

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her mouth and chin. She has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing bright red lipstick. The background is a soft, out-of-focus skin tone.

REPLACING HER

A
FLASH
THRILLER

KIA ORION

REPLACING HER

A FLASH THRILLER

KIA ORION

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[What's Next?](#)

ONE

The Guerrieri piece needs to move six inches left. I can see it from across the gallery, the way the light hits wrong and butchers the texture. Makes a forty-thousand-dollar painting look like a dorm room poster.

I catch the installer's eye, the young one. He shifts the frame. Better, but still not perfect.

Seventy-three people in the space. Good for a Tuesday. Great, actually, considering it's September and everyone's just coming back from the Hamptons pretending they worked all summer. The collectors are here, the real ones, not the art students nursing free wine (the truth is always in the shoes).

Kelly appears at my elbow with a tray of empty glasses. My sixth assistant this year, but who's counting.

I am, of course. I'm always counting.

"More champagne," I tell her. "The Taittinger, not the Veuve. Mrs. Huang just walked in."

Kelly doesn't move. Just stands there holding empties, looking at me with an expression I can't read. I don't have time for expressions I can't read.

"Kelly. Champagne. Now."

"I can't do this anymore."

The words take a second to register. I'm watching Mrs. Huang across the room, watching her drift toward the large-scale piece I've been saving for her. Sixty thousand. She has a new condo in Miami. The colors are perfect for what I've seen of her life from the proofs of next month's *Architectural Digest*.

"Can't do what?"

"This, any of this. You."

Now, I look at Kelly. Good and hard. She's twenty-six. Pratt graduate. Lasted two months. That's longer than the one before.

"You're quitting."

"Yes."

"Right now. During Vera's opening."

"I'm sorry." But she doesn't sound sorry. She sounds relieved. "I have to go."

She sets the tray of empties on the desk, picks up her bag, and walks out.

Despicable.

Now, here I am, holding my own champagne glass, watching her leave. Watching seventy-three people mill around drinking wine I now have to serve myself because my assistant walked out mid-event.

Bile rises hot in my throat.

Really Kelly?

I set my glass down, pick up the champagne bottle Kelly abandoned, and cross to Mrs. Huang with my best smile. The performance crushes my soul but looks effortless.

"Mrs. Huang. I'm so glad you could make it."

We talk as I pour, my hand loyal enough not to shake, even though I want to scream. She mentions the large piece. I swallow the liquid in my glass and mention the Miami condo. She blinks and asks about price. I tell her someone else is considering it, which is technically true. Someone is always considering something.

"Let me think about it," she says.

Translation: no.

I watch her drift toward the exit. That's sixty thousand dollars walking away because I pushed too hard. Because I'm pouring champagne like I'm hired help instead of the gallerist who discovered Vera three years ago.

Vera.

Where is that bitch?

She's an hour late to her own opening, which is very Vera. Very *on-brand*, at least. The tortured artist who can't be bothered with commerce. The collectors love it.

The front door opens.

There she is.

Vera in paint-stained jeans and an oversized blazer. Etro. Two seasons ago. It cost her eight hundred dollars to look this purposefully ugly. Hair unwashed. Boots with actual

mud. She's performed this entrance so many times, I can see the calculation underneath.

But tonight, something's different.

I move toward her with champagne. "Stunning work."

She takes the glass but doesn't drink. Doesn't soften the way she usually does when I compliment her; just stands there looking at her own paintings like she's seeing them for the first time.

"Vera."

"Catherine." She says my name like it's a terminal diagnosis.

"Three pieces sold already."

"Good for you."

Good for *you*?

"Is everything okay?"

She doesn't answer. Instead, she crosses the gallery to talk to a collector I've been cultivating for months. A collector whose attention is now being commanded by Vera. Two women I've made relevant, walking away from me in one night.

"Catherine."

I know that voice.

I turn around and am face to face with Marcus Reed. The man who wants to destroy me. Oh, Marcus. He's standing in my gallery, at my opening, wearing a suit that's much too flashy, even for him.

"Marcus." I keep my voice pleasant.

"Congratulations." He looks around, calculating. "Vera's really outdone herself."

"She has."

"I've been following her work closely."

There it is: the threat wrapped in a compliment.

"Have you?"

"We've had some interesting conversations, actually. About her trajectory. Her future."

My fingers tighten on the bottle's neck. "Vera's under contract through next year."

"A year's not that long." He steps closer. Close enough that I can smell his cologne. It's horrendous: something musky and aggressive. "Things change fast in this market. You know that."

He stays exactly long enough to make his point, short enough to avoid being rude. Six minutes. I time it. Then he

walks away before I can respond.

In his absence, I realize my heart is pounding.

I need air.

Or wine.

Or both.

The gallery is too hot. Too many bodies. Seventy-six now.

I slip my phone into my pocket and fix my face, then cross the gallery to greet a collector I recognize from the Armory Show. We talk about Vera's use of negative space, about her exploration of feminine rage, about whether the market can sustain these prices. He buys a piece. I place the red dot myself.

Seventy-eight people now.

James appears near the door with Sophie and Max. I didn't know he was bringing the kids. We didn't discuss it, but then again, we don't discuss much anymore.

Sophie, of course, is on her phone. Max is looking at the art with actual interest, which surprises me. Most fourteen-year-olds don't voluntarily look at contemporary art.

I make my way over and kiss James on the cheek. It's perfunctory. He knows it.

"You came."

"You asked me to." His voice is flat.

"I thought you'd come alone."

"Nanny cancelled. It was this, or leave them alone."

Sophie glances up from her phone, says, "Hi, Mom," then goes back to scrolling.

"Hey, sweetheart." I touch her shoulder. She doesn't react. "What do you think of the show?"

"It's fine."

Max points at one of Vera's pieces. "Why is that one so expensive?"

"Because it's good."

"But why?"

I look at my teenage son, trying to summon an answer that makes sense. But Mrs. Patterson is staring me down across the room, and there's no champagne circulating because Kelly's gone, and James is looking at me like he's waiting for me to fail.

"Ask your father. I need to work."

"Of course you do." James's voice is quiet. The kids don't hear it.

I move toward Mrs. Patterson. We talk about Vera's use of negative space. About feminine rage. About market sustainability. Always the same script. She doesn't buy anything but promises to come back.

When I turn around, James and the kids are gone.

I pull out my phone. No text. No apology.

I pour myself more champagne. The bottle's lighter than it should be. Too busy counting people, I've lost track.

Can't be more than three glasses...

Maybe four?

The room winds down. Collectors drift out, making vague promises. Vera's on the far side of the gallery, talking to a young woman I don't recognize. Pretty. Dark hair. Someone's girlfriend, probably.

I should go say goodbye to Vera. Thank her. Celebrate the sales.

But I'm so tired.

And she's on the other side of the room.

And the distance . . . No, it's too far.

Champagne. Champagne will help.

I refill my glass and stand near the Guerrieri piece I moved. Yes. It looks perfect now. The light catches every brushstroke. Creates depth. Makes it *sing*.

"Catherine."

Vera's beside me. The pretty woman is gone.

"Beautiful opening," I say.

"Was it?"

"Five pieces sold. Mrs. Huang is thinking about the large-scale."

"Is that what success looks like to you?" Her expression is sincere. "Red dots and champagne and collectors who don't actually care about the work?"

"Vera, what's wrong?"

"You wouldn't understand."

She leaves before I can respond. Walks out into the Chelsea night like she can't get away fast enough.

The installer's packing up, but I tell him to leave it, I'll lock up. He looks relieved. Like all of them. Like everyone who leaves me.

I'm alone.

Finally, it's just me and Vera's paintings. Feminine rage with nowhere to go.

My phone buzzes.

James: *Put the kids to bed. I'm sleeping downstairs. We need to talk.*

I sigh.

Another buzz. Kelly, the assistant who quit: *I'm sorry.*

I stare at the words until the screen goes dark.

I'm sorry.

I look around the gallery. White walls I painted myself when I first signed the lease. Track lighting I installed with my father, when he still spoke to me. Art that matters, should matter, *will* matter. If I can just hold on long enough.

This is everything I've built. A gallery of my choices.

My marriage. My kids. Countless assistants. Sleep. And the drinking . . .

Vera's question sits in my chest: *Is this what success looks like to you?*

I walk over to one of the open champagne bottles. I try not to drink alone unless it's an emergency, but this feels like an emergency.

My reflection in the darkened window looks unfamiliar. Harder than it should be. Jesus, when did I get so old? There are lines around my mouth I swear weren't there last month.

I raise a glass to the empty gallery.

"To Vera," I say out loud.

I turn the lights off one by one, lock the door, and stand outside in Chelsea at midnight on a Tuesday, looking at my own gallery from the outside.

Vera's work glows in the window display. Powerful. Impossible to ignore.

I made this. I made her.

"I made you," I whisper.

The canvas doesn't answer.

Two

I wake up on the gallery couch. How did I get here?

An empty wine bottle catches the light on my desk, and last night returns to me in pieces. The opening. Kelly quitting. Vera walking out. James's unanswered text.

Then, blank white space.

Flashes of movement. A tray of empty glasses. Mrs. Huang leaving.

That was what, 9 PM? 10?

What time is it now?

My phone says 7 AM. I've been on the couch for...When did I fall asleep? I count backwards and keep counting until the numbers stick. Five hours?

I check my sent texts. Nothing. Thank god. Last time I blacked out, I sent James a three-paragraph rant at 2 AM that I had to apologize for the next day.

My hands are shaking.

This has to stop.

I have to stop.

Jesus, I've been saying that for three years.

I sit up, and the gallery spins. My mouth tastes like something small died in it and started to pickle.

There's a text from James from three hours ago: *Fine. Don't come home then.*

I stare at it.

My head is pounding. I need water. Coffee. A shower. A new life.

I settle for the bathroom sink and whatever's left in the mini fridge under my desk.

The mirror is unforgiving. My mascara is smudged, and my hair is doing something architectural. The silk blouse I

slept in looks (surprise, surprise) like a silk blouse that's been slept in.

I text James: *Sorry. Fell asleep at the gallery. Home soon.*

Three dots appear. Then disappear.

Great.

I'm washing my face when my phone rings. Unknown number. My head pounds, but I answer anyway because that's what you do when you run a gallery that's always one disaster away from closing.

"Catherine Mercer."

"Catherine. It's Ryan."

Ryan Kimura. My second best artist. The sculptor I've been developing for two years, who I plan on offering a solo show next spring.

I close my eyes. "Ryan. Hi."

"I wanted to tell you personally before the announcement." He pauses. I hear sirens in the background. He's calling me from the street. "I'm moving to Marcus Reed's gallery."

The words land like a punch, but I keep my voice steady. "I see."

"Marcus has me at the Armory next season."

"I was working on that."

"For two years, Catherine."

"Building institutional relationships takes time."

"He did it in two months."

Because Marcus has money and connections and a reputation that opens doors mine doesn't. Because the art world isn't fair and we both know it. So that's why he came last night. To gloat.

"When?"

"I signed yesterday."

Yesterday. While I was setting up Vera's opening, working to keep this gallery alive.

"How considerate of you to tell me after."

"Catherine—"

"Is there anything else?"

Silence. Then: "You gave me my start. I won't forget that."

"Clearly."

I hang up before he can: a small victory.

I sit on the closed toilet with my phone in my hand, staring at the cheap tile floor I've been meaning to replace for

three years.

Ryan was twenty percent of my revenue. Vera's probably leaving. Kelly quit. My marriage is crumbling. And I'm hungover in a gallery bathroom at 7:30 on a Wednesday morning, trying not to do something pathetic.

I don't cry. That's not something I do anymore. Crying makes people uncomfortable, and uncomfortable people don't buy art.

Instead, I stand up. Splash more water on my face. Pull my hair into something that passes for intentional.

I have three interviews today. Assistant interviews I scheduled last week when Kelly told me she was drowning and needed more help with the job.

She was already one foot out the door, I was just too busy to see it.

The first candidate arrives at 9. She's twenty-four and a Parsons graduate, according to her resume. She wants her outfit to say "gallery professional," but it's actually saying, "I bought this blazer yesterday at Zara."

"Why do you want to work here?" I ask.

"I'm really passionate about contemporary art?"

I hate how this generation speaks. How every opinion is posed as a question. I wait for her to say something else, but she doesn't. Just sits there looking pleased with herself.

"What was the last show you saw that changed how you think about art?"

She blinks. Thinks about it for a second. "Um. I really loved the Basquiat retrospective at the Guggenheim?"

"Two years ago?"

"Oh." Her face does something between smile and wince. "Well. It really embedded itself in me, you know?"

"I'm sure it did." I close her resume. "Thanks for coming in. We'll be in touch."

Her shoulders drop as she stands. She knows she's not getting the job, but she thanks me anyway.

The second candidate is worse. Too eager. Too smiley. Repeatedly calls me "Miss Mercer" even after I correct her. When I ask about her previous gallery experience, she tells

me about the time she helped organize an art show at her college.

"That's not professional experience," I say.

"But I learned so much about curation and—"

"It's not the same thing."

Her smile falters. Good. Better she knows now than waste both our time.

I stand up before she's finished talking. "I think we're done here. Thank you."

She looks like I've slapped her. She gathers her things quickly, stumbling over her own feet on the way out.

After she leaves, I sit in the empty office, wondering if I was too harsh. Then I remember Kelly quitting via text in the middle of an opening, and decide I wasn't harsh enough.

By the time the third interview rolls around at 11, I've given up hope. I'm scrolling through LinkedIn, contemplating headhunters when the gallery door opens.

She's younger than I expected. Late twenties, maybe. Dark hair pulled back in a way that's designed to look careless. No makeup except a brush of mascara. Jeans and a black blazer that's nice enough to be professional, but worn enough to suggest she actually works in it.

She's carrying a portfolio under one arm and a coffee in her other hand. The coffee is from the place on 10th that's overpriced but good.

"Mrs. Mercer? I'm Lily Carter. I'm a few minutes early. I can wait outside if—"

"No, come in." I gesture to the chair across from my desk. "Please."

She sits. Sets her portfolio down carefully. Keeps the coffee in her hand.

"Do you want water or anything?"

"I'm okay. Thank you." She looks around the gallery at Vera's paintings still up from last night. "These are stunning. Vera Kline, right?"

"You know her work."

"I saw her show at NADA last year. The pieces about consumption and desire, they haunted me for weeks."

An actual answer. I sit up a little straighter.

"Tell me why you want to work here."

"Honestly?" She pauses. "I need the job. I've been freelancing as a studio assistant for three years, and I'm tired of

not knowing where my next paycheck is coming from. But I also love your gallery. You take risks. You show artists before they're safe. That's rare."

"It's not rare. It's expensive."

She almost smiles. "That too."

I like her. I don't want to, because I've liked the last six people I hired and they all quit, but I do.

"What's your background?"

"I have a BFA from Purchase. And I worked at two galleries in Brooklyn before they both closed. The art world is not kind to small spaces with big ambitions." She shifts in her seat. "I paint too. But just for myself. Nothing serious."

"Can I see your portfolio?"

"Of course." She stands to hand it to me, and that's when it happens.

The coffee cup tips.

She tries to catch it and misses. The lid pops off, and coffee goes everywhere. My desk. Her portfolio. The floor.

"Oh my god." She's already grabbing napkins from her bag, trying to clean it up, making it worse. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine."

"It's not fine. I'm an idiot."

"Lily. Stop." I take the napkins from her. "It's coffee. I've seen worse."

She looks mortified. Young. Vulnerable in a way that makes me remember what it was like to be twenty-something and desperate for someone to give you a chance.

"Sit down," I tell her. "Let's see what's salvageable."

The portfolio is damp but not destroyed. I open it carefully. Inside are prints of her work. Paintings mostly. Some mixed media.

I flip through them. The color theory is sophisticated. One piece catches my eye: a woman's figure dissolving into abstract shapes. I stop on it for a moment, then keep going.

"These are yours?"

"Yes. Well. Some of them are older. From school. But I still paint when I have time."

"Who are your influences?"

"A lot of people. Ana Mendieta. Jenny Saville. Some lesser known artists from the nineties." She pauses. "My mother was a painter...not professionally, but she taught me to see."

"Is she still painting?"

Something crosses her face. "She died. Years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright. Thank you."

We sit in silence for a moment, coffee still seeping across the floor. What is it that this portfolio reminds me of? Something about the brushwork. Or maybe the composition. I can't place it and it's irritating me.

I close the portfolio and look at her. "Tell me what you know about running a gallery."

She shifts back into interview mode. Gives me competent answers about client relations, art handling, and social media strategy. She's done her research. She knows my roster. She's even looked at my sales from the past year, which is more homework than anyone else did.

"I have to be honest with you," I say when she's done. "I've gone through six assistants this year. The job is demanding. The hours are terrible. I'm not easy to work for."

"I know."

"You know?"

Lily's smile falters for a second. "I talked to someone who used to work here. She warned me."

I almost laugh. "And you still applied?"

"I want to learn from the best, even if the best is difficult."

It's a good line. Too good, maybe. But Ryan just left for Marcus and I need someone who won't quit in three months.

"Can you start Monday?"

She blinks. "That's it? You're hiring me?"

"Unless you're going to tell me you can't start Monday."

"No. I can start Monday."

"Good. The pay is forty-two thousand. That's not negotiable. The hours are whenever I need you, which is most of the time. You get two weeks vacation, but you probably won't take them. Health insurance kicks in after ninety days. Questions?"

"No questions."

"This is a probationary period. One month. If it's not working for either of us, we walk away. No hard feelings."

"Understood."

I stand. She stands. We shake hands. She holds it just a beat longer than necessary, looking at me with an intensity that surprises me, but that I recognize as gratitude.

"Thank you," she says. "I won't let you down."

Everyone says that. I nod anyway.

"See you Monday. 9 AM sharp."

She leaves. I watch her go through the gallery window. She walks quickly, confidently. Doesn't look back.

I sit down at my desk and look at her portfolio again. It's still sopping wet. I flip back to the front page where she's written her contact information in neat print.

Lily Carter.

I look over her references and consider calling them, but don't. I've already been disappointed by everyone this year. Let me give her a blank slate and judge for myself.

I finish cleaning up the coffee and throw away the napkins.

My phone buzzes. James: *When can I expect you back?*

I stare at the text. Try to decide if I have the energy for the fight that's waiting for me at home.

I don't.

I text back: *Something came up. I'll be home tonight, I promise.*

I slide the phone back in my pocket and think about getting myself some coffee from the place on 10th. I really just hired someone who spilled coffee all over my desk in the first five minutes.

But something about her felt right. Felt *real*.

Maybe I'm just desperate enough to believe that someone might actually stay.

Outside, Wednesday afternoon moves through Chelsea. People going to jobs they probably hate. Living lives they probably didn't plan.

Monday, Lily starts.

And maybe, finally, something will go right.

THREE

Lily shows up Monday at 8:45 AM, which tells me she's already figured out that I'm the kind of person who arrives before the sun has fully committed to the day. I'm at my desk with cold coffee when she walks in carrying two cups.

"Coffee." She sets it on my desk. Black, two sugars.

"Thank you, how did you know?"

"Lucky guess," she says, laughing. "That's how I like it too, so if you didn't, I figured I'd just drink both." She takes one out and leaves the other on my desk. "Should I start with email or the install schedule?"

"Email. Password's on the desk."

She nods once and moves to Kelly's old desk without another word, settling into the chair like it's always been hers. I watch her through the glass partition, her fingers moving across the keyboard with the kind of confidence that comes from actual experience. I wait for the inevitable moment she realizes the job is impossible, when the volume of work and the weight of my expectations crush whatever optimism brought her here.

It doesn't come.

By noon, she's cleared two hundred emails. Not just skimmed them, but actually responded, filed, and deleted the garbage. She's reorganized the install schedule Kelly had turned into an incomprehensible mess, called three collectors to confirm studio visits, and somehow fixed Kelly's disastrous contact database without me having to ask. Between my own calls, I comb through her work, looking for mistakes. I don't know if finding none makes me more or less cynical.

"Lunch?"

"I brought something." She doesn't look up from her screen, doesn't break her rhythm. "I can eat here."

Of course she can. Of course she's the type who meal-preps on Sundays and eats sad desk salads while working through lunch. She pulls out a sandwich, some whole-grain thing wrapped in wax paper, and puts it on the desk next to her.

An hour later, I walk past. The sandwich is still there. Untouched.

"You okay?" I ask.

She looks up, surprised. "What? Oh. Yeah, I got caught up in emails. I'll eat in a bit."

At 3 PM, the sandwich is unmoved. She dumps it in the trash at the end of the day, like it was always just a prop.

Maybe she's stressed, too nervous to eat. I should be thrilled that I've finally found someone who takes this as seriously as I do, who can keep up, who doesn't need their hand held through every task, who doesn't quit three weeks in because I expect them to actually work.

Instead, I'm standing at my office window, scotch in my hand, waiting for the other shoe to drop like it has six times before.

Wednesday morning I'm on a call with a collector in Boston, nodding along to her concerns about shipping insurance and installation timelines, when Lily appears in my doorway. Her face is doing something I've seen before, a particular expression I've come to recognize over the years. The face people make right before they destroy your day.

I cover the phone. "What?"

"The Hoffman piece."

My stomach drops so fast I feel my ribs tighten around nothing. "What about it?"

"I sent it to the wrong address."

The phone is still pressed to my ear and the collector is still talking, something about her contractor and whether the piece needs special mounting, and my mouth is still forming appropriate responses, making agreeable sounds—but my brain has gone completely white, wiped clean of

everything except the image of a fifty-thousand-dollar painting heading to the wrong state.

"Hang on," I tell the collector, setting the phone down with a precision that takes everything I have, every ounce of control I can scrape together. "Say that again."

"I'm so sorry. I mixed up the addresses in the system. It's going to their home in Connecticut instead of the Miami gallery. I already called UPS but—"

"That piece is fifty thousand dollars."

"I know."

"Fifty. Thousand. Dollars." I'm standing now, though I don't remember moving from behind my desk. "It's supposed to be installed Friday for their event. The event they're hosting to show this *specific* piece to thirty collectors and two museum curators who've been circling the artist for months."

"I can fix it. I'll call UPS again, I'll overnight it, I'll—"

"Get out."

She goes completely still. "What?"

"Get out of my office. Right. Now."

She leaves without another word, pulling the door closed behind her so quietly, it's somehow worse than if she'd slammed it. The controlled politeness of it makes me want to throw something, to shatter the careful professionalism we've both been performing for three days.

My hands are shaking, my lungs trying to remember how to breathe. The collector is still on hold. I pick up the phone and apologize for the interruption, make pleasant conversation about her contractor and the Miami weather, and hang up with promises to check in next week.

Then I open the bottom drawer of my desk and pull out the bottle of Maker's I keep for emergencies that seem to be happening more frequently these days. It's 10 in the morning, but I drink it anyway, let the burn settle in my chest like proof of something, though what, exactly, I can't say.

Two hours later, my office door opens and I still haven't moved from my desk, haven't done anything but sit here and drink and stare at my computer, mentally calculating

how much the assistant's mistake is going to cost me in reputation and goodwill. I don't look up.

"It's handled." Lily's voice is steady in a way that coaxes me to meet her eyes. "UPS rerouted it. Express shipping. It'll arrive Thursday morning, plenty of time for installation. I paid the fee: three hundred dollars. Here's the receipt."

She sets the paperwork on my desk with hands that are perfectly steady, though I notice she's positioned herself just far enough away that I'd have to reach to grab her. I look at the receipt, then at her face. She's been crying, I can tell by the slight puffiness around her eyes that she tried to hide with powder, the careful way she's holding her expression neutral.

Good. She should understand what her carelessness costs.

"Three hundred dollars because you can't read an address."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll pay you back if—"

"With what? The salary that I pay you?"

She says nothing, just stands there absorbing each word like a physical blow.

Oh god, I'm being an asshole. Not the tough-but-fair kind. The other kind. The kind who lashes out because my life is falling apart and she's the only person within striking distance.

"The Hoffman collector is important. This mistake could have cost us a relationship I've spent years building. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Can it happen again?"

"No."

"Because if it does—"

"It won't."

We look at each other across my desk.

"Okay," I say finally. "Get back to work."

She leaves, and I sit with the receipt in my hand and the whiskey warming my blood and the knowledge that I have become the one thing I promised never to become: my mother. Turns out that's easier said than done.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from the Hoffman collector:

Thx for being transparent about the shipping issue. Classy move comping our installation fee. This is why we work with you.

I stare at the text for a long moment, the words refusing to make sense in any order.

I put my head in my hands and breathe into the darkness there.

The rest of the week passes without incident, which somehow makes me more nervous than if Lily had fucked something else up. I'm still a little unsettled that she offered an installation for free without asking, but considering how much the client loved it, I'm choosing to move past it. In fact, ever since then, she's been perfect.

And not in the try-hard way of the others who came before her, but in a way that feels effortless, like she's been doing this job for years. No mistakes. She anticipates problems before they happen, stays late without needing to be asked, brings coffee every morning like Wednesday's disaster never happened. Like I never stood in my office and screamed at her.

Friday night I'm still at the gallery at 9, which isn't unusual. What's unusual is that Lily's still here, bent over her computer in the blue glow of the screen.

"Go home."

"Almost done with the grant application."

"That can wait until Monday."

"I want to finish it." She doesn't look up, her fingers moving across the keyboard with a rhythm that suggests she's been typing for hours. "You said Ryan's replacement needs to be ready for the Armory. That's a competitive application. I want it to be perfect."

I watch her from my office doorway. Most people would have quit after Wednesday. Most people would have found another job where the boss doesn't keep whiskey like Advil in her desk drawer.

"Why do you work this hard?"

She glances up, and for just a moment, I see something in her face I can't quite read. Then it's gone, replaced by that steady competence that's becoming familiar.

"Because you do."

A simple answer. A true answer. The kind of answer that hits somewhere in my chest and makes me wish I had

something better to offer her than my exhaustion and bad temper.

I go back to my own work. We stay until 11, the gallery quiet except for the hum of computers and the occasional click of her keyboard. After locking up, we walk out together and stand on the sidewalk for a second in a silence that feels empty but comfortable, less awkward than I expected.

"Have a good weekend, Catherine." She adjusts her messenger bag over one shoulder and looks at me.

Catherine. Not Mrs. Mercer. I try to remember when that shift happened, when I gave her permission to drop the formality, but I can't place the moment. *Was* there one? Or did she just decide we'd moved past it?

"You too, Lily."

I watch her disappear down the sidewalk toward the subway, her dark hair swinging as she goes, and I try to remember the last time someone kept pace with me instead of falling behind or burning out or quitting via text in the middle of an opening.

FOUR

Week two starts with an email from Vera at 7 in the morning. I'm still in bed, haven't had coffee yet, and James is already gone. He took the kids to school without saying goodbye. Again. I don't know when "again" became the operative word in my marriage.

Subject line: "We need to talk."

I smile to myself.

Great. Another person who "needs to talk" with me.

My phone buzzes in my hand with a text from Lily: *Saw the email. Already called her. She'll meet you at 10. I'll have coffee ready.*

I read it twice. She called Vera? Without asking me?

I text back: *Don't call my artists without clearing it first.*

Three dots appear, then: *Understood. Won't happen again. Sorry.*

When I get to the gallery at 9:30—earlier than I need to, because I can't sit in my apartment thinking about what Vera wants to talk about—there's coffee waiting on my desk. It's still hot. Beside it, Lily's already printed Vera's sales history, her exhibition record, and her press coverage. Everything I might need for whatever conversation is coming, laid out in neat stacks.

Vera arrives at 10:15 wearing what might be a fashion statement, but what are definitely silk pajamas.

"Coffee?" Lily asks her.

"Sure."

Lily disappears and comes back thirty seconds later with a cup prepared exactly how Vera takes it: oat milk and honey, stirred counterclockwise (Vera claims she can taste the difference). I never told Lily this. I'm not even sure I con-

sciously knew this until I watched her hand Vera the cup, and saw Vera accept it without her usual litany of corrections.

We go to my office. Vera sits in the client chair and looks at me with an expression I've seen on artists before, right before they tell me they're leaving.

"I'm not happy, Catherine."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"I don't know. Everything? Nothing?" She waves her hand like she's trying to catch the right words out of the air.

"I don't feel seen here anymore."

"The show was successful."

"The show was fine."

"We sold five pieces. Mrs. Huang said she'll come back for the sixth." I lean forward, trying to catch her eye, trying to make her remember what it feels like to have collectors actually buy the work. "That's a twenty percent sell-through in three weeks. That's exceptional."

"For you."

The words hit like she meant them to. "What does that mean?"

"It means you see dollar signs when you look at my work. I see my work. That's the difference."

I open my mouth to argue, to tell her that's not fair, that I've fought for her, championed her, made her career possible, but the words die somewhere between my brain and my throat, because we both know she's right. I stopped seeing Vera's paintings as art somewhere around the time I started calculating how many mortgage payments each one represented.

"What do you need?"

"I don't know." She stands, leaving her half-finished coffee on my desk. "Space, maybe. Time. A gallerist who remembers I'm a person."

She leaves without saying goodbye, doesn't even look back. I sit at my desk, staring at her abandoned coffee cup with a lipstick mark on its rim.

Lily appears in my doorway. "Are you—"

"I'm fine."

"Do you want me to—"

"No."

She nods and starts to leave, then pauses with her hand on the doorframe. "For what it's worth, I think Vera's scared."

The show was so successful. Sometimes that's harder than failing. The pressure to repeat something extraordinary, to prove it wasn't a fluke."

"And you know this how?"

"I don't." She pauses, her fingers tapping once against the wood. "My mother always said the second show was the hardest. The first one, people are curious. The second one, they're judging."

Lily leaves, and I sit staring at Vera's lipstick mark on the cup's rim until the coffee inside goes cold.

Finally, I muster the courage to text Vera: *You're right. I'm sorry. Let's talk when you're ready.*

She responds almost immediately: *Okay.*

Not forgiveness. Not absolution. But not the door slamming shut either.

Through the glass, I can see Lily at her desk, working with the same focused intensity she brings to everything. I watch her for a minute, maybe two. She never looks up. Never checks her phone. Like she never gets tired. Like she's not a human, but a machine.

I push the thought away.

On Saturday, Lily shows up at the gallery at 10 with a proposal to reorganize the storage room, which has been a disaster since I opened this place. Kelly was supposed to do it six months ago. Before Kelly, it was someone else's problem. The room has become a repository for all my failures to delegate properly.

"You don't need to be here."

"I know."

"I'm not paying overtime."

"I'm not asking you to."

She disappears into the storage room, and I try to focus on the grant application for Ryan's replacement, but I keep glancing back to watch Lily move between racks of paintings and sculptures, never once stopping to eat or breathe.

By evening, the storage room looks like a different place. Everything's cataloged, organized, and labeled with dates and acquisition numbers. She's even found three pieces I'd forgotten we owned: a small Guerrieri study, a sculpture by

an artist who died five years ago whose work has since tripled in value, and a painting by someone I can't remember ever representing.

"How did you know where everything was?"

"I didn't. I spent all day figuring it out." She wipes dust off her hands onto her jeans. "You had a system once. I just followed it."

"You didn't have to give up your Saturday for this."

"I wanted to."

She's still there at 8 when my stomach starts making noises that can't be ignored. I order Thai food from the place on 9th that delivers, and we sit on the gallery floor eating pad thai and spring rolls, surrounded by inventory lists and decades of accumulated chaos now miraculously organized.

I'm almost finished with my noodles when I notice she's barely touched hers.

"Not hungry?" I ask.

"I ate a big lunch." We've been together all day, and she hasn't eaten a thing. What a strange thing to lie about. She smiles and takes one deliberate bite. Chews and swallows. I watch her throat work. "This is great, though. Thanks for ordering."

I look at my empty containers, then at hers, practically untouched.

"Tell me about your mother," I say, changing the subject. I've been thinking about it all day, what her mother said about second shows and expectations.

She looks up from her food. "What about her?"

"She was an artist."

"Before I was born. She stopped when she had me and never really picked it up again." Lily looks at her food, then back at me. "I think she resented us for it sometimes, giving it up."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not in words. But you can tell, right? When someone blames you for something they chose."

We sit in silence for a moment, the only sounds the hum of the gallery's air conditioning system and a distant car alarm going off on the street.

"I have kids," I say, surprising myself. I don't talk about Sophie and Max at work. Don't talk about them anywhere, really, except to James when we're fighting about who's responsible for them. "A daughter, seventeen. A son, fourteen."

I don't see them enough. Sometimes I wonder if they'd even notice if I stopped showing up."

"They'd notice."

"You sound certain."

"Kids always notice." I want to ask what her mother owed her, but her face has gone carefully neutral, and I know the door has closed.

Sunday, she's back again. Says she wants to work on the digital archives, which is code for, "Your filing system is from 1987 and needs to be dragged into the current century."

"Lily, you can't work every weekend."

"This is the last one. Promise."

It's a lie and we both know it. But I don't argue because I'm too tired and too grateful and because part of me is starting to depend on her showing up, on finding her already here when I arrive, on having someone who gives a shit about this gallery besides me.

By Sunday evening, the gallery is more organized than it's been since I opened it. She's done in two days what Kelly couldn't do in four months. What I couldn't do in four years. When I tell her it's exceptional work, she just nods like it's nothing, like everyone spends their weekends voluntarily cataloging someone else's professional life.

"But you'll burn out working like this."

"I'm fine."

"Everyone says that right before they collapse."

She almost smiles. "I'm not everyone."

"No," I say, watching her. "You're not."

I should feel relieved. Instead, I find myself checking the storage room twice, making sure she didn't move anything I wouldn't have wanted moved.

FIVE

Week three. Monday morning. Staff meeting.

Me, Lily, Blake the installer, Sarah the gallery manager, and Tom, who handles social media. Five people sitting around a table trying to figure out how to keep a sinking ship afloat.

"Ryan's gone," I say, skipping the pleasantries because I'm tired of pretending. "Marcus Reed took him. We need to replace that revenue. Who has ideas?"

Silence. Everyone is suddenly fascinated by their hands and the water stains on the conference room ceiling.

"Anyone?"

Sarah clears her throat. "We could focus on Vera. Build momentum from the show. Try to place her in some group exhibitions, build institutional interest."

"Vera's not returning my calls."

More silence. Tom shifts in his seat.

"What about emerging artists?" he offers. "BFA shows, MFA thesis exhibitions. Find the next Vera before Marcus does."

"Good. Do it." I look around the table at faces that won't meet my gaze. "What else?"

Nothing. They have absolutely nothing, and in their silence I can hear what they're thinking:

This gallery is dying.

And they're all contemplating when to jump.

I lean forward, putting both hands flat on the table.

"Someone's been feeding Marcus information."

The air in the room changes. Everyone goes completely still.

"Catherine—" Sarah starts.

"He knew we were struggling to get Ryan into the Armory. He knew Vera was unhappy. How? He's an aloof dickhead who's notorious for being out of touch with artists." I look at each of them in turn, watching for the flinch that will give someone away. "Someone in this room has been talking to him."

"That's not fair." Sarah's voice is sharp in a way I've never heard from her before. "You're accusing us of—"

"I'm not accusing anyone. I'm stating facts. Marcus is too well-informed. Either someone here is leaking, or we have a security problem."

"Or maybe," Sarah says, standing up so fast her chair scrapes against the floor, "your artists are leaving because they're miserable. Not because someone's whispering shit to Marcus. Maybe the problem isn't a mole. Maybe the problem is you."

"Sit down."

"No. I'm done." She grabs her bag from the back of her chair. "I'm done with the paranoia. The accusations. The assumption that everyone's out to *get you*. I quit. Effective immediately. Go fuck yourself."

She walks out and slams the door.

The rest of them sit frozen, waiting to see if I'm going to explode, if I'm going to fire them all just to be safe.

"Anyone else want to leave?" I ask.

No one moves. No one even breathes.

"Then get back to work."

They scatter like I've fired a gun, nearly tripping over each other in their hurry to get out of the room. Only Lily stays, still sitting in the same chair, hands folded in her lap. She hasn't said a word.

"You think I'm paranoid," I say

"I think you're scared."

The honesty of it catches me completely off guard. "That's not—"

"You're losing artists. Your assistant before me quit during an opening..." She pauses, and when she speaks again, her voice is gentler. "You have every right to be scared. But taking it out on your staff won't fix it. It'll just make sure you're alone when everything finally collapses."

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"I know." She stands and walks to the door, then stops and looks back. "But someone needs to tell you."

She leaves, and I sit alone in the empty conference room, staring at the spot where Sarah was sitting, trying to remember when I became this person.

A few hours later, still alone in my office, I'm nursing a scotch when my phone buzzes. It's James.

Nanny emergency. I won't be able to make pickup. Are you available?

I look at the time. 3:30. I have two studio visits scheduled, and Mrs. Patterson coming at 6 to look at a piece for her living room.

I text back: I can't. You're in Boston?

No. In the city. But I have meetings until six.

Then move them.

Fine. Forget it. I'll figure it out.

The screen goes dark, and I'm left staring at my own reflection in the black glass. A woman who can feel everything she's built starting to crack, but can't figure out how to stop it.

The gallery is quiet except for the occasional car passing outside.

I look up to stretch my neck, roll my shoulders, and that's when I see her.

Lily's standing in my doorway. Just...watching.

Her face is completely blank. Empty. Like she's somewhere else entirely and I'm an object in her line of vision.

Then she blinks and smiles.

"Hi," she says. "Everything okay?"

My heart beats faster.

"Nanny emergency. James can't get the kids."

"I can pick them up."

"What?"

"It's not far. I can meet them at school, and then bring them here or to your place, wherever you need."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know. But you have Mrs. Patterson at 6 and the studio visits. You can't leave."

She's right. I can't leave. Not right now. "Are you sure?"

"Completely."

I text her the school address, Beacon High School, and the kids' names and Sophie's cell number in case there are issues. My hands are shaking as I type.

"Just bring them here. I'll figure it out after."

She nods. "Okay."

She leaves. I can hear the alarm beep as she sets it from outside.

My pen hovers over a contract I can no longer read. The words keep blurring.

How long was she standing there watching me? Thirty seconds? A minute? Longer?

How much have I had to drink?

Not enough. I get up and pour myself another scotch from the bottle in my desk drawer. Some of it splashes on the desk.

I'm being paranoid. She was probably just checking if I needed anything. She does that sometimes, stands in the doorway instead of coming all the way in, waiting to see if I'm in the middle of something important.

That's all it was.

But that look on her face. That blankness.

I drink the scotch. It burns going down, but I pour another anyway.

I try to dive back into the contract, but keep checking my phone, like something terrible might have happened since I last checked it.

At 3:30:

Got them. Sophie's teaching me about photography. Max drew something for you.

I stare at the text until the words stop making sense. Sophie's teaching her about photography. My daughter, who barely speaks to me, who treats me like I'm some kind of annoying roommate she's stuck with until college, is teaching a stranger about her passion.

The studio visits blur together into a series of nods and polite questions I don't care about the answers to. By the time Mrs. Patterson arrives at 6, I'm already exhausted, but I force myself to walk her through the painting again, to talk about the artist's use of color and the way the brushstrokes create movement.

She's interested but wants to think about it. Another sale I've lost because I can't close anymore. I've forgotten how to connect with people.

"Mrs. Patterson, this piece is exceptional. And honestly, it's underpriced for what it is."

"I'm sure. I just need to—"

"Someone else is looking at it." The lie comes easily now. "I can hold it until tomorrow morning, but after that I can't make promises."

She looks at me, then cocks her head to the side a little. "You know what, Catherine? I think I'll pass."

"I can work on the price if—"

"It's not the price." She stands and picks up her Gucci handbag. "I came here because I enjoy art. I don't enjoy feeling cornered."

She walks out, and I sit in the empty gallery trying to remember what it felt like to love art before I needed it to save me.

I find Lily and the kids in the back office at 6:30. Sophie's showing Lily something on her phone, their heads bent together over the screen. Max is sprawled on the floor playing his Nintendo Switch.

Sophie looks up from her phone. "Lily's been teaching me about composition. She knows a lot about photography."

"Does she."

I look at Lily, and she just shrugs like it's nothing, like it's normal to spend your afternoon teaching your boss's kids about art, while your boss is busy alienating collectors and driving away employees.

"Mom, can we order pizza?" Max asks. "I'm starving."

I check my phone. It's 7, when did it become 7? "Sure. What do you want?"

We order from Tony's on 8th, and the kids tell us about school. About Sophie's photography class, Max's history project, and some drama with Sophie's friend Emma that I don't fully understand because I've never met Emma. I realize I have no idea who any of Sophie's friends are.

Sophie shows Lily her Instagram. "This is my favorite one."

It's a photo of our apartment building at dusk, shot from across the street. The windows are lit from inside, each one a different color: yellow, blue, the cold white of a television. But the foreground is sharp black shadows, fire escape railings cutting diagonal lines across the frame. It's good. Actually good, not just she's-my-daughter good.

"These are exceptional," Lily says, scrolling through them. "You have a real eye."

"Thanks." Sophie glances at me, then away. "Mom doesn't really look at them."

The words are casual, careless, tossed off like they don't matter. They cut anyway.

"I do look at them, honey."

"When's the last time you asked to see them?"

I open my mouth but nothing comes. I can't remember the last time I asked Sophie about anything that mattered to her.

Sophie goes back to her phone. Case closed.

At 8:30, I drive Sophie and Max home to our apartment on the Upper West Side. The one James and I bought back when we still believed in things like shared spaces and the future. It feels later than it is. Max hugs me goodnight, Sophie doesn't. I stand in her doorway watching her scroll through photos on her phone, the blue light making her face look ethereal and distant.

"Your work really is beautiful."

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry I don't tell you that more."

She glances up, and for a second, her face softens. "It's fine, Mom. I know you're busy."

But it's not fine, and we both know it. I'm not busy. I'm absent.

I drive back to the gallery even though I should stay home and try to sleep. Should do something other than return to this place. Lily's still here, cleaning up pizza boxes, closing programs on the computer, doing all the small tasks that keep this place running.

She looks up at me as I walk in.

"You didn't have to stay," I say.

"I wanted to finish the grant application for the Armory. It's due Friday."

"It can wait until tomorrow."

"It's done now."

I watch her save the document and close her laptop with slow, careful movements.

"You passed probation."

She looks up, surprised. "Really?"

"Really. You're good at this. Better than anyone I've had in years."

"Thank you."

I pull out the Magnum bottle I keep in the mini-fridge under my desk: Veuve Clicquot. Grande Dame, limited edition. Not the cheap shit I serve at openings. I pour two glasses and hand one to Lily.

"To surviving the month."

She takes the glass and pauses for a moment before drinking. "To surviving."

The champagne is cold and smooth and exactly what I need after this disaster of a day.

We're on our second glass when I catch Lily's reflection in the dark gallery window behind her.

She's looking at me. But her face in the reflection isn't the warm, slightly tipsy expression she's wearing now. In the glass, her face is completely hollow. She's studying me.

I blink and turn my head to look directly at her, not the reflection. She's smiling, mid-sip of champagne, looking relaxed and grateful. Normal.

I glance back at the window. Now the reflection matches, she's smiling there too.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yeah, sorry. Thought I saw something."

"In the window?"

"No, it was just something in the street. It's nothing."

She turns to look, and I watch her reflection turn too, perfectly synchronized now, nothing wrong with it at all.

I'm drunk. That's all. Champagne and the stress of the past few weeks, the relief of finally having an assistant who doesn't quit. My brain's playing tricks.

"Probably just someone walking by," Lily says, turning back to me. "This neighborhood gets weird at night."

"Mmm."

I finish my champagne, pour another.

"You're good with my kids."

Lily nods, "Yeah, they're great kids."

"They don't usually warm up to people that fast. Sophie especially. She's been hostile to every babysitter we've ever had."

She smiles and takes a sip of her champagne, then sets the glass down on my desk. "For what it's worth, Sophie talks about you a lot. She's proud of you."

"She has a strange way of showing it."

"She's seventeen."

I almost smile. "You want kids?"

"No, I don't think that's in the cards for me."

But something in her voice gives her away. She does. Maybe she can't. I don't ask, and she doesn't offer anything more.

She pours herself more champagne. Grips the bottle a fraction too tight, her knuckles going white. "We weren't close. My mother and I. She never said it out loud, but I could feel it my whole childhood. In the way she looked at me. In the things she didn't say. She resented me."

The words sit heavy in the room. I want to ask more, and suddenly realize she's never talked about *how* her mother died.

"That must've been hard."

"It was what it was." She sets the glass down slowly, like she's suddenly aware she's had too much. When she looks up, her eyes are a little too bright. "Sorry. That's too much information. I should go."

"Lily—"

"Really. Early day tomorrow." She grabs her bag from her desk and stops at the gallery door. She turns back right before she leaves. Her face smoothed out again, that careful mask back in place. "Thank you, Catherine. For giving me a chance."

"You're welcome."

After she leaves, I sit in the empty gallery with what's left of the champagne, and try to add up everything I know about Lily Carter. It doesn't amount to much. Past: Mother was an artist who quit and resented her family for it. Died when Lily was young. They weren't close.

Present: Lily knows how to organize a gallery, how to talk to artists, how to anticipate what I need before I know I need it. Works weekends without being asked. She's good with my kids. She knows how Vera takes her coffee. She doesn't eat. Doesn't check her phone. Doesn't make mistakes.

She knows how Vera takes her coffee.

I sit up straighter. I've been thinking about this for days but haven't faced it directly. Now, I make myself trace it through—and there's no path that leads to an explanation. No way Lily could've known. Did she ask someone? Look through private emails? Watch Vera at a coffee shop?

The freshly-poured champagne whispers in my glass, tells me I'm being ridiculous. Paranoid. Sarah's words echo: *the assumption that everyone's out to get you.*

Maybe she's right. Maybe I'm so used to fighting that I've forgotten how to recognize when someone's actually helping me.

I finish the bottle, turn off the lights, and lock the door. Outside, Chelsea is dark and cold, the streets empty except for the occasional cab and the constant backdrop of sirens. Four weeks down. Lily stays. And I'm trying very hard not to think about why that makes me uneasy, why every instinct I have is telling me that something about this is wrong, even though I can't point to a single concrete thing she's done that I could hold up as evidence.

I walk to my car thinking about her mother.

And I wonder what Lily resents.

SIX

The Marcus Reed Situation happens on a Tuesday morning in October, seven weeks after Lily's first day. I find out because a collector calls me directly: Mrs. Huang, who's been circling one of Vera's mid-sized pieces for a month. She's apologetic but firm.

"I'm going with Marcus's gallery. I'm sorry, Catherine. The price point is just better."

"What price point?"

"Forty-two thousand. You quoted me forty-four."

Somehow, fucking Marcus knew to undercut me by exactly two thousand dollars, just enough to make the choice easy.

"I appreciate you calling," I tell her, because there's nothing else to say. "If you change your mind—"

"Will do. Thank you."

She hangs up before I even finish my sentence.

When did Vera start showing pieces at Marcus's gallery? And how did he know what I was selling her pieces for?

After I hang up, I sit at my desk staring at the spreadsheet. The password protection I set up. The sharing settings show exactly two people with access: me and Lily. I walk over to her desk. She's on the phone with a collector, her voice warm and professional, taking notes in that neat handwriting she has. When she sees me, she holds up one finger, *just a minute*, and I stand there watching her finish the call. My hands are gripping the edge of her desk. I don't remember putting them there.

"Sorry," she says when she hangs up. "Mr. Patterson wants to schedule a studio visit."

"Did you talk to anyone about our pricing? For the Vera pieces?"

Her face doesn't change. "No. Why?"

"Marcus Reed undercut us on a sale."

"That's strange." She frowns, concerned but not defensive. "Could the collector have told him?"

"Maybe. Just...be careful what you share. Who you talk to."

"Of course."

I go back to my office. Keep thinking about Marcus poaching Ryan, and now Vera. About the way Lily's been absorbing Sarah's responsibilities with an ease that should be comforting, but instead feels like water filling spaces I didn't know were there.

It's past 8 PM and I'm alone in my office reviewing contracts for next season's shows. Ryan's replacement still hasn't been found and I'm starting to panic about the spring schedule. I look up to stretch my neck, roll my shoulders, and I see her again.

Lily.

Standing in my doorway. Watching me.

Something cold moves through my chest.

Then she blinks. Smiles. The professional warmth slides back into place.

"Sorry," she says. "Do you need anything? I'm about to head out."

I can feel myself starting to sweat. "No. I'm fine. You can go."

"You sure? I can stay if you need help with those contracts."

"I'm sure."

She nods. "Okay. See you tomorrow."

I hear her close the door and set the alarm.

Maybe the problem is you.

I jolt at the sound of Sarah's voice, and my pen clatters to the ground. I look around the room, but I'm alone. I can't tell if the voices in my head are getting louder or if it's because I haven't slept properly in weeks, I'm hearing things, seeing things that aren't there.

Scotch. I need scotch.

The bottle trembles as I pour. Glass shivers against glass. In the murky liquid, I see my own distorted face. It splits open and becomes my mother's, then mine again, then Lily's. I can feel a scream bubbling in my throat. I swallow it down.

How ridiculous I must look. What a joke I've become.

I drink the scotch, erasing everything. I pour another, but don't look in the glass this time.

Lily's face. I can't stop thinking about it. I've seen that look before. My mother, right before she'd say something cruel, that split second where you'd see what was underneath. Not anger, not even really emotion. Just...nothing. A void where a person should be.

No. Lily is a good assistant. The best I've had in years. She works hard, anticipates my needs, never complains. She's probably just tired, too. Probably just zoned out for a second before asking if I needed anything.

That's it.

I have to stop doing this. Stop looking for problems where there aren't any.

I shudder, finish the second scotch, and go back to the contracts. But my eyes keep being pulled to the doorway. Like they know to look out for Lily's return.

She doesn't come back.

Of course she doesn't come back. She went home.

I'm losing my mind.

I need to go home too. Need to sleep. Need to stop drinking alone in my office at night.

I pack up my things. Turn off the lights. Set the alarm. Lock the door.

On the sidewalk outside, I look back through the gallery window. Everything's dark. Empty. Normal.

I'm imagining things.

I have to be.

By week nine, Lily's running the gallery. Not officially, of course. I'm still the owner, still the one signing the checks and making the final decisions, but in every practical sense, she's keeping things moving. She schedules the studio vis-

its. She handles the collectors. She manages the Instagram account, the newsletter, the inventory spreadsheet, and all the small tasks that used to be split between me, Sarah, and Kelly before her.

"You should hire a new gallery manager," she says one night when we're both still there at 8:30, her at Sarah's old desk going through invoices, me in my office pretending to review contracts between pours of scotch.

"I will. Soon."

"You need help."

"I have help. I have you."

She looks up at me. "I'm your assistant, Catherine. Not your partner."

The words sting. "You're right. I'll post the position."

But I don't. Because posting the position means interviews and training and the inevitable moment when the new person quits or betrays me or proves incompetent, and I'm too tired to do it all again. Easier to let Lily keep absorbing responsibilities, keep staying late, keep knowing things before I ask.

Vera's not returning my calls again. I've left four messages in two weeks. Finally, I text her: *Is this about Marcus? Because we can discuss terms.*

She texts back three hours later: *I told you, it's not about money.*

What can I do?

No response.

I consider driving to her studio in Bushwick, but I can picture how that would go. Me showing up unannounced, her annoyed at the intrusion, the conversation devolving into an argument about respect and boundaries, all the ways I've failed to see her as an *artist*. So instead, I do nothing and tell myself she'll come around eventually. She always does.

Except this time feels different.

Thursday night, I leave the gallery at 6, an unprecedented move that makes Lily look up from her desk in surprise.

"Family dinner," I explain, like I need to justify it. Like leaving at 6 is some kind of radical act.

"That's great. Have fun."

James made pasta, his one meal, the thing he makes when he's trying. The kids are already sitting at the table when I walk in. Sophie's on her phone. Max is doodling on a napkin. James is pouring wine for himself and water for everyone else.

"Hi," I say.

Sophie doesn't look up. Max glances at me and goes back to his drawing. James hands me a glass of wine.

"Thanks for coming."

The phrasing catches me off guard. Like I'm a guest in my own home. Like showing up for dinner is some kind of favor I'm doing them. I sit down across from Sophie and try to think of something to say that won't sound forced.

"How was school?"

"Fine."

"Max? How was your day?"

"Good." He's still drawing, his pen moving in quick, confident strokes across the napkin.

James serves the pasta. I wind some around my fork and eat an entire mouthful. I didn't realize how hungry I was. I chew and look around the table. The silence stretches, punctuated only by the clink of cutlery and a distant siren on Columbus Avenue.

"What were you drawing?" I ask, taking another bite.

Max holds up the napkin. It's a bird, a falcon maybe, with detailed feathers and sharp talons. The proportions are perfect. "For my portfolio."

"For your portfolio?" I laugh. "OK, well, I like it. It's beautiful."

"Thanks." He sets it down and keeps eating. "Lily said I should apply to that SVA program. The summer one for kids."

I set down my fork. "When did Lily say that?"

"Last week. When she picked us up." He says it casually, like it's normal that my assistant is giving my 14-year-old son career advice. "She knows someone who teaches there. She's going to put in a good word."

James is watching me across the table. Waiting.

"Well, that is very nice of her," I say carefully.

"She's been helping me with *my* portfolio too," Sophie adds, finally looking up from her phone. "The one for college. She has this whole system for organizing the work and writing the artist statements."

"I could help with that."

Sophie's face doesn't change. "Riiight. It's OK. Lily knows what she's doing."

"I went to art school too, you know."

"Did you?" She says it like she's genuinely forgotten, like this basic fact about me has somehow been erased. "When?"

"Cooper Union. Before you were born. Obviously."

"Oh. Yeah." She goes back to her phone.

I look at James, but he's deliberately not meeting my eye. Max is drawing again. Sophie is scrolling. The silence is back. It feels heavier now.

"Your photography is really coming along," I try. "I liked that picture you showed me. The one of the building at dusk."

"Which building?"

"Our building. With the windows lit up."

"I've posted like fifteen photos of buildings."

"The one with the fire escape? The shadows? When you were in the gallery, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah. That one." She takes a bite of pasta. "Lily says I need to think more about negative space."

"That's good advice."

"I know. That's why I'm taking it."

The words land. Not cruel, exactly, but dismissive.

James clears his throat. "How was work? You said you lost a sale to Marcus?"

"Yeah. He undercut us on a Vera piece. Knew our exact price somehow."

"That's strange."

"It happens." I take a sip of wine. "Usual gallery politics."

"Is Vera still being difficult?"

"She's being an artist."

Sophie looks up. "You always say that. Like being an artist is some kind of excuse for being a dick to people."

"Sophie," James says.

"What? It's true. You say it yourself all the time." She looks at me. "You complain about your artists constantly. Vera this, Ryan that. Maybe they're not the problem."

My hands grip my fork. "You don't know anything about running a gallery."

"And you don't know anything about being here." She stands up, leaving her plate half-full. "Can I be excused?"

"We're still eating," James says, but Sophie's already walking away, already closing herself in her room. The door doesn't slam, but I almost wish it would.

Max finishes his pasta in silence. James pours himself more wine.

"She didn't mean it," he says finally.

"Yes, she did."

"She's seventeen."

"She said I'm never here. That's true." I push my plate away. "When did Lily start picking them up regularly?"

"It's not regular. It's just when I have meetings and you're at the gallery."

"Which is always."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." I stand and start clearing plates. James reaches for his, but I wave him off. "I've got it."

"Catherine—"

"I should get back anyway. I have contracts to review."

"It's 7:30."

"I know what time it is."

He stands now and brings his cutlery to the sink. We stand side by side, not looking at each other.

"She's good with them," he says quietly. "The kids like her."

"I know."

"Better than the nanny was." He pauses.

"Better than me. You can say it."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"But you were thinking it."

He turns to face me. "I don't know what you want from me. You asked me to handle pickup. I'm handling it. If Lily helps out sometimes because you're busy, I don't see the problem."

"There's no problem."

"Then why do you look like you want to throw that glass at my head?"

I set the wine glass down carefully in the sink. "I'm not angry."

"You're always angry lately. Or absent. Or both." He leans against the counter. "I can't keep track of which version of you I'm going to get."

"Maybe if you'd ask before farming our kids out to my assistant—"

"Farming them out? She picks them up from school sometimes. She helps with homework. Jesus, Catherine, she's being nice. When was the last time someone did something like this for us?"

I don't have an answer for that. Or, I have too many answers, and none of them will make sense out loud. So I grab my bag and my keys and tell him I'll be back late, don't wait up.

He doesn't try to stop me.

I drive back to the gallery. Lily's still there when I arrive at 8:30, at her computer, working on something. When she hears me come in, she minimizes the window.

"I thought you were doing family dinner?"

"I did. It was two hours ago."

"How'd it go?"

I drop my bag on my desk and pour myself scotch from the bottle I'm no longer hiding. "About as well as you'd expect. Thanks for helping Max with his portfolio. And Sophie."

"It's nothing. They're talented."

"They are." I should leave it there. Walk to my office, close the door, and decompress in peace. Instead, I hear myself say: "James says you've been picking them up a lot."

"Only when he asks. Only when you're busy." She says it carefully, watching my face. "Is that a problem?"

"No. Of course not. I just—" I stop. Start again. "I appreciate it. I know it's not in your job description."

"I don't mind."

We stand there, and I watch her watch me, trying to figure out what I saw in her face when I walked in. What she was looking at on that screen before she minimized it. I should ask. Should confront her directly. Instead, I hear myself saying: "I should let you finish those invoices."

"Yeah, OK."

"What were you working on? When I came in?"

"Just organizing the newsletter list. Want to see?"

"No. That's fine."

I go to my office and review contracts, but keep an eye on Lily through the glass. At 10:30 she stands and stretches, starts shutting things down for the night.

"I'm going to head out," she calls to me. "Unless you need anything?"

"I'm good. See you tomorrow."

After she leaves, I sit in the empty gallery. Count to sixty. Then I walk to her desk.

The computer's off. I know her password. I made it for her when she started. My hands shake as I type. The screen glows blue in the dark gallery. If she comes back for something she forgot, if she sees me doing this—

I stop thinking and open her browser history.

Gallery websites. Artist portfolios. Emails to collectors. Exactly what you'd expect. I open her documents folder. Gallery files. Inventory spreadsheets. A draft of next week's newsletter. Nothing unusual.

Maybe the problem is you.

I shut down the computer and go back to my office. Inside my mini fridge, another unopened bottle waits for me in the dark.

At 1 in the morning, I'm lying in bed next to James, who's asleep and snoring softly. I can't stop thinking about Lily's references. I hired her so fast, so desperately, that I barely checked them. Shit, I *didn't* check them.

I get up and go to the living room with my laptop. Pull up the files from her interview, the resume, the references, the portfolio. Start with the references. Call the first number despite the time, because I'm past caring about appropriate business hours.

It's disconnected.

I try the second reference. Disconnected.

The third one rings, but goes to a generic voicemail. I don't leave a message.

My heart is hammering. I Google "Lily Carter artist, New York" and get nothing. "Lily Carter gallery assistant" brings up a few LinkedIn profiles but none with her photo. I try her email address, Gmail, nothing distinctive. I try a reverse image search.

Nothing.

Like she didn't exist until she walked into my gallery last month.

Something is wrong. Something has been wrong this entire time, and I've been too desperate, too exhausted to see it.

Her address is listed at the bottom of her resume.

I get dressed, get in my car, and drive to Brooklyn.

Lily's building is in Greenpoint, one of those industrial conversions that still has fire escapes on the outside. I park across the street and turn off the engine. Sit in the dark trying to figure out what I'm doing, what I think I'm going to find. It's 2 in the morning. I'm spying on my assistant. This is insane.

I'm reaching for the keys to start the car when the building door opens.

And Vera walks out.

I stop breathing. My hands are frozen on the steering wheel as I watch Vera come down the steps in her fucking vintage leather jacket. She lights a cigarette. Checks her phone. The flame from her lighter illuminates her face for a second before it goes dark.

You bitch.

There's no other explanation. She was in Lily's apartment.

My artist. My assistant.

Vera starts walking. Her boots echo on the empty sidewalk. I watch until she turns the corner and disappears, and I am left in my car trying to make the pieces fit together in a way that makes sense. Trying to find an innocent explanation.

There isn't one.

Unless...

I drive home. Don't sleep. At 6 AM, I'm back at my laptop, searching through emails I haven't looked at in years. Searching for names. For galleries. For artists I rejected or dropped or destroyed on my way up.

And there it is.

An email from twelve years ago. Subject line: "Gallery representation inquiry."

From: Diane Rosen.

I click it open. Read the tentative, hopeful pitch. The memory surfaces slowly, like something rising from deep water. A woman in her thirties, dark-haired, with a portfolio full of raw, emotional work. Talented but rough. Marketable but difficult. I gave her a show. Or, *almost* gave her a show. I found someone better, someone younger, someone male, someone who'd sell. I called her two weeks before opening

night and cancelled. Told her the work wasn't ready. Told her we were going in a different direction.

I never thought about her again.

I search my email for her name and find three more messages, increasingly desperate. Asking for an explanation. Asking for another chance. The last one is from six months after I cancelled her show. Brief. Bitter. Telling me I destroyed her career, that no other gallery would touch her after my rejection.

I never responded to any of them.

My hands are shaking so hard I can barely type. I Google "Diane Rosen artist."

The search brings up an obituary. Over a decade ago.

Diane Rosen, age 52, died of complications from alcoholism. Survived by her daughter, Lily.

Lily.

I read it again. Then again.

The words don't change.

SEVEN

LILY

I. ORIGIN

My mother didn't come home on a Thursday. This was twelve years ago. I was sixteen, old enough to know mothers don't just disappear, young enough to wait three days before calling anyone.

Those three days were the freest I'd ever felt.

I practiced my grieving expressions in the mirror after school, the worry-crease between my eyebrows, my mouth going small to show fear. But alone in the apartment, I ate cereal for dinner. Watched Skinemax naked on the couch with my hand between my legs. Drew at the kitchen table without her wine breath hovering over my shoulder, asking why I wasn't more like her at my age, more passionate, more *alive*.

The apartment was mine. The air was mine. I could breathe.

There was no one to call. No family to notify. My father wasn't around because he never had been. Left before I was born, or maybe during—my mother's story changed depending on how drunk she was. Drinking was a habit she'd always had, but leaned on more after she knew he wasn't coming back. Sometimes he was a musician who couldn't handle fatherhood; sometimes he was married and disappeared when she got pregnant.

The truth was probably simpler: he didn't want me and she didn't blame him. Neither did I.

So it was just me. Just the apartment and the silence and the feeling that I could finally exist without someone watching me fail to be enough.

When the police found her Sunday morning, slumped in her car in a parking lot near some gallery in Hudson, I was relieved. People act like that's something to be ashamed of, but it's the truth.

The detective had a coffee stain on his tie shaped like Florida. He told me the medical examiner said "overdose." Pills and alcohol. He used the word "accidental," but his eyes said he didn't believe it and didn't care either way.

"Was your mother depressed?" he asked.

I thought about the journals under her bed. The empty wine bottles in the recycling. The way she'd stopped painting three years before, but still called herself an artist, like it was a religion she'd been excommunicated from. She might've had talent once, maybe. But talent without follow-through is just self-pity in a frame.

"I don't know," I said. "She didn't talk to me much."

Which was true. We'd been roommates, mostly. Two people living parallel lives in the same small space, trying not to touch.

At the funeral, seven people came. One was the landlord. Probably came to assess whether I could still pay rent, and gave up when he saw the cheap flowers. Two were artists from her gallery days, back when she still believed beauty could save people. They called her work "ahead of its time," which I learned means nobody wanted to buy it. One of them touched my shoulder and said, "At least she's at peace now."

I wanted to laugh. My mother had never been at peace a day in her life. Why would death be any different?

I tried to cry during the service. Not because I felt like crying, but because I knew it was expected. I'd watched enough TV to know mourning has a specific performance: the hitched breathing, the dabbing at eyes, the shaking shoulders. But when I tried to summon it, nothing came. My eyes stayed dry as paper.

Maybe I was broken. People talk about feeling "broken" when they can't cry. But I didn't feel broken; I felt like the only honest person in the room.

It only took a week before someone at the church (a church my mother had attended maybe twice, both times

hungover and looking for community she never found) had started a GoFundMe.

"Help Lily After Tragic Loss"

The photo was taken from my high school yearbook. I looked younger than sixteen, looked like someone worth saving.

The description said my mother had "struggled with addiction" and "passed away unexpectedly," leaving me "orphaned with no living relatives." It said I needed help with "funeral costs and living expenses" and "a fresh start."

It raised four hundred thirty-seven dollars in three days.

That's what my mother's life was worth, apparently. That's what I was worth. Less than five hundred dollars from strangers who felt briefly bad about a dead addict and her leftover kid. I stared at the screen. That was the inheritance she left me. Four hundred dollars and an eviction notice. I was angry then. Not sad—*offended*. I deserved more than this scrap heap of a life.

The landlord wanted me out by the end of the month. Foster care was already arranged: some woman named Patricia who fostered six other kids and smelled like menthol cigarettes and mothballs. I had two weeks to pack a life I'd never wanted into boxes for Goodwill.

I was packing one afternoon when a woman from the church stopped by. Fifties, paint under her fingernails, wearing the kind of clothes artists wear when they've stopped believing they're artists but can't quite let go of the costume.

"Lily? I'm Sarah. I knew your mother. From the gallery days." She held up her phone, showing the GoFundMe. "I saw this and I...I wanted to talk to you. If that's okay."

I let her in, and we talked awkwardly in the empty kitchen. "Your mother was talented," she said, like talent had ever saved anyone.

I nodded. Made my face do something appropriate.

"Did she—?" The woman paused, glanced around the dirty apartment. "Did she ever talk to you about Catherine Mercer?"

The name meant nothing to me then. Just another stranger in my mother's orbit of disappointments.

"No."

"Right. Of course. You're young." She pulled out a card, pressed it into my hand like it was precious. "I'm Sarah. If

you ever want to talk. About your mom. Or what happened."

"What happened was an overdose."

"Right. Yes. The overdose." She said it the way people say things they don't quite believe. "It's just...your mother was working on something. Before. She'd found some discrepancies in her sales records. From the gallery."

I waited. People always fill silence if you let them.

"She thought Catherine was stealing from her. From you. Your mother had proof, she said. Or thought she did. She was going to report her. Get her show back or go to the IRS with everything." Sarah's voice dropped. "She met with Catherine the day before she died. To talk about it. Work something out."

"And?"

Sarah touched my arm. The gesture felt rehearsed. "I'm so sorry. Your mother deserved better."

She left me standing there with her card and that name: Catherine Mercer.

I was sixteen. I knew what "deserved better" meant. It meant nothing. It meant thoughts and prayers. It meant people standing around funerals saying the right words and giving you four hundred thirty-seven dollars to buy back your disintegrating life.

But at least now I had an answer.

Catherine Mercer.

I went to the library computer the next day and found her gallery, her artists, her pristine white walls, and her severe face in photographs, standing in front of other people's work like she'd made it herself.

I looked at her life, and the math finally made sense. The gallery my mother should've built. The money that should have come to us. Catherine wasn't successful on her own. She was successful with *our* money. She was living in a house that should have been *mine*.

I kept Sarah's card. Not because I planned to call her. What would be the point? No, I kept it because it had Catherine's gallery name scribbled on the back:

Mercer Gallery, Hudson.

People think revenge is hot. Furious. Messy. But I wasn't interested in revenge. Revenge is for people who've been hurt. I was interested in collection.

And that requires patience. Requires becoming someone else entirely. Watching and waiting and preparing for years while everyone around you thinks you're fine.

I was sixteen. I had time.

And Catherine Mercer had no idea I existed.

Not yet.

II. THE INTERVIEW

The coffee spill was practiced. I spent the night before in my apartment perfecting it: the grip, the twist, the way it needed to look like nervous energy instead of carelessness. Most people drop things by letting go. But if you hold too tight and twist at the last second, it reads as someone who cares too much. Someone whose body betrays their eagerness.

I needed Catherine to see me that way. Eager. Grateful. Harmless.

I arrived fifteen minutes early and waited across the street, watching through the gallery window. Catherine was at her desk, maneuvering like someone with a hangover trying not to move too much. I could see the careful way she held her head, the overdone makeup trying to hide what was underneath.

Good.

Desperate people make mistakes.

I'd planned it all: the expensive coffee from the place an avenue over, the portfolio that looked professional but not too fancy, the slight tremor in my voice that said *please like me, please hire me, I need this so badly.*

She looked up. Her eyes passed over my face the way you'd glance at a piece of furniture you're thinking about replacing. I was already categorized: young, hungry, disposable.

Perfect.

I decided to do it when I reached for my portfolio. Just enough to slosh over the rim.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry—"

I was already grabbing napkins from my bag and cleaning, flustered in the exact way someone would be if this

genuinely had been an accident..

I watched her face cycle through annoyance, assessment, resignation, and then saw her decide I was worth the trouble, or at least not worth the energy of finding someone better.

"It's fine," she said.

But I apologized again, establishing the dynamic: I make mistakes, she forgives them, I'm grateful.

She asked about my experience and I delivered every rehearsed answer with the right amount of confidence. She named a dozen tasks I'd need to handle in the first week. I watched her test me, waiting for me to flinch. I didn't. Instead, I nodded and took notes.

We shook hands. I held on slightly too long...not enough to be weird, but long enough to communicate, *I need this, I need you.*

Outside, I walked three blocks before I let myself smile.

She'd hired me.

Of course she had.

III. INFILTRATION

In the first week, I made seven mistakes, all small enough to be believable. I misspelled collector names, wrote the wrong shipping address, double-booked calendar entries, etc. Each time, Catherine yelled. Her face would flush, and her voice would thin out like wire pulled too tight.

And each time, I'd apologize immediately, work through lunch, stay late to fix it, whatever it took to show her I cared about getting it right.

Then I watched her relax. She started to trust me with alarm codes, credit cards, and access to files she should've kept locked. I learned the gallery the way you learn a house you're about to move into. Where the light switches were. Which floorboards creak. What was worth keeping or not.

It was almost *too* easy. All I had to do was be competent and available. Honestly, if she weren't drunk half the time, she probably would've seen how strange it was, how seamlessly I absorbed her chaos.

By the second week, she started getting food for us. Catherine would order Thai food or pizza and insist we eat together, like some little bonding ritual that she thought made her a good boss. I'd force down three bites while she demolished entire containers, talking about her kids or the gallery or whatever guilt was gnawing at her that day, then scrape the rest into a napkin when she wasn't looking.

She watched me sometimes. I could feel her trying to figure out if I had an eating disorder. That worked fine. Better she think I'm fragile than realize I just stopped being hungry years ago.

Catherine, on the other hand, ate like she had a hollow leg.

Week three, I stayed late after she left and logged into her computer, and found the financial files in fifteen minutes. Easy.

And there they were: sets of spreadsheets. One for her records, one for the IRS. And the numbers didn't match.

I copied everything to a thumb drive. Sales records, invoices, tax returns, bank statements. Years of fraud, right there in folders labeled "TAXES" and "SALES PERSONAL," like she didn't even imagine someone might look.

My mother was right. Catherine had been stealing from all of her artists. For years.

I held that thumb drive in my hand and felt something settle into place. Not satisfaction exactly. Clarity. The math worked now.

My mother had been right about the money. Which meant I was right about everything else.

Catherine was a thief. And she was careless. Everything she had (the gallery, the reputation, the family) was built on a foundation that wasn't hers. It was built on capital that should have flowed somewhere else. Should have flowed to my mother, should have flowed to me. She was living in *my* house, spending *my* money.

She was wasting the life that had been meant for me.

I met Vera at a group show in Bushwick four months before I applied to Catherine's gallery. She was standing alone,

looking bored, which meant she was either the most successful person there or the most disappointed.

As it turned out, she was both.

We slept together the third time I visited. Vera's studio smelled like turpentine and cheap weed, and the sex was fine. She talked after anyway, which was the point. She told me about her gallery and Catherine, and how frustrating it was to work with someone so disorganized and drunk.

"She double-booked three appointments yesterday," Vera said, lying on her studio couch with her head on my shoulder. "And then blamed *me* for not reminding her. I'm the artist, not her fucking assistant."

"Why stay?"

"I was nobody before her gallery."

"You made the work," I said. "She just sold it. Badly."

The way Vera looked at me, I could tell she'd been thinking the same. She just needed someone to give her permission, and I was happy to oblige.

I saw Vera maybe twice a month after that. She texted when Catherine pissed her off, and I listened, validated her feelings. I mentioned once that I'd worked at a gallery where the bookkeeping was a mess and artists were underpaid but never knew.

"Huh," she said. "I should probably check my statements."

I planted seeds, but I didn't push.

I didn't need to.

When Vera casually mentioned that Catherine's fifth assistant this year had just quit, I waited two days. Then I submitted my application. I didn't hear back right away, which was fine. I didn't expect to. I'd been patient for this long. What was a few more months? I knew it would only be a matter of time before her next assistant got fired or quit. I'd just keep submitting my application, and eventually, my time would come.

The night of Vera's opening, I stood across the gallery while Catherine got drunk on her own champagne. Her eyes passed over my face once. Probably, she thought I was just another art student there for the free booze. When I saw a young woman approach her holding an empty tray, have a short conversation, and then storm off out of the building, I assumed the best. I applied again, and this time, it stuck.

When Vera saw me at the assistant's desk a week later, she almost laughed.

"New assistant?"

"Lily."

"I give you two months."

"I'm aiming for three."

We'd agreed not to tell Catherine. It would complicate things. But I caught Vera watching me sometimes when Catherine was in her office. Something between amusement and concern, like she couldn't figure out if I was brave or stupid.

It wasn't long before I mentioned Marcus Reed's gallery. I told Vera I'd heard good things, and she should do what's best for her career.

By week six, Marcus offered her a show. Better terms, better exposure.

She asked what I thought. I touched her face. "Whatever makes you happy."

A week later, she scheduled a meeting with Catherine to talk about leaving.

I was the first person she told.

IV. JAMES

Men trust me. I'm not beautiful enough to threaten their wives, but not plain enough to be completely invisible. I'm just in the place where they feel comfortable confiding in me. Dark hair, brown eyes, a small triangle nose and thin lips. Attractive in an easy-to-miss way.

The kind of pretty that sneaks up on people.

It took three weeks with James. Not because it was difficult—it wasn't. It was like walking past a beautiful house with the front door left wide open. You almost feel obligated to walk in, just to make sure someone is taking care of it.

The first week, I was simply helpful: picked up the kids, talked to Max, complimented Sophie's photography.

James started looking forward to seeing me. I could tell by the way he'd linger when I dropped off the kids, looking for excuses to talk even after Catherine called to say she was

on her way home. He was starved for attention. It annoyed me, actually. Not him. *Her*. How do you have a husband so devoted and just leave him on the shelf to collect dust?

Week two, I stayed for dinner. Catherine had an opening and asked if I could watch the kids. James ordered pizza. We ate in the kitchen while Sophie filmed TikToks and Max played video games.

James asked about me. The usual questions: where I grew up, what I wanted from life, etc. The things people ask when they're trying to pretend they're not interested.

I told him about my parents. Both teachers, supportive but worried I'd chosen such an impractical field. About growing up in Ann Arbor, quiet and safe and boring. About studying art history because I believed beauty mattered, and that helping artists succeed was its own kind of creation.

None of it was true. Well, the degree was real. Everything else, I'd invented years ago because the truth (dead addict mother, absent father, foster care) is messy, and I wanted to be the kind of woman a man like James should have. Clean. Simple. Uncomplicated.

James ate it up. He asked thoughtful questions and told me about his own parents, his own choices and regrets.

I made my face soft. Laughed at the right moments and looked sympathetic when he talked about feeling invisible in his marriage.

It's not hard, really. People tell you exactly what they need to hear. You just have to listen.

Week three, the kids were at a sleepover. Catherine had an event and asked me to drop off contracts. I knew James would be home. I timed my arrival for 8 PM.

When he opened the door, I saw it in his face: the recognition that we were alone, that this was different.

"Catherine asked me to drop these off," I said, holding up the folder.

"Thanks. Do you...want to come in?"

I hesitated just long enough to seem like I was considering whether it was appropriate. "Okay, just for a minute."

We sat in the living room. He claimed he'd just opened a bottle of wine, but I knew he was lying. I could hear him scrambling in the kitchen, trying to be quiet twisting the cork. He poured our glasses too large for a quick visit, and that's when I knew.

We talked about Catherine carefully, neutrally. He didn't complain directly, but I could hear it in every sentence: she works too much, drinks too much, never sees the kids, never sees him.

I said things like "That must be hard" and "You're doing your best."

He told me about their marriage. How lonely he was. How invisible he felt. Everything I already knew but pretended was a revelation.

I touched his hand, just for a second. Just to let him know I understood.

He looked at me like I'd offered him water in a desert.

"Lily," he said, my name in his mouth like a confession.

Then I kissed him.

He jerked back an inch, eyes searching my face, stunned, before his gaze dropped to my mouth and he closed the distance himself.

It was better than I expected. Not the sex (that was fine, it was functional) but the rest of it. The way he held me after. The way he looked at me like I was something precious. *This is what other people feel like*, I thought.

Afterward, he cried. Actually cried.

"We can't do this."

"I know."

"Catherine—"

"I know."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay." I kissed his cheek. "It's okay."

But I didn't leave. I stayed. And we did it again.

Over the next two weeks, we fell into a pattern. I'd come over when Catherine was at the gallery. We'd have sex in his bed, in the bed he shared with her, and afterward he'd tell me he was falling in love with me.

"I think about you all the time," he said once, touching my hair like it was precious. "Is that crazy? We barely know each other."

"I think about you too," I said.

And it wasn't even a lie: I did think about him, about what he did for me. About how naturally he fit into the shape of the life I was building. About how good he was with Sophie and Max, how patient. About how wasted he was on Catherine, who never saw him. Touched him. Made him feel like he mattered.

"Do you really care about me?" James asked one night, his voice small and vulnerable. "Or am I just... I don't know. Am I just convenient?"

"I care about you," I said. And I made my voice soft and sincere. I looked into his eyes, as if he were the only person in the world who mattered.

Men are so simple.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I can't keep doing this. But I can't stop."

"We'll figure it out," I said.

And I meant it. We would figure it out. I was already figuring it out.

The gallery was almost mine. The husband was almost mine. The kids already liked me better.

Catherine was living in my house, sleeping in my bed, wasting my life.

She just didn't know it yet.

Soon she wouldn't have to worry about any of it.

EIGHT

CATHERINE

When she walks in, there are two empty scotch bottles in my office. One on the desk, the other on its side near my foot, rolling slightly when I shift my weight. The gallery floor isn't level. I've always known this, but right now I can feel it, the way everything tilts slightly left.

I'm sitting in the dark. Just the security lights. Everything looks underwater.

Lily comes through the door, and I watch her figure resolve from shadow into substance. Jeans. Sweater. Hair pulled back. She looks twelve years old. She looks like someone who should be asking me for homework help.

"Catherine? What are you doing here so late?" Her voice is soft. Concerned. The same voice she's been using for two months. "Are you okay?"

I don't answer.

She sets her bag down on my desk. Slowly. "Your text said you needed to talk about something urgent?" She looks around. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"You're late," I say. My tongue feels thick.

"You didn't say what time." She takes a step closer. "Is everything okay? Did something happen with a collector?"

"Sit down," I say.

"Maybe we should turn on some lights—"

"Sit the fuck down, Lily."

She stops. Then she sits in the chair across from my desk. Not in my chair. The chair for assistants. For people who know their place.

"Okay," she says carefully. "What's going on?"

I stand up. The room tilts and keeps tilting until I grab the edge of the desk. The wood feels too smooth. Like it might slip out from under my hand.

"How long did you think it would take?" I ask.

"How long would what take?"

"Before I figured it out."

Her face doesn't change. "Figured what out?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I saw Vera. Two nights ago. Leaving your building at 2 AM."

"Oh." She shifts in her seat. Looks down. The perfect amount of embarrassment. "I should have told you. I know it's complicated with her being one of your artists, but we—"

"I don't give a fuck about Vera." The lie isn't convincing, even to myself. "I looked you up."

"I don't understand—"

"Lily Carter doesn't exist. She graduated from Oberlin? No record. She worked at Pace Gallery? They've never heard of her. The phone numbers you gave me for your last three references? Disconnected."

She's very still now. Not breathing.

"So I started thinking," I continue, not taking my eyes off her. "Young woman. Shows up with a fake identity. Why? What does she want?" I sway forward. "Then I remembered. 'Survived by daughter Lily.'"

The air in the gallery changes.

"Diane Rosen," I say.

For a long moment: nothing. She just sits there. Then her face does something. Not a change exactly. More like a mask sliding off. The concerned assistant disappears. What's underneath is...nothing. The expression I'd glimpsed before in the reflection.

"That's your mother," I say.

"Yes." She doesn't seem surprised. Her voice is different now. Flatter. All the warmth gone.

I feel my stomach drop. "You've been planning this. All of it."

She stands up slowly. Walks to my desk and sets her bag down. Not the assistant's chair anymore. She sits on the edge of the desk, her hands folded in her lap.

"Most of it," she says. "Some things were improvisation. But the outline, yes."

This isn't the girl who spilled coffee in my office. This is someone else entirely. Or maybe this was always who she was and I was too stupid to see it.

"You blame me for her death," I say.

"That's not really the point."

The answer catches me off guard. "What?"

"Whether you killed her." Lily examines her fingernails. "It doesn't matter to me."

"It doesn't—" I feel my face get hot. "Your mother is dead, and it doesn't *matter*?"

"My mother was weak." She says it the way you'd say the sky is blue. "She had a claim, and she couldn't execute it. She came to you desperate and drunk and begging, and you did whatever you did, and she's gone." She looks up at me. "That's not why I'm here."

"Then why?"

"Because you're a thief." She pulls out her phone. The light from the screen makes her face glow blue. "Two sets of books. Unreported income. Cash sales. I copied everything. Bank statements going back ten years. Invoices. Emails where you discussed hiding transactions."

The room feels too hot. I can feel sweat starting under my arms, along my spine. "You broke into my files."

"You gave me the password. You gave me access to everything." She tilts her head. "You know what I kept thinking, the whole time I was here? How careless you are. How wasteful. You built something real—this gallery, your reputation, your family—and you just... let it rot. Drunk by noon. Ignoring your artists. Ignoring your husband. Ignoring your kids."

"You don't know anything about my family."

"I know your daughter wants to be a photographer and you've never once asked to see her work. I know your son sketches in his room alone because no one's told him it matters. I know your husband makes dinner every night and eats it alone because you're here, or at openings, or passed out somewhere." She stands up. "I know you have everything, and you don't even see it."

"So this is about...what? Teaching me a lesson?"

"No." She says it simply. "It's about correcting an error."

"An error."

"You built this with money that wasn't yours, Catherine. Capital that should have gone to my mother, and then to

me. Every artist you signed, every sale you made, every year you spent becoming *Catherine Mercer*—" She spreads her hands, indicating the gallery around us. "You were just keeping it warm. Holding my place."

I laugh, but it comes out wrong. Too high. "You're insane."

"I'm very practical, actually." She picks up a paperweight from my desk. Turns it over in her hands. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to sign the gallery over to me. You're going to leave New York. And this will be over."

"No *fucking* way."

"Then I send everything to the IRS tomorrow. Embezzling is a federal crime. Five to seven years. You'll lose your license. Your reputation. Everything." She sets the paperweight down. "But honestly? I'd rather you just left. A legal battle is tedious. I'd prefer to skip to the part where I'm running things."

"You used a fake identity." My voice is getting louder but I can't control it. "Fake references. Fake background. That's fraud. Identity theft. If you think I'm going down alone—"

"Who are they going to believe?" She leans forward. "You're a drunk. Everyone knows it. Your staff. Your artists. Your husband. You think anyone's going to take your word over mine?"

"I could say you're the one who's been embezzling. You've had access to everything—"

"Try it." Lily takes a step toward me. She's close enough now that I can see her pupils. They're huge, black holes. "See what happens."

The door opens.

It's James.

Fucking James. He's holding takeout. A plastic bag from the Thai place he knows I love.

"Catherine." His voice is careful. Too careful. "You're not answering your phone."

"Battery died," I lie. I turned it off hours ago.

He looks at Lily. She looks at him.

The air changes.

Something passes between them that's so obvious it's like watching two people speak a language I don't know. Their bodies shift. His shoulders drop. Her chin lifts slightly. They're communicating without words and I'm watching it happen and I can't—

"How long has this been going on?" I say.

My voice sounds strange now, distant. Like I'm underwater.

James sets the food on the desk. "What?"

"How well do you know each other, James?"

He won't look at me. His eyes are on the floor, the wall, the ceiling. Anywhere but my face.

Lily hasn't moved. She's still looking at him. Still not blinking.

"How well!?" My voice is rising. I can hear it getting shrill and I don't stop it. "How many times has she been to our house!?"

"I don't know. Ten? Twelve? She's been helpful with the kids—"

"Helpful." The word tastes like acid. "That's what you call it."

"Catherine—"

Lily moves away from where we're standing. She walks right up to him, too close for an employee, and puts a hand on his arm.

"It's okay," she says softly. "She knows."

James freezes. He looks at her hand on his arm, then at me. His face goes white. "Don't."

"It's okay, James." She steps closer, practically leaning into him. "We don't have to hide it anymore. I showed her the books. I showed her everything. It's over."

"James," I whisper. "Get away from her."

He pulls his arm back, stumbling a step away from her. "Lily, stop. Not here."

"Why not?" She smiles at him. It's not a cruel smile. It's patient. "This is what we wanted. You said you couldn't keep doing this. You said you couldn't keep living like a ghost in your own life. Now you don't have to."

"Stop talking," James says.

"We've been sleeping together," Lily says to me, but she keeps her eyes on him. "For six weeks. Isn't that right, James?"

I brace myself on the desk, the corners digging into my palms. "Tell me she's lying."

James starts crying. What a fucking disgrace of a man. What a weakling. My husband is crying in my gallery with Thai food on the desk and I can smell the peanut sauce and it's making me nauseous.

"James," she says, soothingly. "Don't cry. You don't have to feel bad for her. Look at her." She gestures to me, dismissively. "She's drunk. She's falling apart. She's not the wife you deserve."

"You're crazy," James whispers.

"I'm the one who listens to you," Lily continues. She reaches for him again. "I'm the one who makes you feel alive. You told me that. You said I made you feel seen."

"This was a mistake," James says. He's backing toward the door. "I made a terrible mistake."

Lily's expression flickers. Just for a second. The demeanor of the loving partner slips, revealing the confusion of a creditor whose check just bounced.

"No," she says firmly. "We fit, James. You said it yourself. You said we fit."

"Stop." James is backing toward the door now. "Just stop."

"I don't understand." Lily's voice doesn't change. Still gentle. Still patient. But something in her eyes has gone flat. "I thought you wanted this. You said you were falling in love with me."

"I was—I don't know what I was. Lonely. Stupid." He's shaking his head. "But this isn't... You're talking like we're going to run off together. I barely know you."

Lily is very still.

"James," she says. And now her voice is different. Careful. "Think about what you're saying."

"I'm saying this is fucked up. All of it. You, her, this whole—" He gestures at the gallery, at me, at Lily. "I'm done."

"You're choosing her?" Lily asks. Not angry. Genuinely curious. Like she's trying to solve an equation that won't balance. "After everything she's done? After how she's treated you?"

James is at the door now. His face is doing something complicated. Collapsing and hardening at the same time.

"You're both—" He can't finish. He's shaking his head.

"James—"

"I'm filing for divorce." He looks at me. He's talking faster now. Getting louder. "She told me about the embezzlement. About the stealing from artists. All of it."

I feel my throat clench. "You don't know anything about—"

"She showed me the books, Catherine. I knew something was wrong. I just didn't want to believe it." He pulls the door open, standing there looking between us. "I'm taking the kids. And getting as far away from both of you as I can."

Then the door slams shut, and he's gone.

Lily stands very still for a moment, looking at the closed door. Her expression isn't one of hurt. It's the look of someone revising a spreadsheet.

"That was unexpected," she says quietly. Almost to herself.

I feel far away, like I'm watching someone else's life from a dream. "You used him."

"You use everyone." She looks at me. "I just did it better."

The smell of fish sauce and lime fills the gallery. My stomach lurches.

"Get out," I say. My voice hoarse now. "Leave New York. Tonight. If I ever see you again—"

"You'll what?" She looks me up and down, taking in my shaking hands. "You can't even stand up, Catherine. You're not a threat to anyone."

She grabs her bag and walks to the door, then stops. "He's going to take everything," she says, then looks at me. A long, assessing look. "You really didn't deserve him," she says. "But I guess he didn't deserve me either."

She leaves.

I'm alone with the Thai food and the empty bottles and the sound of my own breathing.

I need a drink.

There's wine in the mini fridge. I get it out. Try to open it. The corkscrew slips. I try again. My hands are shaking too badly. I smash the neck of the bottle against the desk. Glass sprays and wine pools onto the floor. I put my mouth around the broken neck and drink. It cuts into my lip but I don't care.

James is going to take my kids.

He's going to tell everyone everything.

I'm going to lose the gallery.

I need to explain. Need to make him understand.

I get my keys. They fall. I bend to pick them up and the room spins. I'm on my knees. Glass everywhere. Wine soaking into my jeans.

I stand up. Slowly. Everything takes so much effort.

My coat. Where's my coat?

There. On the chair. I put it on. One arm. Other arm.
Buttons. Can't do buttons.

Fuck buttons.

Outside. The door. The alarm. I punch in the code.
Again. Third time it works.

The street is too bright. Or too dark. The lights are halos.
Everything is edges.

My car. Where did I park?

There. Across the street. I step off the curb. A cab blares
its horn. I jump back and catch myself on a parking meter.
My ankle twists. Goddamnit.

Cross. Make it to the car. Keys. Open the door. Get in.

The seat is too close. No, too far. I can't find the right
position.

Start the engine.

I just need to explain. Just need to make him understand
that I didn't know. That Lily is dangerous. That this isn't my
fault.

I pull into traffic. Someone honks. I correct. Overcorrect.
The car feels too big. Like I'm driving a boat.

The streets are blurring, but I know where I'm going.
James's office. Or home. One of them. Both.

I just need to talk to him.

Just need to make this right.

The lights are bleeding together. Red. Green. Yellow. It
all looks the same.

I take a corner. Fast. The car lurches. My stomach goes
with it.

I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm always fine.

I just need to find him.

Just need to explain.

NINE

NYPD INCIDENT REPORT Case No.:

2077-08847

Date: Wednesday, November 20, 8:47 AM

Location: 447 W 28th Street, Parking Garage, Level 2

Deceased: James Edward Mercer, 47

Discovered by maintenance worker in vehicle (2021 Honda Accord)

Preliminary: Blunt force trauma, back of skull

Blood trail from stairwell to vehicle (approx. 30 feet)

TOD estimate: 11 PM Tuesday - 4 AM Wednesday

WITNESS STATEMENT: Carlos Reyes, Building Maintenance

Wednesday, November 20, 9:04 AM

I come in at six every mornin'. Do my rounds. Parking garage is always last 'cause it's cold as hell and ain't nobody down there that early. Around 8:30 I'm doin' trash pickup on Level 2 and I see this car. Honda. Engine's off but the guy inside, he's just sittin' there. I'm like, a'ight, he's sleepin' or on his phone or whatever.

I walk past. Come back maybe ten minutes later and he still ain't moved. So I go closer. Tap on the window. That's when I see his face. Eyes open but like, not seein' nothin'. And the blood, yo. There's blood on the window. Blood on his shirt. Blood everywhere.

I don't touch nothin'. Call 911 right away. I seen some shit workin' maintenance. But this? Nah, man. This shit was different.

The other cops asked me 'bout the security cameras. Yeah, we got cameras. Four of 'em in the garage. They show live on the monitor in the office, right? But the DVR? Mannn, that thing's been fucked for months. Building manager keeps sayin' he gonna replace it, but he's cheap as hell. The hard drive fills up after like three days and then it just stops recordin'. Overwrites itself or crashes or some shit. You can see what's happenin' live, but half the time it ain't actually savin' nothin'. And nobody ever done no shit like this before, so he didn't really see it as a priority, you know?

I checked the system right after I called you guys. Last thing recorded was from Sunday night. Whole system crashed sometime Monday and nobody noticed 'cause nobody checks it unless there's a problem. We got nothin' from Tuesday night. Nothin' at all. Sorry fellas.

Building manager gonna hear about this, though, believe that. I been tellin' him for six months that system's a piece of garbage.

VIDEO INTERVIEW: CATHERINE MERCER Wednesday, November 20, 2:47 PM

DETECTIVE MORRISON: State your full name for the recording, please.

CATHERINE MERCER: Catherine Elizabeth Mercer. Is he really... is James really dead?

MORRISON: We've confirmed the identity of the deceased, yes. I need to establish a timeline, Mrs. Mercer. When was the last time you saw your husband alive?

CATHERINE: Last night. Tuesday. At my gallery.

MORRISON: What time?

CATHERINE: I'm not sure. 9:30 maybe? Ten?

MORRISON: And the nature of this meeting?

CATHERINE: It wasn't a meeting. He came to bring me dinner. We... We argued.

MORRISON: Was there physical contact?

CATHERINE: No. Just shouting.

MORRISON: About what?

CATHERINE: [Pause] He was having an affair. With my assistant, Lily. She was there. She told us both.

MORRISON: This was the first you'd heard of it?

CATHERINE: Yes.

MORRISON: So you were angry.

CATHERINE: Of course I was angry. I told them to get out.

MORRISON: And did they?

CATHERINE: James left first. He said he was filing for divorce. Lily left a few minutes later.

MORRISON: Leaving you alone at the gallery.

CATHERINE: Yes.

MORRISON: What time was that?

CATHERINE: 10:15, I think. Around then.

MORRISON: What did you do next?

CATHERINE: I was upset. I had a glass of wine.

MORRISON: And then?

CATHERINE: I went home.

MORRISON: How?

CATHERINE: I drove.

MORRISON: You drove from 28th Street to your home on the Upper West Side?

CATHERINE: Yes.

MORRISON: What route did you take?

CATHERINE: I... I don't know. The one I always take. I was upset. I told you.

MORRISON: It's a fifteen-minute drive at that hour, Mrs. Mercer. Maybe twenty with lights.

CATHERINE: Okay.

MORRISON: Your neighbor, Mrs. Olesky, called in a noise complaint at 11:30 PM. She watched a black SUV back into your communal recycling bins.

CATHERINE: That might have been me. I'm not proud of it.

MORRISON: If James left at 10:15, and you went straight home, where were you for the missing hour?

CATHERINE: I must have stayed at the gallery longer than I thought. I was so upset.

MORRISON: [Silence]

CATHERINE: What?

MORRISON: Place your hands on the table. Palms up.

CATHERINE: Why?

MORRISON: Please. [Catherine puts her hands on the table]

MORRISON: Deep lacerations on the palms. Fresh.

CATHERINE: I broke a wine bottle. At the gallery. I was trying to open it and the neck shattered.

MORRISON: [Points to her arms] And the bruising on the forearms?

CATHERINE: I don't know. I must have bumped into something.

MORRISON: Those are patterned contusions, Mrs. Mercer. We typically see that specific pattern on the radius bone when someone raises their arms to block a strike. Or when they are struggling to shove someone away.

CATHERINE: I told you, I didn't touch him.

MORRISON: I didn't say you touched *him*. I asked about the bruises.

CATHERINE: I don't remember.

MORRISON: Your daughter, Sophie. She was home when you arrived?

CATHERINE: I think so. She was in her room.

MORRISON: She told the uniformed officer she heard you come in at 2:30 AM.

CATHERINE: That's wrong. You said yourself. The neighbor saw me at 11:30.

MORRISON: The neighbor saw your *car* at 11:30. Sophie didn't hear you come inside the apartment until 2:30. She was awake. She said she heard the shower running.

CATHERINE: [No response]

MORRISON: That's three hours, Mrs. Mercer. You're sitting in your car, covered in glass cuts and bruises, for three hours?

CATHERINE: I must've fallen asleep. I don't know. I told you, I was upset. I was so tired.

MORRISON: James was found in the parking garage on 28th Street. Four blocks from your gallery. Can you explain that?

CATHERINE: What? Why was he there?

MORRISON: That's what I'm asking you.

CATHERINE: I don't know. I didn't see him again after he left the gallery.

MORRISON: He didn't make it to his car. Not walking, anyway. There was a blood trail starting at the stairwell. Thirty feet of drag marks.

CATHERINE: [Staring at the table]

MORRISON: He was hit from behind. Blunt force. He was on the ground, bleeding, and then someone moved

him. Someone put him in the driver's seat.

CATHERINE: I didn't... I wouldn't...

MORRISON: You're the only person unaccounted for between 10:15 PM and 2:30 AM. You have no alibi. You have defensive wounds. And you admit you were in a rage.

CATHERINE: What about Lily?

MORRISON: Lily Rosen?

CATHERINE: Yes. She was there. She hates him. She hates us both.

MORRISON: We're looking for Ms. Rosen. But right now, she's not the one sitting across from me with glass cuts on her hands and three hours of her night unaccounted for.

CATHERINE: I didn't kill my husband.

MORRISON: Then you need to start remembering what you *did* do.

CATHERINE: I want a lawyer.

INTERVIEW: LILY ROSEN Chicago PD, Saturday, November 23, 2:14 PM

MORRISON: Thank you for coming in, Ms. Rosen.

LILY ROSEN: Am I under arrest?

MORRISON: No. We just have some questions.

LILY: Then I can leave whenever I want.

MORRISON: You can. But a man is dead, and you left New York the morning his body was discovered. So I'd suggest cooperating.

LILY: I didn't leave because of that. I didn't even know he was dead.

MORRISON: You applied to Catherine Mercer's gallery under the name Lily Carter. Your legal name is Lily Rosen. Why the different name?

LILY: I use Carter professionally. Lots of people do. It's not illegal.

MORRISON: Why?

LILY: My mother died when I was young. Taking her name felt...I don't know. Heavy? I wanted a fresh start.

MORRISON: Your mother was Diane Rosen.

LILY: [pause] Yes.

MORRISON: Artist. Died in Hudson, New York, twelve years ago.

LILY: Yes.

MORRISON: She had a connection to Catherine Mercer.

LILY: Catherine represented her briefly. Before I was born, I think. Or when I was very young. I didn't know that when I applied for the job.

MORRISON: You didn't know?

LILY: No. I found out later. Going through gallery records. I saw my mother's name in old contracts. The art world is incredibly small.

MORRISON: And what did you do when you found that out?

LILY: I asked Catherine about it. She said my mother wasn't a good fit for the gallery. That she had to let her go. It happens in the art world.

MORRISON: You weren't angry?

LILY: Why would I be angry? My mother struggled. She was an addict. Catherine probably made the right call.

MORRISON: Let's talk about James Mercer. Were you having an affair with him?

LILY: [pause] It wasn't an affair. We were building a life together.

MORRISON: He was married.

LILY: He was lonely. Catherine was never home. She drank constantly. He felt invisible in his own marriage.

MORRISON: So you slept with him.

LILY: We connected. He saw me, I saw him. It was real.

MORRISON: How long?

LILY: Six weeks. But it felt...inevitable. When you really connect with someone—

MORRISON: Did Catherine know?

LILY: Not until Tuesday.

MORRISON: Walk me through Tuesday night.

LILY: Catherine called me to the gallery around nine. She was drunk. She started accusing me of things.

MORRISON: What things?

LILY: That I was lying about who I was. She was paranoid. She gets like that when she drinks.

MORRISON: Was she wrong?

LILY: About what?

MORRISON: About you lying.

LILY: I used a different last name. That's it. Everything else about me was true.

MORRISON: What happened during this confrontation?

LILY: She was screaming at me. Threatening to call the police and say I'd stolen from her. Which I hadn't. I'd never stolen anything.

MORRISON: Did you access her financial records?

LILY: I worked there. Part of my job was organizing files. Of course I saw things. But I didn't steal anything.

MORRISON: What did you see?

LILY: Discrepancies. Income that wasn't being reported. But that's not my business. I'm not an accountant.

MORRISON: Did you confront her about this?

LILY: Tuesday night when she was accusing me of all these things. I said... I told her if she was going to threaten me, I could tell people what I'd seen in those files. It was defensive. I was scared.

MORRISON: What happened when James Mercer showed up?

LILY: He came to the gallery around ten. Catherine told him I'd been lying. And then—[pause]—she told him she knew about us. About James and me.

MORRISON: How did he react?

LILY: He was devastated. Not because of me. Because of the way Catherine told him. She was cruel. She made it sound ugly.

MORRISON: What did you do?

LILY: I tried to explain that what we had was real. But Catherine kept... She's vicious when she drinks. Told him I was using him.

MORRISON: *Were* you using him?

LILY: [slight sobbing] No. I loved him. Maybe that sounds crazy after six weeks, but I did. He was kind and gentle and he saw me. Really saw me. Not like... [stops]

MORRISON: Not like what?

LILY: Not like I was disposable. The way Catherine treated me. The way she treats everyone. Her staff. Her artists. Her own family. She burns through people.

MORRISON: [Silence. He lets her cry for ten seconds. Then:] And yet, you left him there.

LILY: [Sobbing stops abruptly. She looks up.] What?

MORRISON: You say you loved him. You say he was the best thing that happened to you. But you left him alone with a "vicious" drunk and got on a bus to Chicago.

LILY: Catherine kicked me out.

MORRISON: You didn't wait outside? You didn't text him?

LILY: I was scared.

MORRISON: We found your DNA in his car. Hair. Fingerprints.

LILY: We were together. Of course my DNA is there.

MORRISON: We found prints on the gear shift.

LILY: I drove sometimes.

MORRISON: James's car was detailed on Monday morning, Ms. Rosen. We have the receipt.

LILY: [Silence]

MORRISON: Any prints found in that car were placed there *after* Monday morning. You said you hadn't seen him since Sunday.

LILY: [Voice tightens] The detailers probably missed a spot.

MORRISON: On the gear shift?

LILY: What are you implying?

MORRISON: I'm not implying anything. I'm looking at a timeline that doesn't work. You say you were home packing. But the garage security cameras on 28th street are interesting.

LILY: [Staring at him. Unblinking.]

MORRISON: They're grainy. Hard to make out a face. But at 10:45 PM, they show a figure following James into the structure. Female. Dark hair. Same height as you.

LILY: That could be anyone. That could be Catherine.

MORRISON: Catherine drives a white Mini Cooper. She doesn't walk.

LILY: I was at my apartment.

MORRISON: Can anyone verify that?

LILY: I live alone.

MORRISON: So you have no alibi for the time of death. You have fresh prints in the victim's car. And you fled the state six hours later.

LILY: I didn't flee. I moved.

MORRISON: Why did you kill him, Lily?

LILY: [Coldly] I didn't.

MORRISON: Was it because he rejected you? Because he chose his wife?

LILY: He didn't choose her. He was *trapped* with her.

MORRISON: Then why is he dead?

LILY: Ask Catherine.

MORRISON: I'm asking you.

LILY: And I'm telling you, you're looking at the wrong person. Catherine Mercer has a history of destroying people who get in her way. My mother. Me. James.

MORRISON: You seem very focused on Catherine.

LILY: She's the common denominator, isn't she?

MORRISON: Or maybe you just hate her.

LILY: I don't hate her. I pity her. She had everything, and she treated it like trash.

MORRISON: So you thought you should take it?

LILY: [Pause. She leans forward.] Someone had to value him.

MORRISON: Is that why you killed him? Because you couldn't have him?

LILY: I'm done answering questions.

MORRISON: We're not done.

LILY: [Stands up] Am I under arrest?

MORRISON: Not yet.

LILY: Does Catherine have an alibi?

MORRISON: We aren't discussing Mrs. Mercer.

LILY: If you had enough on her, you wouldn't be wasting time trying to trip me up with "grainy footage" and car detailing receipts. Which means you don't know who did it.

MORRISON: [Silence]

LILY: Call me when you charge Catherine. Until then, I'm leaving.

[Interview concluded 3:47 PM]

**DISTRICT ATTORNEY – NEW YORK COUNTY EARLY
CASE ASSESSMENT BUREAU**

CASE SCREENING / ACTION SHEET

NOTE: Case subject to reopening upon development of new forensic or testimonial evidence.

TIME: 0945 HRS

ADA: S. Morrison

PRECINCT: 13th Pct

ARREST #: N/A

COMPLAINT #: 3024-013-09821

DEFENDANTS:

MERCER, CATHERINE (F/W/42)
ROSEN, LILY (F/W/28) a/k/a CARTER, LILY
TOP CHARGE: Murder 2°
DISPOSITION: ☒ DECLINE PROSECUTION (DP) ☐
DRAFT COMPLAINT ☐ PENDING

BASIS FOR DECLINATION

Homicide of James Mercer. Victim located deceased in parking garage, 28th Street. Cause of death: blunt force trauma.

S1 – Mercer:

- No verified alibi
- Claims memory loss re: incident
- History of alcohol abuse and prior domestic incidents
- No forensic evidence linking S1 to weapon or scene beyond residence

S2 – Rosen:

- Departed NY shortly after incident
- Admitted consensual relationship with victim
- DNA and prints recovered from victim vehicle
- Evidence consistent with prior access; no direct link to crime scene

Case is wholly circumstantial. Evidence supports competing theories. No murder weapon recovered. No conclusive video surveillance. No confession.

At this time, People cannot meet burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt as to either suspect.

ACTION:

No charges filed. Both parties released. Case remains open, investigation active.

NOTIFIED: Det. Morrison, 13th Pct

ADA: S. Jenkins

SUPERVISOR: M. Lowery

TEN

CATHERINE

Six Months Later

The apartment is too small. That's the first thing I notice every morning when I wake up. Two bedrooms, galley kitchen, living room that barely fits a couch. Max's room is the size of a closet. He doesn't complain, but I see it in his face when he comes home from his dad's—

No. Not his dad's. His grandmother's. James's mother. That's where Max lives now. Where Sophie lives when she's not at school. She won't return my calls.

I get Max one weekend a month. Supervised. A social worker sits in my living room and watches us eat takeout and pretend everything's normal.

The gallery closed in January. I teach now, three classes a week at Pratt.

I've been sober for 193 days. It doesn't mean anything.

James is still dead. Sophie still won't answer my calls. And Lily is out there somewhere, getting away with murder.

I know she did it. I know it the way you know when it's going to rain, something in the air, something inevitable. The police never charged her. Insufficient evidence. But I know.

She killed him because she wanted revenge. Because she's a psychopath.

That's what I told the police. That's what I tell my therapist. That's what I tell myself every night when I can't sleep

because the dreams won't stop.

The dreams are always the same: I'm driving. It's dark. I'm following someone, but I can't see who. Then I'm standing by a river and there's blood on my hands and I don't know how it got there. I wake up gasping, sheets soaked with sweat, and I have to remind myself it's just a dream. Just my mind trying to process trauma. That's what my therapist says.

But sometimes I look at my hands in the morning, and I remember the bruise on my forearm that took three weeks to fade. The cuts on my palms that I told everyone came from broken glass. The blood under my fingernails that took days of scrubbing.

And I don't remember how any of it happened.

I've been keeping a journal. My therapist's idea. Write down what I remember from that night. Maybe it'll help to bring the memories back.

It doesn't.

All I have are fragments of that night.

And then nothing.

White space. Just the feeling of being very drunk and very angry and needing to... what? I don't know. I wanted to talk to him, wanted to explain. I wanted to make him understand that Lily was dangerous, that she'd planned all of this, that we were both victims.

I tell myself that's proof I didn't do it. If I'd killed my husband, I'd remember. Wouldn't I?

Except there's this thing my therapist told me about. Dissociative amnesia. When the mind experiences something so traumatic that it just...erases it. Walls it off. Protects you from something you can't handle knowing.

She was talking about witnessing James's death. About the trauma of losing him.

But what if.

No.

I didn't kill James. Lily did. I know she did.

I have to believe that.

It's Sunday, and I'm finally starting to unpack the last boxes from the move. I keep thinking I'll finish unpacking *this*

weekend, make this place feel like home, but six months later, half my life is still in cardboard.

I'm three boxes in when I find it.

Sophie's journal. Purple cover, pages warped like it got wet. Her handwriting on the inside: "PRIVATE. DO NOT READ. YES THAT MEANS YOU MOM."

I shouldn't.

But she won't talk to me. She's at Wesleyan, and she screens my calls. I just want to know if there's any chance she'll forgive me.

I open it.

The first entries are normal. Complaints about school. A boy named Trevor I never heard about.

Then November.

The handwriting changes. Gets messier.

November 20th.

The day James died:

nov 20

i can't sleep. when i close my eyes i just see it over and over again.

dad never came home and the police were just here asking if Mom drinks. if Mom has a temper.

i lied and said i didn't know.

i barely saw Mom at all last night. when she pulled in she hit the trash bins and it woke me up. i looked out the window and just sat there in the driveway for like ten minutes. i almost went down to help her but then she got out and the security light turned on and I saw it.

there were dark wet patches on her shirt and her hands looked shiny and wet.

i'm pretty sure it was blood.

she looked crazy. she looked like a complete fucking monster tbh.

and dad never came home.

i'm afraid if i say it out loud they'll take her away and I'll be all alone.

i can't tell anyone.

oh god Dad.

The journal falls from my hands.

Sophie saw me.
She saw the blood.
She's known this whole time.
No. She's wrong. She couldn't have seen clearly. It was dark.
But she wrote it down.
The same time frame I can't account for.
My therapist's voice: *Sometimes the mind protects us from truths we can't handle.*
I close my eyes.
What happened after Lily left the gallery?

*I'm in my car. Driving. The streets blur. I run a red light.
I see James's car. Turning into a parking garage.
I follow.
I park. Get out. The concrete is cold.
James sees me. "Catherine? Jesus, did you drive here?"
"Need to talk."
"You're drunk. Go home."
"Please. Lily, she planned this. She's dangerous."
"I know what she is. You brought her into our home. You let her near our kids."
"I didn't know —"
"You didn't care." He's backing away. Toward the stairwell.
"You were too busy drinking to notice."
"I'm sorry."
"It's too late. I'm taking them. I can't do this anymore. The drinking. The outbursts. All of it."
"Outbursts!? I never —"
"You threw a plate at my head last month!"
Did I?
"James, don't take them. They're all I have."
"You should have thought about that." He's at the stairwell now. Backing up the steps. "Stay away from us. If you come near the kids—"
"They're MY kids!"
He flinches. "Not anymore."
Something breaks inside me.
I'm moving. I don't decide to. I just do.
My hands hit his chest. Hard.*

*He's off balance on the steps. His arms windmill.
"Catherine—!"
He falls backward.
His head hits the concrete edge.
The sound. Like a hammer hitting a wet sack of flour.
He slides down two steps. Eyes open. Not moving.
"James?"
Blood pools beneath his head, spreading out in a slow, deliberate circle.
"James, get up."
He doesn't move.
His eyes are empty.*

*I'm on my knees. The journal on the floor. My hands over my face.
No no no no—
But it's flooding back. All of it.*

*I'm kneeling in his blood. Shaking him.
He's dead.
How long do I kneel there? Minutes? Hours?
My kids. They'll take my kids.
I'm moving. Dragging him to his car. Thirty feet. He's so heavy.
I push him into the driver's seat. Find his keys. My hands shaking.
Wipe the door handle. The steering wheel.
Leave him there. Like he fell asleep.
I drive home. The streets empty. I pull into my driveway and sit.
Blood on my shirt. On my hands.
Sophie's window. The light is on.
I go inside. Shower. Scrub until my skin is raw.
Get in bed.
And my mind does something merciful and terrible.
It erases everything.*

I can't breathe.

I killed James.

Lily was right.

Lily spent twelve years knowing I murdered her mother. She came for justice and I called her a psychopath. I destroyed her credibility. Made her look insane. She was RIGHT and I destroyed her all over again.

Just like I destroyed her mother.

Sophie knows. She saw me come home with blood and she's carried it alone for six months. Protecting me because I'm all she has left.

I did that to her.

I could turn myself in. Show them Sophie's entry. Confess.

Or...

I look at the purple cover. My daughter's handwriting.

I could destroy it. Burn it. Make it disappear.

Sophie will never tell. She's already proven that.

I could just...survive.

That's what I do.

I killed two people and built a life on their graves and I'm still here.

I sit there for a long time. The journal in my hands.

I think about James's face in that garage. The betrayal. The fear.

But I also think about what he said. That he was taking my children.

What was I supposed to do?

Any mother would have—

No. I can't finish that thought.

I think about Diane. About her threats. The blackmail. She was going to ruin me. Report me. End my career. What choice did I have?

They backed me into a corner. Both of them.

But god. Oh god, I killed them.

I look at the journal. Sophie's handwriting. My daughter. She shouldn't have to live with this. This weight. This knowledge. It's not fair to her.

She's eighteen now. She should be thinking about classes, about boys, about her future. Not about what she saw

that night.

I can fix this. I can take this burden from her.

I stand up and walk to the kitchen. Turn on the gas stove.

The journal is evidence. But it's also Sophie's pain. Her fear. Her impossible decision.

If it doesn't exist, she doesn't have to carry it anymore.

I'm doing this for her.

I tear out the first page and feed it to the flame.

The corner blackens, then bursts alive, a flickering tongue racing toward my knuckles.

I let it go before it reaches my fingers, watch it die in the sink.

Another page. Then another.

i lied and said i didn't know — burns

i'm pretty sure it was blood — burns

oh god Dad — burns

The smoke detector starts beeping. I open a window and keep going.

Sophie doesn't need this anymore. She's free now. She can move on. Build a life without this hanging over her.

I'm protecting her. That's what mothers do.

The last page curls and blackens.

I run water over the ashes and watch them dissolve, disappearing down the drain.

Gone.

I dry my hands, turn off the stove, and close the window.

The smoke clears.

I make some coffee, then sit at my kitchen table. Papers to grade spread in front of me.

Tomorrow I'll go to therapy and say 194 days. I'll tell her the nightmares are better. And they will be. Now that I remember, now that I've taken care of things, maybe I can finally sleep.

Through the window, the city moves. People going to work like everything is fine. Just living their lives.

They don't know what it's like. To be pushed to their limits. To make impossible choices. To protect the people you love no matter what it costs.

They'd never understand.

I pick up my red pen.

I have papers to grade.

ELEVEN

LILY

Six Months Later

"The light in here is exceptional," the realtor says. His name is David. He's young, wearing a suit that's a little too tight and cologne that smells like vetiver and cedar. "South-facing windows. You get sun all day."

I run my hand along the quartz island. It's cold and pristine.

"It's lovely," I say.

"And the building is full service," David continues, sensing a sale. He's steering me toward the living room, filling the silence with noise. "Twenty-four-hour doorman, package room, private gym on the second floor. It's very secure. Perfect for a young woman living alone."

"Secure is good."

I walk to the center of the room. The floors are pale oak. The walls are waiting for art, like one enormous blank page.

"So, what brings you to the city?" David asks. "Work? School?"

"A fresh start," I say. I'm wearing a new coat, and my hair is lighter now. Honey blonde. It makes me look softer, like the kind of girl who volunteers at animal shelters. "I've been traveling for a while. It's time to put down roots."

"Absolutely," David continues, checking his phone. He thinks I'm an easy commission. Cash buyer. No questions. "And it's quiet. You'd never know you were in the middle of the city."

I nod, barely paying attention. I'm listening to the hum of the building. The ventilation. The distance between this unit and the one next door. I need to know if the walls are thick enough.

"I have two other showings this afternoon," David says, dropping his voice to a confidential whisper. "I'm not trying to pressure you, but a unit with this square footage? It won't last the weekend."

I ignore him and walk to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The shades are drawn halfway, filtering the afternoon glare.

"Can I?" I ask, reaching for the cord.

"Of course," David says. "That's the selling point, really."

I pull the cord, and the shades rise.

The city hits me all at once: the gray winter light, the traffic moving in a slow, rhythmic artery.

I look down at the street. People are walking with their heads down against the wind, heading home to their families after a long day.

I scan the buildings across the way. Pre-war. Brick. Fire escapes zigzagging down the sides.

"It's a lot of money," I say, keeping my back to him.

"It is," David agrees. He steps up beside me, eager to close. He points a manicured finger toward the horizon. "But you're paying for the location. And the sightline."

He leans forward, tapping the glass.

"From this height, you clear the water towers on 74th. Which means you have a direct, unobstructed view of the West Side and Central Park."

I follow his finger, and there it is. The treeline. The reservoir. The specific geometry of the Upper West Side.

I look down at the street again. The crosswalks. The corner deli. The path that leads directly to the subway station two blocks over.

I calculate the distance: Twelve minutes walking, four by car.

I feel a warmth spread through my chest.

I turn away from the window and look at David. I give him my warmest, sweetest smile.

"Cancel them," I say.

David blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"Cancel the other showings."

I look back out at the city.

"I'll take it."

WHAT'S NEXT?

Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to get **secret chapters, early pages from new books, and vote on what I write next.**

