

THE HUSBAND I BURIED

Either the
love of my life
is dead...

Or my
whole marriage
was a LIE.

MARYANN WEBB

Also by Maryann Webb

My Husband's Lies
The Girl in the Cellar

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*For Mom,
who taught me that surviving changes you, but it doesn't have to break you
xx*

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Prologue

My husband was dead.

I had the proof to back it up – the death certificate, the reports on the accident, the carefully chosen words of people who spoke to me like I might shatter if they used the wrong tone. The world had accepted his absence quickly, decisively, as if closing the door fast enough might keep the fragility of life from slipping through.

In the weeks after, I sat curled on the couch, knees drawn to my chest, the house quiet in the way it only ever was when you were alone. The lamp beside me cast soft circles of light, leaving the corners of the room in shadow. Somewhere outside, cars would pass, tires hissing against wet asphalt, the sound distant and fleeting.

Four months on, and I felt like I had barely moved from that couch most evenings . . .

I still felt him like a force, pulling me toward him, like I always had.

Tonight, our wedding album lay open on my lap, our names embossed on the cover. Luis and Mackenzie.

I traced the edge of a photograph with my thumb, looking at my smiling face, the way my body leaned into his without thought or hesitation. We looked impossibly sure of ourselves. Of each other. The future was ours.

My brown eyes met his smoky blues. We only had eyes for each other. Luis's hand was at the small of my back in nearly every picture, fingers splayed. I'd loved how easily he touched me, how naturally we fit together, as though proximity were essential, not optional.

My eyelids grew heavy. The edges of the room softened. Just as I started to fall asleep, I was snapped awake by a loud cracking sound: the sound of a window being jammed open.

The image of Luis's face disappeared.

I sat up. The wedding album slid from my lap and fell open on the floor, our smiling faces staring up at me.

A cold draft brushed my bare arms. I followed it to the kitchen.

The casement window above the sink stood wide open, curtains stirring in the night air.

I hadn't left it open. I knew I hadn't.

I reached for the knife block, my hand shaking as I pulled a blade free. I moved around the house, checking every room. Every closet. Every door.

Nothing.

But as I stood there, knife in hand, a familiar scent lingered in the air, real enough to make my throat tighten.

Luis's cologne.

I shivered, then locked the window. Bolted all the doors. Then I dialed Jess's number. She answered on the second ring.

'Mackenzie?'

'Someone was in my house,' I blurted.

Silence. Then I heard her chair creaking. 'Are you safe?'

'I think so. The window was open. I . . . I could smell his cologne. Luis's cologne.'

She exhaled, the sound muffled by the speaker.

'That cologne was imported. Small batch. From Barcelona. Nobody here wears it,' I reminded her. It wasn't a coincidence.

There was silence again as I waited for Jess to process what I was saying.

'I need you to leave the house,' she finally said, her voice calm. 'Come over. Did you call the police?' She sounded hesitant, like she thought I might be imagining it.

'It's fine. There's no one here. I think I might've scared them off.'

I looked out the window to make sure someone wasn't hiding in the bushes. It was difficult to see in the dark, so I turned on the outside flood lights, brightening the area. Everything looked undisturbed, except for the slight ripple of the pool in the breeze. I'd left the cover off again.

Shit. Now I'd have to filter out any leaves that drifted into the water. Luis used to take care of that. My throat constricted at the thought of him doing laps in the pool. His absence was like a physical clenching of my heart.

'Kenz . . . I have to ask. It's only been a few months. Your brain is still grieving . . . Are you sure someone was there? Olfactory memories are powerful. Maybe something reminded you of Luis?'

'I know what I smelled.' I heard the defensiveness in my tone, but I didn't apologize.

Another pause. Softer this time. 'Please. Come stay with me tonight.'

'I'm fine.'

'You said that last week when you forgot to eat for two days,' Jess said, her voice gentle. She was worried, but right now, I needed her to listen. I

needed her to believe me.

I closed my eyes. She wouldn't have known I hadn't been eating if she hadn't shown up last week unannounced to make us tacos. But she'd been there, on my doorstep like a good friend, checking in on me. There was nothing in the refrigerator and she didn't buy my story about needing to do grocery shopping because I'd been busy with work.

'I'll lock the house,' I said. 'I'll be OK.'

'If you're sure,' Jess said reluctantly.

When I hung up, the dial tone felt louder than the sound of the window opening had. I went outside and pulled the cover across the pool.

Jess was right. Luis was an addiction I couldn't shake. I was still carrying what was left of him, struggling to let go. Maybe this was withdrawal. Maybe I would never let go.

I didn't believe in ghosts, but I felt frightened in a way I hadn't been since I was a little girl.

Chapter 1

Then

The first time Luis spoke to me, I was already breaking a rule.

It wouldn't be the last time I did that.

The day we met, I was running later than usual for court, coffee cooling in my hand, heels clicking across the marble lobby like a countdown. The place was crowded with the usual mix of lawyers, defendants, and people trying not to look afraid. I was already rehearsing my opening argument in my head, half-present, when a voice stopped me.

'Excuse me.'

I didn't slow down.

'Counsel?'

That did it.

I turned, my chocolate-brown hair fanning out across my shoulders, irritation ready on my tongue, and found him standing a few steps behind me, calm in the middle of the chaos. He wasn't dressed like a lawyer – not the usual suit, no briefcase – but he carried himself like someone who belonged exactly where he was. Tall. Composed. His eyes trained on me.

Most people in courthouses announced their purpose. He didn't.

It was as if meeting each other was inevitable. As soon as I saw him, I was drawn to him. It was inexplicable.

It's just because he's gorgeous, I told myself. Every woman crossing his path this week probably thought something similar.

That's the thing about inevitability; you only recognize it in hindsight – once it's too late to do anything about it.

'Do you have a pen?' he asked.

The question was banal. Who used pens anymore? But the way Luis asked, it wasn't.

I glanced at the courtroom doors, then back at him. 'I'm on my way in.'

'I know,' he said, more amused than apologetic. 'You're arguing a suppression motion in courtroom three. Judge Feldman hates when people are late.'

'Excuse me?' My stomach tightened. I gripped my bag. Who was this stranger who knew so much about where I was going and what I did, and wasn't trying to hide it?

He wasn't the prosecution. I already knew the prosecutor was a man named Paul Barry. A decent enough lawyer, but I'd beaten him in court before, and he wasn't one to lose twice.

Maybe this man had been sent to stall me, to find out what he could and then use it against me so Paul Barry could claim the case for himself.

'How do you know all that?' I asked.

'Observation,' he said, like that alone explained everything. He watched me watching him, the corner of his mouth tilting upward. 'You observe people the same way I do.'

It sounded like a line and I tried not to roll my eyes. Had I passed him in the halls? I would remember his licorice-black hair and those hypnotic, smoky-blue eyes. If he worked for Barry, he was new.

'I mean,' he said, 'you would've chosen a different profession if you weren't observant.' I took a deep breath, thankful he'd added some context, or else it might have sounded creepy.

He smelled of expensive cologne. The kind that lingered in the halls. His eyes were burning into mine, but I couldn't look away. I'm sure I would've noticed if I'd seen him before.

I should've left without another word. I should've asked him more questions about how he knew my schedule. Instead, realizing I'd been staring at him for too long, I dug into my bag, handing him the pen.

He took it, his fingers brushing against mine. I couldn't tell if it was intentional.

'Thanks . . .' he said, leaving a question I instinctively answered with my name.

'Mackenzie.'

He smiled. 'Mackenzie.' The way it moved on his lips, slow, deliberate, made it sound new.

I didn't wait for him to finish with the pen. I had at least two more in my satchel and a courtroom to get to. I started walking.

He fell into step beside me, matching my pace as if this were the most natural thing in the world. 'You work too much,' he said lightly.

'You know that too, do you?' I turned to him, narrowing my eyes. 'You're very bold for someone asking a favor.'

'I didn't mean any offense,' he said. It was the first time I saw that smile – unhurried, confident. 'Jury duty gives a man time to observe.'

His words stopped me in my tracks.

Shit.

A juror. I should have shut the conversation down right then. I was counsel. Even speaking to him was a problem.

‘You know you’re not supposed to talk to me, right?’

His brow creased, just slightly. ‘Because you’re a lawyer?’

‘Because I’m a lawyer involved in an active case,’ I said. ‘And because if anyone hears us talking, you’ll be dismissed from the jury.’

A flicker crossed his face. Too quick to pin down. It wasn’t surprise. Something closer to satisfaction. Maybe he wanted to get out of jury duty, and I was his ticket.

I felt my cheeks redden at my own stupidity. I hadn’t thought he might be on the jury, or I wouldn’t have stopped to talk.

He shrugged, like he wasn’t fazed. ‘I figured.’

‘That doesn’t bother you?’ I played along, curious to know why he was so keen to get out of jury duty. It wasn’t exactly like anyone loved it, but talking to me to get out of it would be pretty extreme.

He studied me, as if weighing how honest he should be. ‘Maybe it should,’ he said finally. ‘But no.’

‘You did this on purpose,’ I said, baiting him.

Slap most people with the truth when they least expect it, and it usually reveals a lot. But he didn’t respond how I expected. He didn’t try to deny it.

A corner of his mouth lifted, deepening his smile. ‘I was hoping you wouldn’t hold it against me.’

The crowd had thinned around us, people flowing past like water around a stone, until it felt like we were standing in a pocket of stillness where only we existed. He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. ‘If I’m dismissed I can ask you out without crossing any ethical lines.’

‘Well, now we’re going to have to explain to the judge why we’re talking,’ I said.

He looked around conspiratorially and leaned in closer, whispering, ‘We could pretend this never happened.’

His lips close to my ear sent a small shiver down my spine. Fleeting. Gone almost as soon as it arrived.

Pretending it never happened would mean pretending we never spoke, and I wasn’t sure I wanted that.

I stepped away. ‘We can’t,’ I said. ‘I could lose my license. Why am I still standing here?’

He was smiling impishly, like he knew I couldn't help myself. 'Let's go speak to the judge then. I'm happy to take full responsibility.'

'If you wanted to get out of jury duty,' I said, 'there are easier ways . . .'

He nodded, as if conceding the point. Then said quietly, 'OK, you're right. I didn't want to be on the jury. That's my second reason for talking to you. I don't believe in judging people for their actions. With all due respect, why should someone's fate rely on your ability to defend them?'

I bit back a response. I really shouldn't be talking to him. Especially not right now. And definitely not about this.

Maybe he really didn't want to sit in judgment on a stranger's life. Looking at him, it seemed there was a good chance he didn't like the idea of being trapped in a room where he couldn't control the outcome.

I checked my watch. Then again, surprised to find almost ten minutes had passed since we'd started talking.

If I didn't get a move on, I really would be running late.

'I need to go,' I said, feeling something sharp and unwelcome. Disappointment. After this, we would go our separate ways, and that would be that.

He handed back the pen. His fingers brushed mine, intentional this time. The contact lingered like a question.

'Listen. I didn't talk to you to get out of jury duty,' he said. 'I'll prove it to you if you like.'

I quickly pulled my hand away and tossed the pen into my bag, trying to figure out how to explain to the judge I'd mistakenly spoken to a juror.

When I looked back at him, he was waiting for my response, but if he handed me his number written down, I'd scrunch it up in a ball and toss it back.

He didn't seem nervous about confronting the judge.

If anything, he looked like someone who'd just won a bet.

I half rolled my eyes, and asked, mostly so I could get moving, 'OK, how are you going to prove it?'

'I'll go in. I'll sit on the jury and do my part.' He smiled, so sure of himself.

I opened my mouth, ready to protest, but he wasn't done. 'So how about that date?' he asked. 'I'll give you until after the trial to make up your mind.' He smiled. 'It's up to you.'

I watched as he walked toward the jury stand, knowing I wouldn't be able to get him out of my head.

Chapter 2

Now

The next morning, I awoke on Luis's side of the bed, my hand stroking the sheet like I would stroke his chest as we lay there. It hadn't gotten easier, facing each day without him, and I found myself missing the little things, trying to recreate them, but it wasn't the same.

Memories of the previous night came back as my brain slowly registered the morning sunlight. Had I really called Jess in the middle of the night, scared because a window had blown open?

My phone blared, startling me completely awake. I reached out to grab it, but it wasn't on the bedside table where I usually left it.

I followed the sound to the ensuite bathroom, where I'd apparently left it on the sink.

It had occurred to me last night that I might be losing my mind, becoming forgetful, but the glass or two of Pinot Grigio was probably a better explanation.

Jess's name flashed on the screen over a picture I'd taken of us together, cropped so it showed her smiling face, strands of my dark hair in the periphery of the photo, streaking across her blonde.

I answered, listening as she did her best to sound bubbly. 'Hey, how did you sleep?'

'OK,' I lied, padding out to the kitchen, picking up my empty wine glass on my way.

'You're sure the house is secure?'

'Yes.'

'Kenz, I'm worried about you.'

'I'm fine,' I said.

A pause – Jess waiting for me to tell the truth.

'Listen, about last night. I'm sure it was nothing. I just freaked out, that's all. I'm not used to living alone—' I stopped abruptly. Jess had been living alone since she broke up with her boyfriend, and she handled it fine. 'I mean . . . I'm just used to his noise, you know?'

'Yeah,' she said wistfully. 'It's not that I don't like being single, but sometimes I miss the little things. And, for the record, you're allowed to freak out sometimes, and you can call me any time; you know that.'

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘I’m going to make coffee and get ready. I’ll call you later?’

‘Sure.’

The kettle clicked off. Steam curled. I turned to the cupboard and reached for Luis’s ‘best husband’ mug, a gag gift to say sorry for forgetting Valentine’s Day. A week later he went all out with flowers, chocolates and a weekend getaway to a spa, but I still kept the mug.

I stopped short when I noticed something out the corner of my eye, the mug almost falling from my hand.

The casement window frame was scratched. Not lightly. Deep enough to splinter the paint. The latch held perfectly, but the hinge hung slightly crooked where it had been torn from the wall, metal bent where it met the wood. A smear of dirt streaked the sill.

That explained the loud *crack* I’d heard the night before.

The hooked latch was useless. A safety measure that wouldn’t hold if someone pushed the window open now.

My breath slowed.

I ran a finger over the gouge. It was fresh. Sharp. It wasn’t there yesterday, was it?

I backed away from the window, eyes scanning outside as if whoever had tried to break in might still be there, and called Jess again.

She answered instantly.

‘What’s up?’

‘Jess, I wasn’t just spooked. The kitchen window,’ I said. ‘It’s damaged. Someone forced it open.’

Her voice shifted from casual to concerned. ‘Mackenzie, listen to me. I need you to get out of there. Now.’

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘I just walked through the house. Whoever was here is long gone.’

‘You don’t know that,’ she said, ‘and your job . . . it’s dangerous.’

I swallowed. She was right about both things. She hadn’t said it, but we both knew I should call the police now. I was all too familiar with the kinds of complaints police heard, though, and the fear of being dismissed – or worse, being seen as hysterical – was greater than the fear of an intruder who was long gone.

‘You know, it could be old damage,’ I said. ‘And I just didn’t notice before . . .’

It sounded weak, like I didn't believe my own words. If I argued like that in court, I'd never win a case.

'Right.' Jess was unconvinced. 'Listen, I have to be in the office today,' she said, 'but I'd like to talk. Can we meet up after work?'

'Sure,' I said distractedly.

'And get out of the house. Please. I'll pay for a hotel room; I don't care. Just . . . be safe.'

A breeze curled through a gap in the window that hadn't existed yesterday.

'I will,' I said. 'Love you.'

'Love you, too.'

I ended the call, trying to steady my shaky hands.

Who broke into my house? It didn't look like anything had been taken, but they obviously wanted something.

I stared down at my cell. Before I could talk myself out of it, I called the police.

Chapter 3

Now

The police arrived forty minutes later.

Long enough for me to second-guess myself three times, and then swing back to certainty so hard it made my stomach hurt.

In those forty minutes, I'd done what I told Jess I wouldn't do: I'd paced the house like a sentry. Checked the locks again. Walked the perimeter. Stood at the kitchen window with my phone in my hand, watching the backyard as if the person who'd tried to force their way in might come strolling back to finish the job in broad daylight.

Nothing moved except the curtains.

I tried to busy myself the way I always did when panic crept in. By harnessing my expertise and doing something useful. I took photos of the latch and hinge from different angles, the splintered paint, the gouge in the frame, the dirt smear on the sill. Evidence, not emotion, I told myself, shoving down the fear.

I opened my Notes app and wrote down what time I'd noticed the crack, what time I'd called Jess, what time I'd called the police.

My hands still wouldn't stop shaking.

When the patrol car finally rolled up, the sound of the tires on the wet street made my throat tighten. Maybe this was my taste of what it felt like to be on the other side of a case, before it arrived in the courtroom.

The waiting was the worst, knowing that whoever had tried to get inside might still be out there, watching.

I shook my hands out. I wouldn't let them scare me.

Two officers stepped out of the car.

One was young, trying too hard to appear authoritative. Like he'd watched enough cop shows to know only what authority was supposed to look like, without the experience to pull it off. The other was older, mid-forties maybe, with tired eyes and a face that carried the particular kind of cynicism that came from seeing the same horrors paraded in different costumes.

'Officer Dean Murphy,' said the older of the two, jutting a thumb towards his colleague. 'This is Davo.' He wiped at his stubble, as if clearing away his previous statement. 'Officer Davidson,' he corrected. 'You reported a break-in?'

Break-in. The phrase made it sound clean and straightforward, like someone had stepped through a door and left a footprint. Like whatever they were looking for when they chose to enter my house wasn't important.

'That's right.' I opened the front door wider, letting them in while keeping my body slightly angled between them and the rest of the house. It was instinctive. An old habit from meeting new clients in my office, from gauging whether someone was volatile before I gave them access to me.

Officer Murphy came inside first, eyes scanning the entryway in a quick sweep that was meant to look casual. His gaze landed on the staircase, the hallway, the living room, and then on me again, as if he was deciding whether I was the kind of woman who was afraid of her own shadow.

'Nice place you have here,' he said.

'Thank you,' I replied automatically.

The younger officer – Davidson – lingered a step behind Murphy, glancing at the framed photo of Luis and me on our wedding day hanging on the wall. He looked from the photo to me and back again, and then asked, 'Was it just you at home?'

The question was routine. Not malicious. But it still made my throat close, because there were days I could say it cleanly, and days I couldn't.

'Yeah. Just me. My husband passed away a few months ago,' I said, hoping I wouldn't need to go over the details.

'Oh,' Davidson said, sheepish, cheeks flushing. 'Sorry to hear.'

Murphy's eyes flicked to Davidson, half in reprimand, half in embarrassment. He kept moving, though, like we hadn't just stepped on something too tender to talk about.

I led them to the kitchen.

The room was too bright. The morning light came in sharp and clean through the window, hitting the countertop where Luis used to leave crumbs when he made bagels, hitting the coffee machine we purchased together for our anniversary.

Now all I could see was the damage.

Murphy crouched beside the casement window, running a thumb over the splintered paint with a gloved hand like he could read it. He tugged the latch gently, then harder, and watched the way the hinge shifted in its bent joint.

The sound of metal scraping wood made my skin crawl.

‘Were you asleep or awake when you heard the noise?’ he asked, not looking at me. I knew that tone. It wasn’t concern or empathy. It was methodical.

He was anchoring my memory. Establishing a timeline without forcing me to give an exact time. It was a cognitive interviewing technique I used in court to lock down a witness’s whereabouts before their story could drift, or to cross-examine a plaintiff’s claim against a client.

‘I was on the couch. I think I dozed off,’ I said.

‘What time did you notice the window was open?’ Murphy continued, while Davidson looked on.

‘I’m not sure exactly, but I heard a cracking sound, and that might’ve woken me,’ I said, wishing I had something more useful to tell them.

Officer Murphy shifted his weight and made a face that said *this is going nowhere*.

The younger officer was still standing near the doorway, arms at his sides, eyes flicking around the kitchen like he expected to find a masked intruder hiding behind my fruit bowl.

‘Wait,’ I said, searching for something that didn’t rely on my shaky memory. I needed something concrete. ‘I called my friend, Jessica, when I realized someone had broken in through the window.’

I opened my call history with renewed enthusiasm and held up my phone like it was a signed affidavit. ‘I called Jessica at 7.15 a.m.’

Davidson pulled out a notepad and started writing, which at least made me feel like I wasn’t completely wasting their time. Murphy asked, ‘Did you notice anything missing?’

The way he said it made me regret calling them out here. Like I was scared to be living alone and hadn’t bothered to check the condition of my windows. Like this was a domestic nuisance call, not a safety issue.

‘No,’ I said, folding my arms as I caught the look that passed between them – skeptical. People didn’t force windows open just to give up and leave empty-handed. Unless . . . ‘Maybe they were interrupted,’ I said.

Murphy examined the latch again, then looked up as if he’d already decided. ‘It’s loose,’ he said. ‘Old timber. It’s probably seasonal swelling. Happens.’

‘The frame wasn’t scratched yesterday,’ I said, unwilling to be dismissed that easily.

Murphy's eyes met mine for the first time, and I saw it. What had initially seemed like hostility was just exhaustion.

'Hard to say when that occurred,' he said, polite but still unconvinced. 'No signs of forced entry inside. No disturbed items.'

He stood and excused himself to look outside, leaving Davo and me in a pocket of awkward silence. 'It's probably nothing,' Davidson offered.

I'm not sure if he thought it would help, or if he was just looking for something to say.

I nodded and smiled. Arguing with him now wasn't going to help.

I watched through the window as Murphy walked around the side of the house, scanning the ground. The backyard was damp, the grass darkened from last night's rain. If there had been footprints, maybe the water had filled them. Or maybe I was right and they'd been careful. If someone had worn gloves, maybe there would be no fingerprints.

Moments later, Murphy came back, looking disappointed. 'No footprints out there,' he said. 'Hard to say if anyone entered, but if they did, I would've expected to find traces of dirt from outside.'

'Listen,' I said, forcing my voice into the same calm tone I used with an unconvinced jury. 'Someone was trying to break into my house.' I looked from Murphy to Davidson, who shifted his weight and averted his eyes.

Murphy shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Morgan. I didn't see signs outside that anyone broke in, and nothing looks out of place in here, except for an old hinge that came undone.'

'It's Ms. Morgan,' I corrected, expecting him to roll his eyes. It wouldn't be the first time. But it had always been Ms. Morgan. Even when Luis was alive.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Ms. Morgan. I'm sure whoever it was changed their mind. There's nothing to suggest they came inside.'

I sighed, frustrated they weren't taking this more seriously. 'It seems like a lot of trouble to go to, breaking the latch if they were just going to stand out there.'

Murphy shook his head, like he had no other explanation.

Maybe if they had sent a female officer, I'd have had more luck.

'You might have scared them off,' said Murphy.

The nerve.

'Whoever it was, they wore the same overpriced, imported cologne as my husband,' I blurted, because if I didn't say it now, I'd wonder if later if I

should have.

Murphy's face softened, but not in the way I wanted. It was the same response I'd gotten from everyone just after Luis died. Pity.

'Smells can linger,' he said softly. 'Or travel from outside. Can't tell you how many times I've craved a steak after the neighbors have been grilling in their backyard.' His joke fell flat, but he carried on. 'Did you keep anything of your husband's around the house?'

That's what he was going to put this down to. Some old clothing I couldn't part with. Grief talking again.

My lack of an answer seemed to confirm his suspicions.

'We'll log this as a concern call,' he said. 'If they come back, or you notice anything else, call us immediately.'

He pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to me, noticing the way I was looking at him. 'Everything's digital, but not always reliable. A card won't reboot on you just when you need it.'

He had a point. I thanked him and took the card. I'd probably add the number to my phone contacts and throw it away anyway.

I saw them out and watched their car roll away, then I messaged work to say I'd be in a little late, that there had been an 'incident'. I called it a break-in.

That's when I noticed him.

A tall, wiry man standing near the edge of my driveway like he'd materialized out of the morning mist. Salt-and-pepper hair slicked back, jaw set in a way that made him look like a Steven Seagal fan who thought posture was a personality trait.

I startled hard enough that my heart misfired.

He'd been waiting, I realized, for me to finish typing so he could speak.

We'd been neighbors for almost a year, and yet his voice was unfamiliar to me. We'd only talked a handful of times, mostly exchanging polite hellos from afar until now, but something had caught his attention and he looked ready to spend his morning exploring it.

I struggled to remember his name as he walked over to me.

'Everything all right?' he asked, peering over my shoulder, trying to get a look inside.

'Fine,' I said with a tight-lipped smile, ready to excuse myself.

Greg.

'I noticed the police car parked outside,' he said.

Of course he had.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. ‘The latch in my kitchen was broken, and I was worried someone might’ve broken in.’ I tucked my hair behind my ear, hoping Greg would let it go. ‘Silly, really.’ Perhaps that would be enough to satisfy him.

No such luck.

Greg moved closer and looked around, lowering his voice conspiratorially, as if the street itself might be listening. ‘Don’t be so sure it wasn’t a break-in,’ he said. ‘It must be scary, in this big house on your own.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s OK,’ I said, not wanting to get into it with the slightly creepy neighbor.

To my relief, my phone pinged.

Work. More specifically, my assistant, Carl, who was already no doubt in the office and fielding calls.

I have a new client for you. Interesting case. Do you think you’ll be able to take a look this morning? She seemed distressed.

It was the perfect opportunity to excuse myself and leave, but Greg’s words had unsettled me.

Sure. On my way.

‘Why do you say it might’ve been a break-in?’ I asked Greg. He’d lived here a while. I think he said fourteen years. He probably knew the neighbors better than I did. Maybe he’d talked to someone, or seen something. ‘Did you notice anyone near my house last night?’

He didn’t say anything for the longest moment. And then, quietly enough for me to doubt if I’d heard correctly, he said, ‘This street . . . it has a way of testing newcomers.’

I tilted my head. Testing them? The words stuck, echoing oddly. ‘Testing them?’

‘Don’t mind me,’ he said quickly, waving a hand. ‘It’s just talk. Every street has its price. Stick around long enough and you’re bound to notice people come and go.’

Before I could ask more, Greg tipped his head, smiled faintly, and disappeared back into his house. The door snapped shut behind him.

Every street has its price. The words clung like smoke from a fire. What did he mean by ‘a price’?

That was why I liked law – I brought logic to chaos. I didn’t deal in mystical abstractions.

Was Greg's comment as innocuous as he tried to pretend, or was there something more behind it? His words were vague and creepy, sounding almost like a threat.

A flicker in the living room window next door caught my attention. Shadows shifted behind the sheer curtains.

I tried to ignore the shiver that ran down my spine.

Greg was watching from his window.

Chapter 4

Now

I clenched the cold metal of the keys in my fist, glad to have a reason to get out of there. It was way too early in the morning for creepy neighbors and home invasions.

I stifled a yawn. It wasn't just the break-in that had interrupted my sleep the night before. I hadn't slept well in months. First, there was adjusting to a new town, a new home, and the life Luis and I had wanted to build together.

Then, in an instant, it was all gone. I was a widow, living in this big house alone. I went from having the perfect life – a job I loved, marrying the man of my dreams and buying our dream home – to whatever this new normal was.

I wasn't really a part of my old life anymore. My old friends in Boston were happy making plans without me. Last-minute get-togethers where no one had to wait for me to arrive thirty minutes behind everyone else, and spontaneous drinks after work.

And it wasn't just my social life. Things that used to matter – my cases, my book collection – now felt flat, like noise without texture. My career at Jackson & Morgan, once the prize I'd bled for, that I'd built with my senior partner Elizabeth Jackson, now rang hollow. Even a courtroom victory, something I'd once lived for, left me cold. Maybe I'd lost my edge.

The truth is, I'd been feeling that way before Luis died. Ever since we moved to Charlesville. The only person who had stuck around was Jess. No one else had time to make the trip out of the city.

It was only after everything had already fallen apart that I'd found a small community to lean on, but a grief support group wasn't exactly the social circle I'd imagined when I agreed to this move.

Jessica would say I was depressed. That I needed time to adjust to life without Luis. But I suspected something else. Maybe I'd needed that holiday we had been planning together before the crash more than I realized. Maybe I still did.

A trip down the coast. To sunshine and lazy strolls along the shore. Before he died, Luis had been trying to plan it, waiting for a lull in my workload so we could spend some time together that didn't involve sitting in the same room clicking away on laptop keys, barely talking.

We had even been planning on getting a dog. After finally settling on a beagle, we discovered there was a long wait list. Luis was disappointed.

Maybe he knew death was coming, that he didn't have time to wait.

Apparently, some people can sense when the end is near. They take care of unfinished business, say their goodbyes.

But that doesn't happen with sudden, violent deaths like Luis's.

I hadn't counted on our days being numbered. He left for work that morning the same way he always did. But he didn't come home. He was erased in seconds on a stretch of asphalt. I had taken what we had for granted, and now it was gone.

In my dreams, I heard it: the crunch of metal, glass shattering, the desperate twist of the wheel. A last attempt to change a trajectory that was already set in motion. I pictured his final moments, imagining how he felt. I wasn't there, but in the middle of the night, it felt so real.

I obsessed over what could have changed the outcome of the crash.

Did he think of me in those final moments? Did he see my face before everything went black?

They said it would have been quick, but I played it over and over again, wondering how things could have been different. If there was a fraction of a second when he could've eased off the brakes, whether it could've ended any other way.

The ache was worse than any physical pain. I'd give anything now to tell him I loved him one more time – not in the casual, rushed way I once did, but in a way that clawed at my chest now to think of it. There would never be another Luis in my life. I couldn't imagine opening my heart to someone again.

I took a deep breath and continued past my car. The train wasn't far. I could walk it in a few minutes.

My phone beeped. Carl, probably checking to see when I'd be in.

Hey, is everything OK? Should I send through the new file?

Shit. I picked up my pace and didn't reply. Slowing down now would only make me later than I already was.

I flicked on *Final Justice* – my favorite legal podcast – while I walked, and listened to lawyers debating criminal law. Today they were discussing whether a fair trial was possible when the media had painted a defendant guilty before the first court date. Usually, I'd talk out loud, answering a host that couldn't hear me. 'Any publicity is good publicity. Once people know

your name and get to know you a little, there's more opportunity to see that you could be innocent.' But not in public.

I'd always preferred to see the guilty go free than let the innocent suffer. Prison destroys people. Ostracizes them. It makes the lines between right and wrong nearly impossible to see. In prison, you learned to survive by doing what you needed to do.

A new meeting invite hit my calendar. Carl had set up a consult with the new client later this afternoon.

I tried not to notice the date on my calendar screen. Four months. Today marked exactly four months since Luis died. Would there ever be a day when that gap wouldn't feel like a chasm? It didn't seem like it. The grief still felt like salt in an open wound, and I kept piling it on, thinking about him even when it hurt, just so I wouldn't forget.

I was getting dangerously close to the expected end of my grieving period, where people would expect me to get it together and move on, like I hadn't lost the love of my life.

I readjusted the satchel on my shoulder, containing everything I needed for a long day: documents, snacks, and a stack of work I needed to get through.

It was the middle of the week, and I'd been living off snack lunches since Monday. I needed some real food.

I stopped and looked for cars before crossing the road. Charlesville was nice. Bougie. The streets were clean. It had charm, and there were plenty of places to get fresh groceries. Boutique clothing shops had beautiful outfits. But it seemed to exist in its own little bubble.

It wasn't home, and I didn't love it the way everyone else who lived here seemed to.

At least the train ride gave me a chance to breathe and reset. But today it would take something more than that. Today, I couldn't stop thinking about Greg and his strange warning. Maybe thinking about something else was a way to forget about Luis.

Suddenly, I realized what I needed to get through the morning.

Coffee.

A few steps past the station, I turned into Bodhi's, an organic coffee shop off the main strip. The smell of roasting beans hit me as I reached the door. It had opened just after we moved to Charlesville. It was Luis's favorite.

Chapter 5

Now

I felt closer to Luis the moment I stepped inside. We'd been here together plenty of times before.

Walking in, I squeezed through the doorway so there was room for him beside me, my muscle memory reacting before my brain had time to remind me that he wasn't here anymore, that I could take up the whole entrance without squeezing by to avoid letting go of his hand.

The bell above the door chimed softly as it swung shut behind me, sealing me inside Bodhi's. Warmth wrapped around me, heavy with roasted coffee and something faintly sweet. Cinnamon, maybe. Or burnt sugar. Luis used to say this place smelled like comfort pretending to be sophistication.

A hipster place, selling organic food and coffee.

The counter gleamed. Pale wood. Potted plants near the windows that somehow survived the inconsistent watering schedules of overworked baristas. The chalkboard menu still listed the same drinks, written in looping script that never quite matched the clean minimalism of the rest of the space.

It was mid-morning quiet. Not empty, but subdued.

A couple sat by the window, laptops open, murmuring like they were sharing secrets instead of spreadsheets. A woman near the back stirred her drink over and over without lifting it to her mouth, eyes unfocused. Waiting for someone, or something, I guessed.

Audrey looked up from behind the counter and softened when she saw me.

'Kenzie,' she said, smiling. 'What can I get you?'

I hesitated, the way I sometimes did now, as if choosing wrong would somehow confirm that everything had shifted beyond repair. 'I'll have Luis's usual,' I said, trying to hide how much it burned, not having him here to enjoy it with me.

Audrey nodded and got to work on the machine, tamping the beans, steam hissing as the grinder kicked into life. The sound of the machine as the espresso pulled soothed me. The smell of coffee wrapped around me, dark and grounding.

Luis always said coffee tasted better when you needed it.

I waited near the end of the counter, fingers curled around the strap of my bag instead of his hand. I checked my phone, more out of habit than necessity. No new messages. No missed calls. Nothing demanding my attention.

That's when I felt it.

Not a stare.

Just . . . a gaze.

The kind you noticed only because it didn't wander.

I shifted my weight slightly and glanced toward the seating area.

In the corner, half hidden behind a structural column and a trailing plant, a man sat alone. He was dressed casually. Deliberately so. Worn sneakers. Soft cotton shirt. Jeans that looked broken in, not styled to look that way. Nothing about him screamed for attention. If anything, he blended in too well.

But his posture was alert.

His gaze didn't drift to the menu. Didn't flick to his phone. Didn't skim the room the way people did when killing time.

It stayed on me. Not leering in an obvious way. He wasn't checking me out, he was tracking me.

My chest tightened.

He walked towards the counter, holding a menu. Probably about to order. In a few seconds he would walk right past.

I focused on my phone again, pretending to scroll, even though my thumb barely moved.

Something brushed my wrist. I flinched before I could stop myself.

'Sorry,' the man said, already holding something out toward me. 'You dropped this.'

I turned slowly, my pulse loud in my ears.

In his hand was a small, folded piece of paper. A receipt, maybe. Plain. Unremarkable.

I didn't take it. 'That's not mine,' I said.

He didn't pull his hand back.

'Are you sure?' he asked, stepping a fraction closer. Close enough that I could smell the soap he used.

I glanced down at my bag. Zipped. Nothing loose. Nothing missing.

'Yes,' I said. Firmer this time. 'I'm sure.'

He hesitated, like he was recalibrating. Then he moved his hand forward again, encouraging me to take it. Almost pushy.

For a moment, I considered it. Not because I thought it was mine, but because curiosity tugged harder than caution. Why was he so insistent? This wasn't a clumsy flirtation. There was no smile, no angle.

This felt like a test.

'Hey,' Audrey called from behind the counter, sharp enough to cut through the moment. 'Your coffee's ready. To go.'

Relief hit so fast it made me dizzy.

I withdrew my hand immediately, my heart thudding. The moment stretched behind me, taut and unfinished.

When I turned back to the counter, Audrey was watching the man with an expression that wasn't quite polite.

She handed me the cup, fingers brushing mine. 'Careful. It's hot.'

'Thanks,' I said, wrapping both hands around it gratefully.

I turned back to look at the man.

He was still staring.

But there was something else there now. Something I couldn't place, that I wasn't understanding. I looked at him more closely. His eyes flicked to my face again. Searching. Measuring.

I knew that look. I'd seen it from witnesses who weren't sure how much they should say, or defendants gauging whether honesty or silence would serve them better.

'Do I know you?' I asked.

An unreadable expression passed over his face. Then he smiled, warm and apologetic.

'No, I don't think so.' He held up the folded piece of paper before pocketing it. 'My mistake,' he said.

'From court, maybe?' I asked before I could stop myself. I passed a lot of people every day. It was impossible to remember everyone, unless they gave you a reason. I might not remember this guy unless he gave me a reason to.

Like he had today.

His brows lifted. Surprise this time. Real or practiced, I couldn't tell.

'No,' he said.

The mention of court made a lot of people nervous. Especially when they had something to hide.

Audrey watched us, holding out a drink. Another barista had replaced her at the register, while she waited on the man to take his order with an impatience that said he was holding up the line.

He went to the counter and picked up his coffee. Audrey leaned across to say something to him. I was just out of earshot, but her face was tense.

He moved past me then, making an effort to walk around me, pushing the door open and disappearing onto the street.

Audrey exhaled. 'Are you all right?'

'Yeah,' I said, though my grip on the cup had tightened. 'Thanks for . . . stepping in.'

She shrugged. 'That guy was acting pushy. What was he trying to give you?'

'Just a piece of paper,' I said, stumped.

'I told him it might be time to leave,' she said.

'I appreciate it.'

She gave me a small smile. 'Any time.'

I left the store with a strange feeling that the man had been lying. He knew exactly who I was. Maybe he wanted to tell me something and the paper was his way of doing so.

Shit.

Outside, I looked around, hoping I could catch up to him, maybe ask what he wanted.

But there was no sign of him.

He was gone.

Chapter 6

Then

We planned our first date after I won the trial. Three weeks after Luis asked to borrow my pen.

The case had been ugly in its simplicity.

A young woman was dead. No witnesses. No confession. No forensic evidence placing anyone's hands on her at the moment she died. What the prosecution had instead was a man who didn't quite fit.

They had built their case on inference.

On timing that couldn't be pinned down precisely. On messages that could be read two ways. On the idea that if you stood in the darkness long enough, eventually you became a part of it. They talked about motive without proving intent, about proximity without proving action. About the language he used, the people he associated with, the beliefs he held – as if those things could substitute for evidence.

I'd leaned hard on what they *didn't* have.

No physical link. No reliable timeline. No proof that he'd been with her when she died, or that he'd laid a hand on her at all. Suspicion, however compelling, wasn't enough. The law didn't allow you to convict someone because the narrative felt right.

The judge agreed.

Luis caught up with me outside the courtroom after the verdict was read out. People spilled into the hallway, voices buzzing with energy at the outcome.

'That was . . .' he began, then stopped, searching for the right word, as if he refused to settle for the obvious. 'Impressive.'

I glanced at him, amused despite myself. 'You're not meant to talk to counsel.'

'I know,' he said easily, smiling. 'I waited until it was over.'

I should have shut it down. Filed it under '*out of bounds*'.

I knew the rules – knew them so well they lived in my bones. But I couldn't hide my smile. Maybe it was the adrenaline still humming through me. Maybe it was the electric feeling of being *seen* when I was at my sharpest.

The man I'd just defended on a murder charge walked toward me, hesitating when he saw Luis, who met his gaze and nodded. A small

gesture, respectful. It was subtle, but it mattered. He visibly relaxed.

‘I can’t thank you enough,’ he said to me, his voice thick with disbelief. ‘Really.’

I smiled. ‘Sure.’

‘Now I’m going to get a burger,’ he said, laughing like he couldn’t believe his own good fortune.

‘Enjoy,’ I said, and then he was gone, swallowed by the crowd.

Luis fell into step beside me as I headed for the exit, matching my pace so that we were walking out together.

‘Nice work,’ he said smoothly. ‘The evidence was—’

‘Circumstantial.’ I cut Luis off with a brisk smile. ‘Not even close to being beyond reasonable doubt.’

I looked at him, saw the admiration in his eyes, and something in me feasted on his approval.

Just outside the courthouse doors, I stopped, the fall air cool against my face. ‘We shouldn’t be talking here,’ I said, suddenly self-conscious. Too many eyes. Too many rules.

‘OK,’ Luis said amicably. No resistance. ‘How about tonight, then? Over dinner.’

I looked away, a little stunned by how easily he said it, by how natural it sounded.

‘I can’t,’ I said. It was an instinctive reflex. I was turning down a date with a man I would usually very much want to have dinner with.

‘Of course you can,’ he said, unfazed. ‘Come on. It’ll be fun.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You have a boyfriend.’ He placed a hand on his forehead, genuinely embarrassed. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘No, it’s not that,’ I said quickly, realizing too late that I should’ve let him believe it. It would have been simpler.

He thought about that for a second. ‘OK,’ he said finally. ‘Listen, I don’t want to make a fool of myself any more than I have, but I like you. So, I’m just going to say this.’ He paused, making sure I was listening. ‘I’m going to dinner tonight at Le Chateau. Seven o’clock. I’ll be alone at a table for two. You’re very welcome to join me if you change your mind.’

I stared at him.

You had to book at Le Chateau months in advance. How could he have known he’d ask me out today? The ruling could’ve easily been delayed.

Again.

Maybe he had got a table because he had connections.

Or maybe whoever he was meant to go with couldn't make it.

Lucky me.

I watched him walk away with a sudden sinking feeling, like I'd lost something I never even had.

I couldn't decide if he was serious or messing with me. Le Chateau was the kind of restaurant you only got a booking at if you were famous, very rich, or very well connected.

I imagined the feel of velvety dining chairs, the soft candlelight. I pictured us eating poached langoustines swimming in beurre blanc. Sipping perfectly chilled Prosecco, and laughing at something he'd said.

I couldn't go.

Could I?

*

Later at home, I dressed, telling myself I was just changing out of my work clothes. That I could still say no. That I might even stay in, have a solo date and order some takeout. I could pretend the whole thing had never happened.

I checked the time again. I picked up my keys. Put them down. Picked them up again. The indecisiveness made my stomach dip.

The ride there passed in a blur, and still I sat in the car, deciding whether to go inside. So, this was how people arrived fashionably late. Through a bout of indecision.

Walking into the restaurant, I felt underdressed in my simple black dress.

I couldn't remember what made me finally go inside.

What I do remember clearly is Luis standing when I arrived, looking impossibly handsome in a crisp blue suit.

'So,' he said, raising his glass once I'd sat down, 'I think congratulations are in order. You argued beautifully.'

I laughed at his choice of words. If I was a man, he wouldn't say I argued 'beautifully'. He would've picked something more masculine.

'What?' he asked with faux hurt.

'Nothing,' I replied, taking my own glass by the stem.

'You dismantled the prosecution while barely raising your voice. It was perfect.'

He tapped his glass to mine gently and drank.

‘You gave them nothing to grab onto,’ Luis continued. ‘Every time they tried to define him, you reframed it.’

‘That’s my job.’

‘It’s more than that,’ he said. ‘You didn’t just defend him. You *saw* him. Not as a criminal, but as a person with a story of his own.’

‘He didn’t deserve to be charged,’ I said. ‘Having strange beliefs isn’t a crime. They had no proof he acted on them.’

Luis’s eyes flickered. Not disagreement. Interest. ‘No,’ he said. ‘But it scares people when someone believes too completely.’

‘You saw it too,’ I said, taking a sip from my glass. It was clear by the way he expressed it that he looked beyond the surface.

‘You convinced the jury he wasn’t dangerous,’ Luis said. ‘Even when everyone else wanted him to be.’

‘That’s the law,’ I replied. ‘Facts over fear.’

He smiled at that, but it wasn’t wide and charming like I expected. It was something quieter.

‘Most people don’t have the discipline for that,’ he said. ‘They want certainty. Someone to blame.’

‘And you?’ I asked.

‘I admire bravery,’ he said. ‘The ability to see what’s really there and not shirk what you find.’

‘Shirk what you find,’ I repeated, smiling. ‘You sound like a pamphlet.’

‘Aren’t you afraid you’ll let a murderer go free?’ he asked, his eyes intense.

I leaned in on my elbow. ‘I’m more afraid of taking someone’s freedom for no reason.’

He poured more wine into our glasses, filling them, and the conversation moved on. I asked what he did for work.

‘Consulting,’ he said smoothly. ‘Mostly advisory.’

‘That’s vague.’

He smiled. ‘It’s flexible. What I do changes a lot depending on the company.’

‘And Le Chateau?’ I asked lightly. ‘How did you manage the booking?’

‘A friend of mine works here,’ he said. ‘He owed me a favor.’

I didn’t pry.

Later, I would think about how easily he'd slipped into my orbit. He hadn't approached me when I was vulnerable. He'd found me in the courtroom, doing what I loved, standing in the place I felt strongest. Somehow, that made it easier to trust him.

That night, as the evening wound down, it was clear neither one of us wanted it to end.

Chapter 7

Now

By the time I arrived at work, I'd already decided not to think about the window, the cologne, or the man in the café.

I shut all of it down, the way I always did when something threatened to crack me open – by working.

The lights were already on in my office, blinds half open, Boston gray filtering in. I was glad to be in familiar surroundings. The office felt controlled. Safe.

A rapid knock at the door caught my attention. 'Yeah?'

It was Carl, wearing a bright yellow silk blouse, gray chinos, and a concerned look on his face. I smiled at the splash of color he brought to the office. 'Love the yellow,' I said.

'Yeah, well, you're meeting with clients this afternoon, so I figured you'd be in something drab.' He rolled his eyes playfully. 'So I wore enough color for both of us.'

'I appreciate it,' I said, sounding tired.

'You all right?'

'Yeah,' I said.

His expression didn't change.

'Someone broke into my house. It was a whole thing, the cops came round.' I brushed it away with a dismissive wave. I didn't have time to get into it now.

Carl's hazel eyes widened. 'Did they find out who?'

'Not yet.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

'Just keep doing what you're doing here,' I said. His ability to keep everything running smoothly was the only thing helping my stress levels.

'Well, let me know when you want more coffee. We've got a lot of work to do. That new client I told you about, her name's Rebecca Ryan.'

'OK,' I said.

'Great name, right? She sounds like a reporter.'

I navigated back to the screen. 'I was just bringing her file up,' I said.

'A spousal death. A residential fire. There aren't any charges yet, but you should give her a call. She sounded worried.'

'They think she did it?'

I skimmed the file fast, mind snapping into focus. I studied the timeline first. Fire reported just after midnight. Husband found deceased inside the property. Cause of death pending autopsy. It didn't say whether Rebecca was located at the scene. The police narrative was careful. Neutral. But the question was already there, hanging between the lines.

Where was she when the fire started? Why didn't she report it? Apparently, it was a neighbor who put in the emergency call. Why hadn't she come forward?

I exhaled slowly and leaned back in my chair. She was probably feeling the pressure already. Carl was right; I needed to call Rebecca and set up a time to go through everything.

My phone rang. I answered on the second ring.

'Mackenzie Morgan,' I said, lacking Carl's morning chirp.

'Mackenzie!' I could hear the relief in the woman's tone. 'I called your office earlier. My name is Rebecca Ryan.'

'Of course,' I said, but she kept talking.

'My husband is dead,' she said. 'They think I killed him.'

There was no hesitation. Her voice was steady. Factual. But there was something coiled beneath it that I couldn't name. Was it grief? Guilt?

'Well, they haven't charged you,' I said, hoping to comfort her. She had already been through the tragedy of losing her husband, and if she was innocent, the shock of being accused of his murder might trick her into saying something she regretted.

'Not yet, but I think they're about to,' she said, her voice hitching.

'What makes you think that?'

'They brought me in to answer some questions.'

'Did you go voluntarily?'

A beat. 'Yes.'

Good. That mattered. If she was cooperating, maybe she wanted to get to the bottom of this, and making things easier for the police – within reason of course – might make them more sympathetic toward her.

'Rebecca,' I said, 'listen to me very carefully. Right now, you are not under arrest. You are being interviewed. You do not have to answer questions without counsel present.'

'They said if I didn't come in right away, it would look bad.'

'They say that to everyone,' I replied. 'It's not true.'

'He's dead,' she said. 'They're going to charge me with *murder*.'

‘Not today,’ I said. ‘And not unless they have probable cause. Have they read you your rights?’

‘No.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I want you to stop answering questions right now. Tell them you’re invoking your right to counsel. I’m on my way.’

Her breath hitched. ‘They won’t let me leave.’

That gave me pause.

‘Who told you that?’

‘They said I need to stay.’

That wasn’t the same thing.

‘Did they handcuff you?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’re not under arrest,’ I said. ‘You’re being detained. There’s a difference.’

‘It doesn’t feel like it.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But legally, there is. Trust me. Sit tight. Don’t say another word.’

‘Don’t you want to know if I did it?’

‘No,’ I said quickly, trying to stop her from saying anything more. That was the last thing I wanted to know. Because if she had, and she told me over the phone, it would make defending her a whole lot harder.

‘I’ll be there soon,’ I promised, and hung up. I was already moving.

Chapter 8

Now

I greeted the officer on duty when I arrived at the station. She looked me up and down, as if trying to figure something out. I knew what she was wondering. Some of her colleagues, under different circumstances, had already asked me outright, but I don't think she wanted to give me the satisfaction.

She was eyeing my shoes, looking for a label. She'd already answered her own question. Why would I want to defend criminals when there were plenty of innocent people out there looking for help? It had to be the money, or so she'd assume.

Or the prestige. I might get my name in the paper along with the criminals I defend, if the media takes an interest.

The truth is, both of those assumptions would be wrong, but try telling a cop that plenty of criminals are innocent; that sometimes people just found themselves in a bad situation.

The officer showed me to the room where they were questioning Rebecca. She wasn't in a holding cell, which meant they were just asking questions at this stage. I forced a reassuring smile, hoping Rebecca had been able to hold it together since we'd talked earlier.

She looked up, her honey-brown eyes hopeful and scared at the same time. Something about her seemed fragile. Perhaps it was the shock of losing her husband. I would have looked the same after Luis died; I probably still did.

Usually, when I first met with a client, I could get a feel for whether they had done what they were accused of or not. The way they acted, their body language, the tone of their voice were all dead giveaways.

Rebecca stood and allowed the officer to lead her toward the interview rooms. 'Where are we going?' she asked, looking at me for the answer. 'Can't we just talk here?'

'Those rooms aren't really used for consults,' said the officer. She seemed so uninterested I was surprised she had been listening to our conversation at all.

'You were in an interrogation room,' I filled in. 'It's where police interview people and question suspects.'

Rebecca's eyebrows rose and she looked at the officer, as though to ascertain if this was true. I shook my head, hoping to deter her. 'You're entitled to a private conversation with your lawyer,' I added. 'So, we're being moved to a room where we can have a confidential discussion. We can do it somewhere else if you like?'

The officer tilted her head to look at me, not rising to the bait. But now she'd be forced to clarify whether Rebecca was here answering a few friendly questions, or if it was something a little more than that. The officer paused.

It was just for a moment – half a beat – but it told me everything.

'She's not under arrest,' she said. 'We're just confirming some details.'

'Then my client is free to leave,' I replied, keeping my tone neutral. 'Unless you've developed probable cause.'

The officer stood up straighter. She didn't like being questioned, which struck me as ironic, given her job. We both knew that if she tried to keep Rebecca now, it would be harder to do so later, if her hunch was right. And right now, I was pretty sure that's all she had. A hunch.

Rebecca looked between us, confusion flickering across her face. 'Probable cause? What does that mean?'

'It means,' I said gently, 'that if they don't have enough evidence to charge you with a crime, they can't keep you here against your will.'

The officer's mouth tightened.

'We'd prefer she stayed a little longer,' she said. 'There are still some questions.'

'Which she is not required to respond to,' I said. 'And she won't be responding right now.'

I turned to Rebecca. 'Have they read you your rights?' From our phone call, I already knew the answer to this, and what I was going to ask her next, but I wanted her to say it out loud for the sake of the officer, whose jaw had become so tense I could almost hear her teeth grinding.

'No,' Rebecca said quickly.

'Have they told you you're under arrest?'

'No.'

'Have they told you that you can't leave?'

She hesitated. 'They said it would look bad if I didn't cooperate.'

I nodded. 'They say that a lot. How long have you been here?'

She glanced up at a clock that looked like a relic ticking on the wall.
'About an hour. Maybe a little longer.'

The officer crossed her arms. 'We're just trying to understand what happened.'

'As, I'm sure, is Ms. Ryan.'

Rebecca looked away when I said that. Did she already know what had happened to her husband? Or was she as clueless as the police?

'If you think of anything else you'd like to ask my client, you have her number.'

The silence stretched while the officer thought about what I'd said.

Eventually she exhaled, sharp and annoyed. 'She's free to go.'

Rebecca's shoulders sank like a string had been cut.

She gathered her bag while I waited.

'Thank you, officer,' I said.

We walked out together.

Chapter 9

Now

The café on the corner was quiet, all brushed wood and low music, the kind of place people went when they didn't want to be overheard.

It wasn't empty, but it was deliberately muted. Voices stayed low, bodies angled inward.

Perfect.

Rebecca wrapped her hands around her mug as if it were anchoring her to the table. She hadn't taken a sip since we sat down. Steam curled upward, untouched, the smell of coffee sharp and grounding in the space between us.

'Thank you,' she said. 'For what you did back there. You were amazing.' Her eyes crinkled faintly at the edges. Grateful. 'I thought they could just . . . keep me for as long as they wanted,' she said.

'They can't,' I said. 'Not without charging you.'

She shook her head slowly, her expression shifting. She picked at the texture on the mug with a manicured thumbnail. 'They haven't yet,' she said, 'but they think I did it. It's only a matter of time before they do.'

'Rebecca,' I said, leaning back slightly, giving her space while keeping my voice steady. 'Why are you so sure they're going to arrest you? I need you to tell me everything. Start from the beginning. What was Brad like?'

She inhaled slowly, deeply, like she was bracing herself for impact. For a moment I thought she might deflect, maybe change the subject. Instead, she closed her eyes.

I relaxed into my chair, consciously softening my posture. This wasn't an interrogation. This was a consultation. My job wasn't to corner her – it was to listen without judgment, to let her reveal herself at her own pace.

Rebecca opened her eyes again and stared into her coffee, as if the answer might be waiting there.

'He was—' She stopped. Restarted. 'He was admired. People liked him.'

It wasn't the description I would expect from a grieving widow, but people grieved and loved differently, and it wasn't my place to judge.

Not yet.

'Liked him?' I prompted, hoping she'd continue.

She nodded. ‘Yes. Very much. He was generous with his time. He was disciplined. Reliable. Structured.’ Her mouth curved faintly, almost fondly, but then her tone shifted. ‘He believed in rules. Not just following them. Living by them. He said most people were lost because they didn’t have enough guidance.’

My breath stalled for half a second. Luis had believed in structure, too. In control, though he’d never call it that.

‘And what do you think?’ I asked.

Her smile faltered.

‘He said I had potential,’ she said, not quite answering my question. ‘That I was strong, but unfocused. He thought I needed direction.’

The words sat between us, heavy with implication. I waited. Silence was often more useful than questions once someone started talking.

‘What did that look like?’ I asked finally.

Rebecca traced the rim of her mug with her thumb in slow, deliberate circles. ‘He helped me make better choices,’ she said. ‘What to wear. Who to spend time with. What ideas were worth entertaining and which ones were distractions . . .’

She hesitated then, as if checking my reaction.

‘He said he wanted me to have the freedom to be myself,’ she continued. ‘My *real* self.’

‘Did you agree with him?’ I asked, careful to keep my tone neutral. I was pretty sure I already knew the answer, but I needed to hear it from her.

‘At first,’ she confessed. Her shoulders sagged, as if admitting to this had cost her something. ‘It felt . . . comforting. Like he loved me for everything I was. The good days, the bad.’ She let out a small, ironic laugh. ‘I felt like a princess.’

Her eyes flicked up to mine, searching. For what, I couldn’t quite tell. Understanding? Someone to believe in her?

‘I know it sounds stupid,’ she added quickly. ‘But I was exhausted. I’d spent my twenties taking care of my mom. She had cancer. Everything revolved around her appointments, her medication. I watched her fade anyway.’ Her voice wavered, just barely. ‘It was nice to let someone else decide things for a while.’

‘I can see the appeal,’ I said honestly.

Because I could.

Because I had.

It was nice being taken care of, feeling loved. And everyone needed a break sometimes. I gave her a moment before continuing.

‘And later?’ I asked. ‘How were things between you and Brad later?’

She stared down at her untouched coffee. The steam had thinned now, the surface gone still.

‘Later,’ she said slowly, ‘it felt necessary to go along with what Brad wanted. To keep the peace.’

Necessary.

The word echoed in my head.

‘He was a great guy most of the time,’ she continued. ‘But he had a temper. What used to feel like love became something else. It was like he had to decide *everything*.’

She paused. Swallowing.

‘It didn’t happen all at once,’ she said. ‘That’s the thing. It was gradual. So gradual I didn’t realize what was happening until I was already adjusting myself to fit around him.’

I wrote it down. Not because it was incriminating.

But because it was familiar.

‘Did anyone else see this side of him?’ I asked, glancing up from my notes. ‘Friends? Family?’

She shook her head. ‘He was good at hiding what he was.’

Chapter 10

Now

I nodded, as if something low in my chest hadn't tightened with recognition.

I'd heard versions of this before. From clients. From witnesses. From women who didn't realize they were describing the slow narrowing of their own lives. Nothing Rebecca had said crossed a legal line, but it put doubt there.

It made it seem like she might have a reason to stop him.

What might someone do to escape a controlling husband?

My job was to pull away from the emotional gravity of the story. I needed to bring it back to who else Brad had shown this side of himself to. If he treated his wife this way, there were probably other people he'd mistreated. People with as much motive as she had.

The notes Carl had sent through didn't include a police report.

Rebecca hadn't been arrested, which meant no formal disclosure yet. It would make getting our hands on the report more difficult, but my team were good at that kind of thing. I sent Carl a quick message under the table, keeping my face neutral.

Need the police report as soon as it's filed. Full narrative, not summary.

Rebecca clearly believed she was going to be arrested eventually. Her sense of the inevitable was why she'd come to me now, before anything official happened. Before she lost control of the story.

'Listen,' she said suddenly, her eyes darting, as if unnerved by how quiet I'd gone. She leaned forward, wiped her palm down the side of her skirt, and cleared her throat. 'Everything about this points to me.'

'Why do you think that?' I asked, watching her carefully.

'I wasn't supposed to be home that night,' she said. 'Brad thought I was staying with a friend. I told him I needed space.'

'How did he react to that?' I asked.

Her mouth tightened. 'He said I was being dramatic. That I was overreacting, but that things would be fine.' She paused. 'He always did that.'

Control disguised as concern. Gaslighting.

'I left the house just after seven,' she continued. 'I drove around for a while. Parked by the pond. I needed to clear my head.'

‘Did you come back later?’ I asked.

She hesitated.

‘Yes. But not for long.’

‘What time?’

‘I don’t know. Late. After midnight.’

People remember things more clearly when it’s something jolting, something out of their routine. Even when they don’t want to.

‘What happened when you got there?’ I asked.

‘The house was already on fire,’ she said, almost defensively. ‘There was smoke everywhere. Flames coming from the bedroom window.’

‘You didn’t go inside?’

Her eyes flicked up to mine. ‘No. I couldn’t do it.’

‘Did you call emergency services?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I figured someone else must have already called. I heard sirens. . .’

Another pause between us. Thin and fragile.

‘Did you see Brad?’ I asked.

She shook her head.

‘Did you hear him?’

‘No.’

‘But you’re certain he was inside?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her gaze dropped to the table.

‘He always went to bed early during the week,’ she said finally. ‘He hated when I stayed out late. Said it disrupted his routine. He usually left early for work.’

‘So you left,’ I said. ‘While the house was burning.’

‘Yes.’ She swallowed. ‘I panicked.’

‘Why, Rebecca? Why wouldn’t you come forward?’

‘Because I knew how it would look,’ she said. ‘The wife conveniently absent while her rich husband burns in their bed. If I went back, it would look like I set the fire.’

Her hands tightened around the mug.

‘Brad was a very structured person.’ She frowned. ‘He believed appearances were important.’

That word again: ‘structured’. ‘And what do you believe?’ I asked, skimming the foam off the top of my latte with a spoon, needing the small, mechanical motion to steady myself.

‘I think people should be accepted for who they are,’ she said. ‘And shouldn’t have to put on an act for the people closest to them, who are supposed to love them regardless.’

The words struck deeper than I expected.

For the people who were supposed to love them regardless.

‘Isn’t that what Brad wanted for you?’ I asked gently.

She scoffed. ‘He didn’t really mean it. He only wanted me to be “myself” if it matched how he wanted me to be.’

So Brad’s love had felt conditional?

Now wasn’t the time to explore that. I set my coffee aside and brought us back to the case.

‘Is there anything else you think I should know about that night?’ I asked. ‘Anything that might compromise a court case, if it comes to that?’

She opened her mouth. ‘I—’

‘Did Brad ever hurt you?’ I asked.

‘Not in the way people think,’ she said quickly. ‘Not often. He just . . . *corrected* me. Constantly. He tried to make me into exactly what he wanted.’

She exhaled, her shoulders dropping. ‘We argued about it that night. It’s why I left.’

‘Rebecca,’ I said gently. ‘Can anyone verify where you were? Did you end up visiting your friend, or maybe someone else?’

She stared into her coffee cup, her voice pitching slightly higher. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No one.’

If she had seen someone that night, she wasn’t ready to say it.

‘And you said you drove around for a while?’

‘I parked in the lot by the pond,’ she said. It was consistent with what she’d already told me, but that didn’t make it true.

‘Rebecca,’ I said, lowering my voice. ‘Did you start the fire?’

Her eyes filled, but her voice stayed steady. ‘No.’

‘Did you expect Brad to die that night?’ I asked.

She didn’t answer right away.

When she did, her voice was quiet. ‘I expected things to change.’

I closed my notebook.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘For now, this is what we’re going with.’

She nodded, relief flooding her face. ‘I knew you could help me. He said you would.’

The words snagged. Maybe she’d been referred by a previous client.

‘He?’

She nearly dropped her mug, coffee sloshing dangerously close to the rim. ‘Just . . . a friend,’ she said, too quickly. ‘I can’t even remember who.’

I passed her a napkin, watching as she dabbed carefully at the coffee spots on her arm.

She hadn’t called for help.

She’d known he was inside. And she was speaking less like someone who’d escaped something, and more like someone who’d justified it. If she hadn’t killed him directly, she hadn’t tried very hard to save him, either.

But why?

She leaned over, tossing the napkin on the table that sat between us. Her bag tilted beside her, spilling onto the floor.

‘Shoot,’ she said, quickly scooping up the contents. A purse, some mints, a lip gloss, and what looked like a brochure for a wellness center.

She saw me looking at the brochure, allowing myself a brief fantasy about a long overdue massage I wouldn’t be getting any time soon.

‘I was going to book a day spa,’ she said, stuffing the brochure back into the bag. ‘Maybe I should, before—’

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. *Before she couldn’t.*

Rebecca collected her belongings and zipped up her bag with a decisive ‘zzzt’.

My phone beeped. Another message from Carl.

The report is in. I already took a look. You’re not going to believe what I found.

I looked up at Rebecca, already halfway turned toward the door, her posture lighter now that she’d handed the weight over to me.

Chapter 11

Now

By the time I got back to the office, my phone was already buzzing.

Carl was in my doorway when I arrived, arms crossed, tablet tucked against his chest. His expression told me this wasn't a routine update.

'The fire wasn't an accident,' he said.

I set my bag down slowly. 'Start from the beginning.'

He followed me into my office and closed the door behind us, his shirt catching the light.

'The initial fire report was vague because the investigators hadn't finished their lab analysis yet,' he said. 'But the updated report came through this afternoon.'

I sat, impressed that Carl had managed to get the report. I didn't ask how he had worked his magic, I was just thankful he had.

'They found an accelerant,' he continued. 'Not gasoline. Not kerosene. Not anything you'd buy at a hardware store.'

'So, what, then?' I asked.

Carl hesitated. 'An oil blend.'

That made me look up.

'Specifically,' he said, 'a mix of essential oils suspended in a carrier oil. High flash point. Burns *hot*. It's fast, and clean.'

'That's . . . unusual.'

'It gets better,' he said grimly. 'It was poured in a deliberate pattern.'

My stomach tightened. Any hopes I'd been harboring for an accidental spark, some faulty tech or an unfortunate accident, obliterated.

'Go on.'

'His body was engulfed in a kind of circle.'

A circle. A containment ring. Not to start a fire – but to keep someone inside it.

I leaned back, the chair creaking softly beneath me.

'And that's why the police ruled it a homicide,' I said.

'Yes,' Carl replied. 'Or at least, they found strong evidence of intent.'

'Any idea where the oil came from?'

Carl tapped his tablet and turned it toward me.

A logo stared back.

A stylized spiral. Soft colors. Serif font.

THE COTERIE INSTITUTE
Alignment. Renewal. Becoming.

My chest went cold.

‘It’s a wellness collective,’ Carl said. ‘They sell oils, supplements, courses. Everything’s branded as “holistic healing”.’

‘Where are they based?’

‘Massachusetts,’ he said. ‘And Spain.’

Of course they were.

‘The oil blend is proprietary,’ Carl continued. ‘Not widely sold. Mostly distributed through workshops and retreats.’

I thought of Rebecca’s bag.

The brochure.

The way she’d shoved it back out of sight.

‘And Brad?’ I asked. ‘Anything in his background?’

Carl nodded. ‘Financial records show repeated payments to the Institute. Retreat fees. Donations. Large ones.’

‘And Rebecca?’

‘Nothing in her name,’ Carl said. ‘But someone registered her for at least two programs.’ I closed my eyes briefly.

‘The oil pattern suggests ignition occurred sometime before midnight. Most likely between eight and eleven thirty p.m. According to the report, Rebecca told police she returned briefly and left before the fire “broke out”. Her words.’

So, she’d told them she was in the house, but not that she’d been there when the fire was blazing.

‘There could be a few reasons she’d tell the police that version. Maybe she panicked, then figured she’d already dug herself a hole that wouldn’t be easy to get out of,’ I said.

‘Maybe,’ Carl agreed. ‘Oh, and get this, apparently, they weren’t married long. Kind of a whirlwind romance.’

‘Does the report say anything else?’ I asked.

Carl scrolled, then stopped, turning the tablet around. ‘There was something else there,’ he said. ‘They found residue – trace amounts of the oil – on the exterior door handle. The back entrance. Not enough for DNA. Not enough to prove transfer. Just . . . presence.’

‘Meaning whoever ignited the fire didn’t leave in a rush,’ I said. ‘They stopped.’

I read through the report quickly, a picture forming in my head as I visualized the crime scene. My chest tightened as my eyes flicked across the screen.

‘They locked the door.’

‘Accidental fires don’t get locked in,’ Carl added. ‘And neither do panicked ones.’

‘Someone had planned this out,’ I said. ‘Oils. A circle.’ I scrunched my nose, a theory forming like an unwelcome smell. ‘It feels almost ritualistic.’

Carl raised an eyebrow, considering it.

‘How did your meeting with Rebecca go? Did she seem . . . guilty?’

I ignored the question. It wasn’t relevant.

‘Well, we walked out of the police station and went for coffee. She certainly seems to have a reason to want her husband out of her life, but I don’t know . . . killing him seems a little extreme. She said he was controlling. He made decisions for her.’

‘If my boyfriend did that, I’d be out of there,’ said Carl without hesitation.

I believed it. I couldn’t see Carl taking orders from anyone, even if they were well-meaning. I walked him through what Rebecca and I had discussed.

‘So,’ he said, ‘someone definitely killed him, and they always suspect the spouse.’

‘We need to go digging. Find out if there was someone else who might want Brad dead.’

‘On it,’ said Carl, gathering up the tablet to take notes.

*

By the time Carl was finished, I already had a strategy forming.

That was always the first step – not belief or doubt, but structure. You didn’t win cases by deciding what *felt* true. You won them by finding the version of events the law could tolerate.

‘OK,’ I said, pushing my chair back. ‘Here’s what we’re going to do.’

Carl sat on the edge of the desk, tablet at the ready.

‘Rebecca wasn’t arrested, because they don’t have a clean line from her to ignition,’ I continued. ‘No accelerant on her clothes. No DNA evidence. No eyewitnesses placing her inside the house at the time the fire started.’

‘And the oil?’ Carl asked.

‘The oil establishes *method*, not *actor*,’ I said. ‘They know how the fire was set. They still don’t know who set it, but they’ll be looking into it. They’ll search her bank records for purchases linked to the accelerant.’

‘Will the bank give them those details freely?’

‘I doubt it. Unless it was fraud, banks are reluctant to give out client information. Especially if their client has millions invested in their bank.’

Carl looked suddenly interested. ‘*Millions?*’ he said with a low whistle.

‘It might take the police a while to sift through their accounts.’

I stood and crossed over to the whiteboard.

DEFENSE THEORY: LACK OF INTENT

‘They’ll try to frame this as deliberate,’ I said. ‘A ritual. A contained burn. But intent is the hill they have to die on.’

I wrote:

- No prior threats
- No accelerant purchased in Rebecca’s name
- No forensic tie to ignition
- No motive strong enough to kill

‘She leaves the house after an argument,’ I continued. ‘She believes he’s asleep. She comes back later to find the fire already underway.’

Carl frowned slightly. ‘But she didn’t call for help.’

‘That could be fear,’ I said. ‘Shock. Panic. The prosecution hates that explanation, but juries understand it.’

I wrote, then underlined, PANIC RESPONSE.

‘People freeze,’ I went on. ‘They make irrational choices when they’re scared. Especially women who’ve been conditioned to doubt their instincts.’

Carl nodded. ‘Abuse dynamics.’

‘Exactly,’ I agreed. ‘And to prove that, we don’t need bruises. We don’t need hospital records. We show coercive control. Emotional dominance. Routine enforcement.’

I paused, then added another line:

- Victim’s rigidity / need for control

Carl glanced at the board. ‘And the locked door?’

‘We don’t explain it,’ I said. ‘We dilute it.’

I capped the marker, using it as a pointer on the board.

‘Heat transfer. Firefighter movement. Secondary contact. They’ll bring in an expert to say it’s *possible*.’

‘Possible is enough,’ Carl said.

‘For now,’ I agreed.

I stepped back, looking at the theory laid out in clean black strokes.

It was solid. More than solid.

This version of events could hold.

Rebecca didn’t kill her husband.

‘We need to find out if that door locks from the inside,’ I said, deep in thought. ‘Anyone who accessed the house that night could have accidentally triggered the lock.’

Carl’s fingers moved quickly, tapping out notes as we talked. ‘She left. A fire started. A tragedy followed.’

Intent blurred into an unfortunate set of circumstances, in which Rebecca was a victim too.

Carl studied me. ‘You believe this?’

The question caught me off guard.

‘I believe it’s defensible,’ I said carefully.

That was the truth.

I gathered my files, already mentally preparing motions. Suppression arguments. Expert witnesses. Narrative framing.

I’d built stronger cases on thinner facts.

Still, as I turned off the light in my office late that evening, something nagged.

The theory depended on chaos.

On panic. Or fear.

But nothing about the fire report suggested chaos.

It suggested order. It suggested a plan.

I pushed my thoughts away.

Every defense has gaps. That didn’t make them fatal.

I just hoped there was nothing tying Rebecca to the accelerant that was used to set the fire.

Chapter 12

Now

I stayed late at work that night, contemplating defense strategies, until my brain decided enough was enough and hit me with a headache.

As I closed my laptop, I realized I didn't want to go home. It wasn't that I minded being alone. It was that I was going home to a life without him, a life we'd planned together but that I was now trying to figure out on my own.

A call from Jess saved my evening.

'Hey,' she said. 'Just thought you might be ready to grab some food?'

I silently thanked her for knowing me well enough to know exactly when I needed to take a break. 'Tell me where, and I'll be there.'

'How about Ola? It's open late.'

'Perfect!'

*

Twenty minutes later, I was searching the tables for a tell-tale head of blonde hair, thinking about all the times Jess had pulled me through.

Especially after Luis died. She stood with me at the cemetery as I watched his coffin disappear beneath the damp earth, letting me grip her hand.

She was my rock.

Jess had driven me home from the cemetery. I would have just stood by his grave all night otherwise. I had told myself all I needed was closure. To say goodbye and let go so I could finally start to heal. But I didn't feel any better after the funeral. Closure is a lie we tell ourselves to make grief sound manageable. There's no closure to what we had shared together, or what we'd lost.

There was only surviving it.

The truth was, my life stopped that day. Something inside me had been buried along with Luis. I wasn't sure I'd ever get it back.

'Do you want me to stay?' Jessica had asked, sitting in my driveway with me while I cried.

'No. I can manage. Thank you for everything,' I had said, hugging her. She had been there for me ever since. Just like during the break-in.

Jess saw me first at Ola, waving her hands dramatically to get my attention. I smiled. I used to smile all the time.

Now, it was a rare occurrence.

I had hoped no one would notice I wasn't the same Mackenzie Morgan anymore. The one who had made partner at Jackson and Morgan and had an almost perfect win record. That I didn't care about those things like I used to.

Life had lost a little of its flavor.

'I ordered us drinks,' Jess said, pushing a colorful cocktail toward me.

She was trying to bring me back to life, one colorful cocktail at a time.

She waited for me to take a few sips before speaking. 'OK, what's up?' she asked. 'Is this about the break-in?'

'The police aren't taking it seriously,' I said. 'They think the wood was old, and that maybe I didn't notice the broken latch.'

'Because you're a woman who lives alone, so obviously you must be scared of every shadow.' She rolled her eyes. 'I mean, we have pest control on speed dial, right?' She rolled her eyes again, more dramatically, trying to cheer me up.

'Right,' I agreed absently.

'It's not that though, is it? Come on. What's really bothering you?'

'It's just . . .' I paused, not knowing how much I should say. Rebecca was a client, but I couldn't shake the feeling there was something she wasn't telling me.

Finally, I caved and told Jess what I could without using names, and without crossing any ethical boundaries. 'It's just, a woman who isn't under arrest wants me to prepare a case I might never use.'

'That seems odd. Why?'

'She thinks it's only a matter of time before they arrest her.' I paused, looking into the vibrant cocktail like it's a crystal ball. 'But it's more than tha—'

Suddenly, it hit me. There was a reason something had been bugging me. 'It's as if she thinks not having done it could be worse for her.'

'Well, did she seem paranoid? Maybe she doesn't trust authority figures.'

'No. She was articulate. Well spoken. She didn't seem particularly hostile towards the police who interviewed her.'

‘Maybe she’s living a secret life as a parking inspector and she doesn’t want anyone to know,’ joked Jess.

That got a smile.

But Jess was on to something. The way Rebecca had been acting, maybe she was involved in something she didn’t want the police to know about. She’d put off calling the fire department while her husband was inside their burning home.

Or maybe Brad was mixed up in something? But why would she be worried? Was hiring me her way to make sure everything was done right?

‘I need to pee,’ said Jess, sliding out of her seat.

While Jess was in the restroom, I sent Carl some instructions to investigate who was on the case and whether they had any ties to Rebecca, Brad, or anyone else who might’ve been close to either of them, with a note to leave it until the morning.

‘More drinks?’ Jess asked when she came back.

‘Why not.’

Two cocktails later, I was feeling a little lighter.

You don’t have to carry it all with you.

I didn’t usually drink this much on a weekday, but it felt good, being out and eating tacos with Jess, like we used to before life got crazy.

‘This has been nice,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

‘It has,’ she agreed, just as my phone pinged.

‘Ugh. This might be work. I need to get it,’ I said apologetically, already pulling my phone from my bag. ‘It’s probably Elizabeth. I feel like she’s been keeping tabs on me. Or it could be Carl.’

‘Let it wait,’ said Jess, holding up her glass in a lone ‘cheers’, taking a gulp before I’d returned it.

I was about to explain when she stopped me. ‘No, I know how it is. Believe me.’

Or perhaps it was Officer Murphy, updating me on the break-in, though I wouldn’t hold my breath on that one.

It wasn’t either of them. It was a number I didn’t recognize. Probably spam. My finger hovered over ‘delete’ until I saw the preview.

Hi Mackenzie, this is Carmen from Beautiful Beagles. We had a cancellation. One little girl is still looking for her forever home.

My pulse thrummed. I had almost forgotten that Luis and I had put our names down for a dog. We’d talked about it for months. We’d even discussed names and couldn’t decide on anything we both agreed on. He’d

joked that we needed something small enough to cuddle but smart enough to outwit both of us. My first instinct was to call him, to tell him we'd finally found our beagle. My hand even moved before my brain caught up. I still wasn't used to him not being there, and whenever something exciting happened, he was the first person I thought of.

But he wasn't there to share it with, and a fresh wave of loss hit me.

I opened the message and saw a beagle pup looking up at the camera with her wide puppy eyes, her head tilted as if she were waiting for the answer to a question she'd just asked.

I swiped through three more photos, each one worse for my resolve.

I flipped the phone around and showed Jess, who visibly melted when she saw her.

'She's perfect,' I said.

My thumbs tapped out a reply.

She's beautiful. I'm definitely interested. Any health issues? Why did they back out?

The reply came fast.

They changed their minds. The thing is, I can't hold her long. I'd need to know by 5pm tomorrow if you want to come see her. I can send through her vet work. You can come by any time before 8. 143 Thomson Street.

She gave the name of the town and a phone number too.

'Are you really going to do it?' asked Jess.

'What?'

'Get a puppy.'

I cracked a piece of taco shell and chewed thoughtfully. 'Maybe. There's no harm in going out there, right?'

'No. I think you should. Pets are great company. I'd be lost without Snowball.'

Now all I had to do was figure out a way to go see her, but it wouldn't be tonight. I was exhausted, and this case was just getting started.

Chapter 13

Now

The house felt different at night.

I was more aware of every sound.

I locked the front door behind me and stood there for a moment longer than necessary, trying to see outside, into the darkness. The click of the lock echoed through the hallway, sharper than it should have been, like the house was listening out for it.

I hadn't turned on all the lights. I never did anymore. I told myself it was practical. Economical. There was no sense in lighting rooms I wasn't using – but the truth was I didn't want to see the whole place at once. Empty rooms carried weight, and shining a light on what wasn't there only made the house seem emptier. Darkness softened the edges.

I set my bag down on the kitchen counter and glanced at the window.

The casement latch had been fixed. New hardware. It was more secure now than it ever had been. The repairman had smiled too easily when he told me it would hold, like confidence was something you could install with a screwdriver.

I checked it anyway.

Locked.

I ran my fingers along the sill, half expecting to feel splintered paint again. Nothing. The paint was smooth. Clean. Reassuring in a way that didn't quite reassure.

The house creaked as I moved through it, settling into itself. I told myself it was normal. Old timber groaned. Especially with temperature changes. The rational explanations came easily when I needed them.

I changed into pajamas and padded back into the living room, leaving the lamp off. Moonlight spilled in through the windows instead, pale and distorting, stretching the shadows out too long.

I sat on the couch and stared at the dark screen of my phone.

I messaged Jess to say goodnight.

Something ticked softly near the ceiling – pipes, probably. Or the heating system adjusting. I counted the seconds between the sounds, just to prove to myself that they were regular.

They weren't.

I stood and walked toward the back of the house, my footsteps careful, deliberate. The pool was visible through the glass doors, the water a dark, glassy sheet reflecting the night sky. The cover was off again. I didn't remember removing it.

I hadn't been swimming in days, but I convinced myself I must have forgotten about it. That it had probably been like that since my last swim.

Luis used to take care of the pool. He loved to swim and had the body to prove it. It would irritate him if I forgot to put the cover on. He said it was an invitation for debris, that the filter would shit itself if I kept doing it.

I slid the door open just enough to let the night air in. Cool. Damp. It smelled like wet leaves and chlorine and something faintly metallic. I leaned against the frame, listening.

Nothing.

I slipped out and pulled the cover across the surface before heading back inside.

And then—

A sound from upstairs.

Not footsteps. Not even a voice. Just . . . movement. A soft shift, like weight redistributing.

My pulse quickened, but my mind raced ahead of it, assembling explanations.

It was an old house. I'd stood in courtrooms full of people trying to make coincidence mean something more than it was.

Still, I didn't move.

'Hello?' I called, my voice thinner than I wanted.

There was no answer.

I climbed the stairs slowly, one hand trailing along the banister. The hallway at the top was dark, the bedrooms closed off like sealed compartments. I flipped on the light, the sudden brightness making my eyes sting.

Everything was where it should be.

I checked the spare room. The office. The bathroom. My bedroom last.

The bed was untouched. Smooth.

I stood there, breathing in the quiet.

For a moment — just a moment — I imagined Luis standing behind me. Not as a ghost. Not as something impossible. Just . . . present. Solid. Familiar. I could almost hear his voice.

You're overthinking it.

He'd said that to me more times than I could count. Usually gently. Sometimes not.

I sat on the edge of the bed and pressed my palms into the mattress, grounding myself. This was my house. My life. I was allowed to feel safe in it.

But safety, I was learning, was an illusion. A story we told ourselves so we could fall asleep at night.

As I turned off the light and headed back downstairs, something caught my eye.

The back door.

The lock was engaged, but out beyond the deck, the cover had blown off the pool again, exposing the cool water beneath.

There was no pretending I hadn't covered it over this time.

I stared at it, watching. Waiting.

But nothing happened. It was a still night, without a breeze.

I locked my bedroom door and slept with my phone underneath my pillow.

Chapter 14

Now

I awoke the next morning on Luis's side of the bed. I closed my eyes, allowing myself a moment to think about him.

The memory came easily. It was after we'd been dating for a few months.

I'd come home and Luis had surprised me. The room was lit with candles, dozens of them, scattered across the dresser and the windowsill, their flames trembling softly like they were breathing. Luis had laughed when I told him it was excessive, said it was only for a night, that sometimes you needed to change the atmosphere to let something new in.

The scent of bergamot had lingered in the air, warm and clean, layered with something deeper I could never quite name. He'd moved slowly that night, deliberately, as if he had all the time in the world. Every touch unhurried. Every word chosen.

'Relax,' he murmured, brushing my hair back from my face. 'Forget about your cases. Just be here with me tonight.'

I remembered how safe I'd felt. How held. As the rest of the world fell away and the only thing that mattered was the space we'd created together.

After, we lay tangled together, candlelight casting soft shadows across the walls. He'd traced lazy patterns on my arm, smiling to himself.

'You carry so much,' he'd said. 'Through here.' He traced the line of my jaw. 'And in here.' His hand moved down my neck, across the side of my ribs, and stopped over my heart. 'You don't have to carry it all with you. Let it go.'

I'd smiled then. Half asleep. Comforted by the idea that someone saw the weight and wanted to ease it.

'I think I love you,' I said, the words slipping out of my mouth before I was sure I wanted to say them.

It could have ruined the moment. It might have, but he'd kissed my forehead, slow and reverent.

'I think I love you too.'

I smiled up at him, and we were kissing again.

The memory faded as reality set in.

I opened my eyes, the room empty now, cold in the morning light. The candles were gone. The scent long faded.

But the feeling lingered. Of Luis's arms wrapped around me. His slow, steady breath on my neck as I slept in his arms.

For a moment longer than I should, I let myself believe he was still here.

Then I looked at the clock, thankful I didn't seem to have a hangover from last night. I was usually up by now, finishing a bowl of granola and yoghurt.

Throwing back the covers, I pulled on my robe, gathered my clothes from the rack and raced through to the shower. I didn't even wait for it to heat up, just jumped in cold to kickstart my day.

*

By the time I reached the station, I felt ready to take on anything.

The train was pulling in but I still needed to cut across to the other side if I was going to catch it.

I broke into a jog, my breath catching in the cool morning air, but I was too late.

Impatient commuters already had their elbows out, edging toward the carriages. Securing a spot for the ride with the ferocity of territorial lions.

Of course. The one morning I actually needed things to go smoothly.

I reached the platform, resigned to waiting for the next one. Ten minutes wasn't the end of the world, but it felt like a lifetime today.

My phone buzzed with a message from Rebecca.

This early in the morning, it probably wasn't good news.

My instinct was right.

The police want to search my house. They say they have a warrant.

I stopped walking.

People surged past me, already getting into position for the next train. I stepped out of the flow and typed back with deliberate care.

Are the police with you right now?

Her reply was instant and loaded with worry.

Yes. They're outside.

I closed my eyes for a beat.

This might work better if I coaxed her through what to do.

I dialed her phone, and she answered immediately. 'They're at the door,' she said.

'OK. Listen to me carefully,' I said in my most reassuring tone. 'Do not consent to anything beyond what's in the warrant. Do not answer questions.'

Do not explain. Do not help them.'

There was a pause. I tried to listen for background noise, anything to give me an idea of what was happening, but I couldn't catch what they were saying.

'They said it'll be faster if I let them in. That the neighbors won't even notice they're here. They'll be in and out. Do they always talk such shit?'

'Pretty much. Whatever it takes to get your agreement.'

I moved quickly, already mapping the fastest route to her house.

'Ask to see the warrant. Take a photo if you can. Stall them. I'm on my way.'

Another pause.

'They're asking for my phone,' said Rebecca.

My fingers stilled.

'Do not unlock it,' I directed. 'Hand it over if the warrant specifies the phone. Don't give them your passcode.'

A few seconds went by. 'They're going inside,' said Rebecca, relieved. 'They said they'd collect the phone next.'

'OK. Are you within earshot of the police?'

'I don't think so.'

'Is there anything on your phone you don't want them to see?'

'Apart from everything?' she said, sarcasm creeping into her tone.

'You know what I mean,' I said, talking quickly now in case they decided to come back sooner than expected. 'Anything illegal, incriminating, or anything else to suggest you might've hurt your husband? Text messages to him, or to someone else?'

'I don't think so,' she said. 'But if there were I could easily delete them while they're inside.'

'No! Don't delete anything. The first thing forensics will check if they get a hold of your phone is what you're *trying* to hide. They'll search your delete history.'

'Good to know,' she said, but there was a slight tremor in her voice that made me wonder if she hadn't already done it.

*

When I arrived, two patrol cars and an unmarked SUV were parked out front, looking out of place in what would otherwise be a fairy tale. Rebecca stood on the footpath, arms folded tight across her chest, looking

diminished against the octagonal bay windows of a beautiful Queen Anne-style home that was more of a mansion than a house.

An officer glanced at me as I approached, before I could even get to the regal-looking door knocker. ‘Excuse me—’

‘I’m Rebecca’s attorney,’ I said. ‘Mackenzie Morgan.’

That changed the temperature immediately.

I turned to Rebecca. ‘Did you consent to the search?’

‘No,’ she said quickly. ‘I told them you were coming.’

‘Good.’

I held out my hand to the officer nearest me. ‘I’d like to see the warrant.’

He handed it over without argument.

I read it carefully. Address correct. Scope limited. Electronic devices, financial records, accelerants. No fishing expedition.

My guess was they were looking for potential accelerants to see if there were traces of the other products used in the concoction. They wanted to tie the two together.

‘OK,’ I said, handing it back. ‘So long as we’re clear on the boundaries, go right ahead.’

‘We’re just doing our job, executing the warrant,’ the officer replied.

‘Right,’ I said, mimicking his tone. ‘And I’m just doing my job making sure you stay within it.’

Rebecca’s voice shook. ‘Are they just allowed to go through my house? Isn’t that a breach of privacy or something?’

‘I know it can be . . . confronting, having someone go through your things, but they have a warrant,’ I explained calmly. ‘So they can legally conduct a search for the things listed.’

Her breath hitched.

‘Listen to me,’ I said quietly. ‘You do not answer questions. If they ask, you say you’re invoking your right to counsel. If they try to make conversation, you don’t engage. This isn’t rudeness. It’s protection.’

One of the officers shifted. ‘We just need some context for a few items.’

‘No, you don’t,’ I said evenly. ‘You need what’s in the warrant.’

The front door opened and closed behind us as officers moved in and out, cataloguing, photographing, lifting objects with gloved hands.

Rebecca watched every movement like she was afraid something might get stolen, or like they’d find something she didn’t want them to see.

A gloved officer placed a vase back with a heavy hand.

‘That vase cost as much as a small car,’ said Rebecca. ‘And he’s handling it like it’s a lump of wood.’

I nodded. I could understand her concern; I just didn’t want the police to hear that was what she was worried about while they were looking for her husband’s killer.

‘Just a few more minutes and they should be out of here,’ I promised.

‘They’re treating me like I’ve already done something,’ she whispered.

‘That’s how investigations feel,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t mean they’ll find proof of anything.’

An officer approached. ‘We need to take the phone now.’

I nodded to Rebecca. ‘Hand it over.’

She did, her fingers lingering on the device like it was the last solid thing she had.

‘Passcode?’ the officer asked.

‘No,’ I said, before Rebecca could answer. ‘The warrant doesn’t compel disclosure.’

He didn’t argue.

When it was over, the officers left as efficiently as they’d arrived with no apology for the disturbance.

I waited until the street was empty before speaking again.

‘Rebecca,’ I said, ‘from this point on, you don’t talk to anyone about this. Friends. Neighbors. No one. Not without me.’

She nodded, swallowing hard.

‘When will I get my phone back?’ she asked.

‘When they’re done with it,’ I said. ‘Sorry, but that’s the truth. It could take a week. Maybe more. They’ll hang on to it for as long as they can, in case there’s something they need.’

She hugged her arms to herself, like she was bracing against a cold wind she could already feel setting in.

‘We’re done reacting,’ I said. ‘From now on, we stay ahead of them.’

She nodded, only slightly reassured.

If I was going to do that, it meant locking down our approach and making sure they couldn’t tear it apart.

Chapter 15

Now

By the time I arrived back at the office, the day was in full swing.

The familiar chaos should've grounded me like it usually did – the smell of burnt espresso, the low hum of printers and phones, the soft thud of heels against polished floors – but it all felt off, like I'd stepped into someone else's life.

'Hey, boss,' Carl called, appearing with his usual bright smile. He pressed a large takeaway coffee into my hand.

'You're bringing me presents after ten a.m.? That can't be good.'

Carl lowered his voice to a whisper, his smile dropping like his cover had been blown. 'Elizabeth's waiting in your office. She said it was urgent.'

'Of course she is,' I muttered, taking a sip. The coffee scalded my tongue, bitter and over-roasted, but I welcomed the sting. At least it felt real.

'Did you reheat this?' I asked.

'Sorry. I thought you'd be here sooner.'

I opened the door to my office and stopped.

Elizabeth was there, sitting on my couch like she owned the place. Perfect posture. Perfect suit. A fixed smile that looked painted on.

'Well,' she said, without preamble, making what might have been taken for professional interest sound like she was expecting a full report on my case. 'How did your meeting with Rebecca go?'

I took a seat behind my desk and set my coffee in its usual spot. 'Fine,' I said, keeping my tone light. I looked at the door. 'How did you get in? I thought I locked the door behind me.'

'You did,' she replied lightly. 'But I make a point of having keys to all the rooms. You never know when someone might . . . misplace theirs.'

Her almost-smile dropped, leaving her face unnervingly still, locked in a Botox freeze-frame.

'Mackenzie, we need to talk.'

That tone. Calm but still precise. I braced myself. She stood and closed the door with deliberate care before continuing.

'You've been distracted.'

Was she talking about me turning up late because of the break-in?

I preferred not to ask. Instead, I took a gulp of reheated coffee and prepared myself.

‘Elizabeth, I always do my work. I have a great track record.’

‘Usually, I’d agree. But you left Ms. Ryan waiting hours without a response.’

How did she know that?

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘You’re right, and it won’t happen again.’

‘She’s a very wealthy client, who has offered to contribute generously to our firm.’

I nodded. ‘I understand.’

‘When you’re done preparing her defense strategy, I’d like an update,’ she said, her icy eyes trained on me.

It took me a second to comprehend what she’d just said. Elizabeth never asked for ‘updates.’ Not like that. Was she testing me? Watching to see if I could still perform?

‘It’s an unusual case,’ she said, watching me for a reaction.

‘Why? People are accused of killing their spouses all the time.’

‘Yes,’ she said, standing to leave. ‘But they don’t usually set them on fire.’

Chapter 16

Now

The train ride out to Thomson Street to see the beagle pup took longer than expected. Carmen's property sat behind a long stretch of gravel road, bordered by overgrown hedges and the kind of silence that made your ears ring, and I had to walk it. I should've organized an Uber.

Carmen answered the door, wiping her hands on a towel like she'd just been baking – earthy and cheerful. 'You must be Mackenzie! Come on through, the pups are just having a nap.'

The place smelled faintly of hay and coffee. Through the kitchen window, I could see a garden with neat rows of vegetables and a scarecrow watching over them.

We stepped into a side room where two small beagles slept curled together in a wicker basket. The soft sound of their breathing hit me square in the chest.

'Oh,' I whispered. 'She's even cuter in person.'

Carmen smiled. 'We believe in keeping our animals healthy. Her parents are from excellent lines. That one—' she nodded toward the other pup, who was stirring at the sound of our voices '—has a bit of a curious streak, but she's a sweetheart.'

As if on cue, the pup toddled toward me, sniffed my hand and went back to napping, while the first pup clumsily climbed onto my knee. Her fur was warm, her heartbeat quick.

'She likes you,' Carmen said. 'You can take her today if you want. She had her shots last week. She's all paid up and ready.'

I barely heard her, distracted by the puppy licking my hand.

'I caught the train out,' I said. The pup was looking at me as if saying hello. 'But I can pay now and organize pickup later.'

Carmen hesitated. Just a flicker of something in her expression – annoyance? Or curiosity? 'Train, huh? Not many people do that around here.'

'I work in the city,' I said. 'And I didn't want to miss out, so I came straight from work.'

Her smile returned, polite but distant. 'Well, she'll be waiting. But I do have a policy on when you need to collect her.'

I nodded, reaching down to stroke the puppy's head. She looked up at me with those trusting eyes, and for a heartbeat, I forgot to feel sad.

'I'll be in touch later this evening,' I said softly.

As I turned to leave, Carmen followed me out. 'Oh – and Mackenzie?'

I paused at the door.

'I was hoping to meet your husband, Luis?'

My breath caught. I hadn't said anything about Luis. 'How— Why?'

Carmen's smile didn't waver. 'He put in the application.' She absently redirected one of the pups who was about to leave the room. 'I spoke to him over the phone. Lovely guy.'

How long ago had they spoken? Carmen probably wouldn't remember. She had no reason to, and she had probably spoken to a bunch of people, organizing homes for all the pups.

I forced a laugh I didn't feel. 'Right. Of course.'

But the back of my neck prickled. 'He couldn't make it today,' I said, leaving it there.

I left the pup behind reluctantly, promising her I'd come back soon, and Carmen insisted on dropping me at the station.

Usually, Luis and I would've made the trip back together by car, one of us driving while the other fiddled with the radio or rolled the windows down to let the air whip through the car. I could almost picture it. Luis's hand reaching across to squeeze my knee, the lazy brush of his thumb over my skin. The memory struck me like a blunt blade, still sharp enough to sting.

Now it was just me and a stranger.

'I could have walked,' I told Carmen. 'I don't want to put you to any trouble.'

'No problem,' she said with a smile.

It was true, though. I would rather have walked. Walking was my therapy these days. Ten thousand steps per day, my app proudly reminded me, as if steps could measure the distance between who I'd been and who I was now. Since Luis died, I'd even started jogging – pounding the pavement until my lungs burned, punishing myself into exhaustion until I was too tired to even think.

Carmen dropped me off, and now here I was, standing on the platform, hugging my coat tighter against the chill, waiting for the next outbound train.

I'd have to find another way to get my steps in.

The station was quiet. A teenage boy sat slouched against a bench, headphones clamped over his ears. A woman in a camel-colored trench coat tapped at her phone, her nails clicking against the screen.

And then I saw him.

Further down the platform, a man standing tall, shoulders squared as he shifted his weight in that familiar way Luis always did after a long day. His dark hair caught the light. Hair I'd run my fingers through a hundred times.

My heart stuttered.

It couldn't be.

From this distance, it could have been a trick of the light. But as I edged closer, the resemblance sharpened. Same lean frame, same height, even the same jut of the bottom lip that Luis did when he was thinking.

I'd clung to those details like a drowning woman grasping at driftwood. The things that made Luis *Luis*. I'd tried so hard to hold on to them after he died, terrified they'd fade. And now they were standing in front of me, outlined in perfect detail.

My pulse hammered in my ears. It wasn't possible. Luis was dead. A few months ago, I'd opened the door to two uniformed officers delivering the news with mechanical sympathy. I'd grieved. I'd thrown dirt onto his coffin with my own trembling hand.

I'd traced the letters of his name on his headstone, getting as close to him as I could, whispering to him. In those first few weeks, I'd visited regularly, unsure how to let go.

And now, I couldn't look away.

It was him. It had to be. No two people could be that alike. Even identical twins had differences, a feature that gave away which twin they were.

If I kept staring like this, I would draw attention to myself. I was already at risk of being labelled a weirdo, but I didn't care. Because the closer I got, the more certain I became. It was him.

He must have sensed me staring.

He looked up.

Our eyes met. Just for a second. Or maybe I only wanted to believe they did. Because his expression was flat, unbothered. No flicker of recognition. No warmth. Nothing that said *I know you*. It was like he was looking at something beyond me. Like he hadn't seen me.

As if I was a stranger, our life together before the accident erased.

I took another step forward, my heart pounding so hard it hurt. I was so close. The train's brakes screamed, metal on metal, drowning out the sound of my own breath. I opened my mouth to call his name—

A gust of air swallowed the word whole, the sound dying on my lips. He stepped onto the train, slipping inside without a backward glance.

Why was he here, and where was he going?

Where had he been all this time?

I had to know.

Before I could think, I was moving. Pushing through the thinning crowd as the doors ahead swallowed him.

I jumped into another carriage, just as the doors sealed shut. My heart was a drumbeat of panic and disbelief. I dropped into a seat by the window, breath ragged, trying to steady my shaking hands. The train lurched forward, wheels clanging over the tracks, gaining speed.

It couldn't be him. It *couldn't*. I'd buried him.

Yet my skin prickled, every nerve alive with certainty. He was the only person who had ever made me react like that.

I leaned my elbow against the window, and propped my head in my hand, wondering if what I thought I'd seen was even real. But here I was. On the train to wherever he was going.

If I could've touched him, maybe I'd know for sure. Maybe my hand would've passed through him like smoke, a ghost conjured by grief. Phantasm. My aching heart tricking me into believing Luis was still here.

I should have shouted louder. Screamed. I should have made a scene. What did pride matter if it meant he answered? If he'd just said my name, even once, I'd have known. I'd know his voice anywhere.

And now, all I had was doubt.

Up until now, I'd been pretending. Pretending I was healing, that time was softening the edges of my grief. But just one glimpse, one impossible moment, and everything was ripped open again, raw and howling.

That's the thing about grief. You can bury it, busy yourself until there's no room left for feeling. But it always waits. Patient. Ruthless. Calling the shots.

Jessica warned me that I needed to deal with my feelings, and I thought I had been, in my own way.

Still, grief didn't explain *this*.

I closed my eyes and saw him again, standing on the platform. I hadn't imagined it. I'd seen him. He was real.

Logic clawed at the edges of my mind, desperate for control. I believed in rationality. In facts. It was easy to think I'd seen exactly the thing I wanted most, but doppelgängers existed. Cities are full of lookalikes. Statistically, it wasn't even that rare. That's what I told myself. Over and over. But my heart wasn't listening.

Deep down, beneath all the rationalizations, I *knew*. I'd seen my husband. Or a very convincing ghost. Either way, I wouldn't be able to let it go. Not until I knew for certain.

The train slowed for the next stop. My eyes scanned the windows, desperate, searching for him among the faces. I thought about following, moving through carriages, stepping off at each station to get on the next carriage, until I found him.

But before I could decide, the doors were sliding shut. I put my hand in the gap between them as they closed, but I was too late. I sat back down, lucky to find a seat, ignoring the looks I was getting from the other passengers for almost slowing their journey as the train lurched forward.

I pressed my hand against my forehead, scanning the platform as it slipped away.

There was no sign of him.

My hands trembled in my lap. Maybe he'd gotten off the train without me noticing.

Maybe I'd lost him.

No. I couldn't accept that.

I pulled out my phone, thumb hovering over the screen though I didn't know who I'd call or what I'd say. My reflection stared back at me in the glass – wide-eyed, pale, trembling.

I wasn't crazy.

I had seen *something*.

For now, it was a man. A man who looked just like my husband.

And if it really was Luis, then everything I thought I knew about life, death, and the man I'd loved was a lie.

The law teaches you to look for evidence, but sometimes it's what's *missing* that matters most.

Once you start looking, piecing together events, you can't stop.

It's why I chose the job I did, searching for answers, for the reasons people do the things they do.

If Luis really is alive, why did he let me think he was dead?

Chapter 17

Then

I had a bad feeling about our new home the day we moved in.

The moving truck rattled down the narrow Charlesville street, jarring harder than my nerves. I'd warned Luis this neighborhood was too picture-perfect: colonial homes pressed cheek to cheek, clapboard siding in cheerful creams and blues, wide porches draped with flower baskets. Who had time for flower baskets?

It was eclectic in a way only Massachusetts suburbs can manage – a mix of artsy urban culture and suburbia. It was exactly what Luis craved. I'd thought the price we paid was too high. I had no idea that was just the beginning, that we'd end up paying a whole lot more.

Luis noticed me fidgeting and took a hand from the steering wheel, placing it over mine. 'Everything OK?'

It was quiet. Eerily quiet. Not the kind of quiet where people respect each other's privacy, but the kind of silence that felt like they were avoiding each other.

I looked at the gardens as we drove, and thought I saw a woman peering out from behind her curtains. When she noticed me looking, she disappeared, leaving the curtain swinging. Not even a wave.

Not the friendliest welcome.

I felt it still as we pulled into the driveway and saw a chalk symbol graffitied on our porch, a circle that had been looped over and over by whoever drew it, but, determined to make moving day the best it could be, I didn't listen to my gut.

That was my first mistake.

Luis's dream was to find somewhere we could raise a family, somewhere quieter than Boston, but still vibrant.

I'd tried to be enthusiastic. Really, I had. But part of me still longed for our two-bedroom Boston apartment, high above the city streets. I loved the hum of other people living their lives, proof that the world kept moving, even when mine, as it would do later, stopped.

'It's just nerves. This is a good neighborhood,' Luis said, slinging an arm around my shoulders. His confidence always carried a kind of gravity I couldn't resist. 'Good schools, quiet streets. Plenty of restaurants, festivals . . . everything we need.'

Everything you need, I thought.

I already felt out of place here. Without the noise of Boston, I could hear a ringing in my own ears, like a fly buzzing.

‘Don’t worry, honey. You’ll still be just a short ride to work, and you get to live here.’

I looked at the house. It was beautiful.

He kissed me and I tried to smile. I wanted to give this place a try, for Luis.

Neighbors emerged like creepy clockwork, as if our arrival had triggered some invisible alarm. A man with a laptop bag hurrying to his car, a woman in yoga pants juggling a golden retriever and her cell phone. Two teenagers on bikes who slowed to stare at our moving truck, curious about their new neighbors.

I forced a smile, trying to match Luis’s enthusiasm.

*

Later that evening, we ordered takeout and sat at our new table with unpacked boxes stacked neatly around us.

Someone knocked on the door.

‘Probably the neighbors,’ said Luis, already wiping his mouth with a napkin. ‘I’ll answer it; you enjoy your dumplings while they’re still warm.’

I smiled as Luis’s hand brushed my shoulder on the way out.

I heard the door open and then voices. Luis was talking to a woman.

I didn’t want to be rude, so I sat and finished the rest of my dumpling.

‘Luis, it’s so good to have you here,’ I heard the woman say with enthusiasm.

Had he told her his name? If he had, I hadn’t heard it.

The sound of a car passing outside drowned out some of what they were saying, and I had to strain to hear. I pushed away my dumplings, about to get up and join them, when Luis’s voice cut in sharply again.

‘Well, thanks so much for stopping by,’ he said. Polite, but firm.

She snorted, as if she were about to protest. ‘I didn’t think—’

‘That’s OK,’ he said, his voice tense.

I got up. Walked out and into the hallway. Luis had his hand on the door, which was halfway closed, like he was trying to shut her out. It meant I couldn’t see her.

‘I just wanted to say hello.’ Her voice remained cheery, not getting the hint.

‘Luis?’ I said, stepping closer.

He turned and gave me a tight smile, an eyeroll, as if to say, sorry about this. ‘My wife’s not feeling well,’ he said, closing the door just a little bit further, ‘so it’s not the best time . . .’

‘Oh,’ I heard. ‘I didn’t realize there were two of you.’ She laughed uncomfortably. ‘OK. Well, goodbye, then.’

‘Bye, Aimee.’ Before Luis could shut the door on her, I darted to it, catching her back view, the flash of auburn hair in the porch light, as she walked away.

Luis finally shut the door, then turned to me, running a hand through his hair. It was a habit that showed sometimes when he was nervous.

I waited, seeing if he’d try to explain why he looked as if he just got caught doing something I wasn’t supposed to find out about.

‘That was Aimee. She lives nearby and just popped by to welcome us to the neighborhood,’ he said, trying to sound pleasant. He gave me a look that said, ‘She seems a little crazy.’

But I wasn’t so sure. The way he spoke to her, his tone, his nerviness.

I stared at him for a second, but the smile he gave me was calm now, reassuring even. I decided to drop it, for now, at least.

‘A bottle of welcome wine might’ve been better,’ I joked.

Luis slid the front door lock into place with a deliberate click.

‘Why did you tell her I was sick?’

He laughed. ‘To get rid of her,’ he said. ‘And it worked.’

He glanced at the door, as if she might still be on the other side, listening to our conversation. ‘She was a little . . . over-friendly,’ he said, sounding wry.

But now I couldn’t let it go.

‘You never met her before?’ I asked, trying not to make it sound like an interrogation.

‘Never.’ He shook his head, but ran a hand through his hair again, uncomfortable.

Good. I wanted him to be. ‘She knew your name, though? I heard her say it.’

‘I think I introduced myself when I opened the door,’ he said, his smile quick and disarming. The smile he used when he wanted something to sound smaller than it was, or when he wanted to move on.

‘Right,’ I said, and he looked at my hands. I was pressing my fingers together into a steeple, the way I did sometimes in the courtroom in front of a witness.

‘Kenz, I don’t know her. I swear. Maybe she heard my name from another neighbor when we were moving in. People talk,’ he said, crossing the room. ‘Come on, let’s get some dessert.’

He leaned in and kissed my cheek, already steering me back toward the kitchen, as if the matter was settled.

I knew there was a chance he was right, that we were the new neighborhood gossip, that maybe the woman was the type to have loose boundaries. Maybe she lived alone and had pounced on Luis as someone new to talk to, I told myself.

But it didn’t feel like he’d been too surprised to see her.

It felt like he’d been expecting her to show up on our doorstep.

Luis cleared away the dumplings and got some ice cream out of the freezer. I watched him, watched his body language.

Stop it, Mackenzie, I told myself.

‘So, you said she was our neighbor?’

‘Well, kind of. I think she lives on our block.’ He turned and started spooning out ice cream into bowls. ‘Why are you making such a big deal of this?’

Because I don’t believe you’re telling me the truth.

Chapter 18

Now

By the time the train neared Barkley Station, my nerves were splintering. I was already standing, ready to step off as soon as I saw him. My palms were slick against the pole, fingers locked tight around it, knuckles white. My heart thudded so hard I could feel it in my throat, each beat a countdown I couldn't stop.

There were only a few stops left on the line before it terminated.

If he – *Luis*, or his exact lookalike – had stepped off earlier, I might have lost him for good.

The train began to slow, the brakes screeching as it pulled into the station. The lights overhead flickered, throwing fractured reflections onto the window glass. I leaned forward, searching the platform, my chest aching with the weight of it all.

With each passing stop, I'd grown more panicked, more certain I'd already missed him, that I'd never see him again. It was like I'd been given this amazing second chance, and I didn't want to blow it.

Maybe I'd imagined him. Maybe grief had finally bled into delusion.

The doors hissed open. Passengers shuffled toward the exits, murmuring softly. I scanned every face, every flash of a dark jacket or familiar stride.

It was beginning to feel futile.

Until the last few passengers departed. Amongst them I noticed a flash of dark hair. That walk.

My pulse spiked. It still looked like him.

Before I could second-guess myself, I was on my feet, squeezing past a woman with a stroller and lunging out the doors just as they began to close, apologizing. I slipped through, breathless, and landed hard on the platform.

He was ahead of me. Already moving fast. Purposefully.

I followed, keeping a careful distance. My plan to confront him, the speech I'd been rehearsing in my head on the train, evaporated. A sharper, colder instinct took over. I would follow him. Watch. See where he was going.

He moved like someone who didn't want to be followed, throwing quick glances over his shoulder, his shoulders tight, stride steady but tense. The kind of walk that said he had somewhere to be – or someone to avoid.

Had he seen me get on the train? Did he know I was behind him now?

I trailed him through the station, weaving between commuters, heart hammering. When he turned left at the exit, I nearly lost him. I pushed through the turnstiles and caught a glimpse of him again, heading down a narrow side street, swallowed by a turn.

The midday light was sharp, reflecting off shop fronts and car windows. He'd put on sunglasses now. Protection against the glare, or a disguise?

He crossed the street in a break between cars, moving fast.

I darted forward to follow—

A horn blared, splitting the air.

A white sedan shot past, the driver's face a blur of irritation.

I had almost been hit.

I stumbled back onto the curb, heart pounding so hard I thought I might faint.

When I looked up again, he was gone.

I spun in place, scanning the street – the café on the corner, the group of students passing by, the steady flow of cars – but there was no sign of him.

I'd found him, and now, I'd lost him all over again.

A cold breeze whipped through, cutting across my cheeks. I closed my eyes for a second, willing the world to stop spinning.

Maybe none of this was real.

What if I was finally cracking under the weight of it all? The months of sleepless nights, the ghost of his voice echoing in my head? Maybe this was what it felt like to unravel: a moment of certainty so vivid you actually believed it was real.

I opened my eyes. The street was ordinary. Just people going about their day, cars humming past, exhaust fumes mingling faintly with the scent of coffee from a nearby café.

And yet, it felt like the world had just tilted on its axis.

Because I'd seen something that shouldn't be possible.

If I was going to move forward with my life, I needed the truth.

Even if it wasn't the truth I wanted to see.

Chapter 19

Now

I made it home with my hands still shaking.

My bag dropped onto the counter with a thud, the sound too loud in the silence, and I gripped the edge of the sink just to steady myself. My reflection in the window looked pale. Ghostlike. As if the life had been drained right out of me.

Now that there was no one around to see me, I stopped pretending I was fine. The tears came hard and fast, spilling out before I could stop them. I pressed my palms to my eyes, but it was no use.

My whole future – everything Luis and I had planned – had been taken from me. Brutally. And I'd spent the last four months pretending I could move on. That the world was still the same.

Well, it wasn't. It never would be.

Outside, the streets hummed with life. A car horn a few streets over. Birds talking, and the whisper of the breeze. But it all sounded far away, like I was hearing it underwater.

It felt like I was floating above my body, disconnected.

I couldn't keep this to myself. I would go crazy. I needed to talk to someone, to prove I wasn't losing it. Someone who would actually listen.

I wiped my face with the sleeve of my jumper, grabbed my phone, and before I could second-guess it, tapped Jessica's name.

She picked up on the third ring. 'Mackenzie? I'm at work. Are you OK?'

I relaxed immediately. Jess always sounded calm. Measured. It was part of her training, I guess. She was a psychologist. The good kind, who cared enough to listen instead of just trying to diagnose.

She was the exact person I needed to help make sense of this.

'I saw him, Jess.'

The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

There was a pause. 'Who?'

'Luis.'

Silence. Then I heard the faint creak of her chair, could picture her sitting up straighter, that little flick she did with her hair when she was uneasy.

'Mackenzie . . .'

‘No, listen to me. I *saw* him. On the train. It wasn’t just some lookalike. It was him. Same hair, same build. The way he stood – God, Jess, it was *exactly* the same.’

The quiet on the other end stretched on for too long.

After Luis died, Jessica had tried to prepare me for the different stages of grief, but I didn’t seem to be moving through them.

And there was nothing that could prepare me for this.

When Jess spoke again, her voice was soft but deliberate. ‘Honey . . . we’ve talked about this. Grief can do strange things. You’ve been running on fumes for months. Barely sleeping. Working too much. It’s normal to—’

‘It wasn’t a trick.’ I could hear the edge creeping into my voice, sharp and trembling. ‘He was right there, Jess. On the platform. He looked right at me.’

‘And did he talk to you?’

‘No, I—’ The question hit me like a slap. My mouth opened, then closed again. I thought of that moment – the brief flicker of his eyes meeting mine, cold and blank, before he turned away. I felt the sting of his rejection all over again. This was a man I was still crying over four months later, and he couldn’t even stop to acknowledge me.

‘I’m just saying,’ continued Jessica, ‘if it really was Luis, don’t you think he would’ve said something?’

‘Maybe,’ I said finally. ‘But that doesn’t mean anything. If he was in a car accident, maybe he had a head injury. Maybe he doesn’t remember me. Maybe he *couldn’t* talk.’

I hated how desperate I sounded. How easily I reached for something to make sense of it all. It was easier than dealing with the fact that maybe he didn’t want to know me anymore.

Jessica sighed softly, and I knew she was choosing her next words carefully. ‘Or maybe you’re seeing what you need to see. You loved him, Kenz. It’s OK to admit that it still hurts. But sometimes our minds . . . they try to protect us from that pain. You saw someone who reminded you of him. It’s not uncommon. The trick is recognizing it and letting it go.’

‘I know what I saw,’ I whispered. My throat was raw, my voice almost gone. I wasn’t looking for validation. I wanted someone to help me break this down and figure it out. Was he OK? Why was he at Barkley Station?

‘Mackenzie, we buried him. I stood next to you when they lowered the coffin. I watched you throw the first handful of dirt. He’s gone. Your ghosts

will keep on haunting you if you don't learn to let them go.'

Her words were calm. Infuriating.

I wanted to scream. To tell her this wasn't a hallucination she could neatly categorize or soothe away with therapy-speak. That it was real, whether she believed me or not.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Instead, I stood there, gripping the phone so tightly my fingers hurt. I tried to swallow the lump rising in my throat.

'Promise me you'll try to get some rest,' Jess said finally. 'You've been through enough. Let's grab dinner again soon, OK?'

'Sure,' I said, but it was flat. Hollow. I hung up before she could say anything else.

The silence that followed was brutal.

The hum of the fridge was suddenly deafening. A car passed by outside, the sound drawing closer before fading into the distance. I could smell the faint trace of detergent from the dishcloth by the sink. All of it so normal, so mundane, that it threw the absurdity of what had just happened into even sharper relief.

Jessica didn't believe me.

Of course she didn't. She was a psychologist first, a friend second.

Maybe nobody would believe he was alive.

But I wasn't crazy. I wasn't delusional.

I *knew* what I'd seen.

And if I was the only one willing to face it – then fine.

If Luis was alive, I'd prove it.

And I'd find out why he'd faked his own death.

Chapter 20

Now

The more I thought about the man from the train, the more I convinced myself it was Luis.

I could feel the frustration building. He had been right there. I could feel how close I'd come, but somehow, I'd lost him all over again.

There was no way I was going to just wait around, thinking, obsessing. I needed to start searching for answers.

This wasn't grief or wishful thinking. And I sure as hell wasn't going to let anyone convince me otherwise.

If Jessica didn't believe me, then I'd find someone who did.

If grief really did make people see what wasn't there – see ghosts, like Jessica claimed – then there were others who knew how it felt to pass a stranger on the street and swear it was someone they'd lost.

I knew exactly where to find people like that. The grief support group that met in the basement at St. Andrew's. They were there every Thursday night, at seven sharp. I'd started going a few weeks after Luis died, realizing I wasn't going to pull myself out of this funk any time soon. It was weeks since I'd been. I hadn't planned on going back, either. Sitting in that basement listening to strangers trade stories of the worst things that had happened to them had started to feel like drowning.

But tonight, I needed them. They might be the only ones capable of understanding.

I checked the clock. Just over an hour until the meeting. Enough time to shower, pull myself together, and stop my hands from shaking.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I opened the fridge and made a sandwich using leftovers. Cold chicken and lettuce. I had no appetite, but I needed to eat something. The act of eating became methodical. Bite. Chew. Swallow. I kept going until I was done. As I finished the last mouthful, my phone buzzed.

It was Carmen, the beagle lady, asking if I was coming to pick up the puppy.

Damn. I'd forgotten to message her back.

I quickly texted.

Yes, of course. I'll have someone there by 8pm. So sorry for the inconvenience, something urgent came up.

Who could I ask to go out there and pick up the puppy? Jess wouldn't be able to do it. She ran a walk-in service on Thursday nights for teens.

A message appeared on the screen as I was thinking. From Carl.

Hey boss, I did some digging on the wellness center and on the—

The message cut off.

I stared at the screen for a beat, trying to figure out what he might've been going to say, until my phone started ringing.

'Hey, Carl,' I said.

'It felt easier to just call,' he said, without a greeting. 'You sitting down?'

He must've found something good, or he wouldn't have bothered. Especially this late in the day.

'Talk to me.'

I took the plate I'd used for my sandwich to the sink and headed to my home office to continue the call.

'I stayed back a couple of hours,' he said. 'Figured I'd follow the Institute thread a little further. There was just surface stuff at first. Websites. Corporate filings. Socials. Blah blah.'

'And?'

'And it's . . . odd.'

I closed the door to my office, leaning against it. 'Define odd.'

'It's not a spa,' he said. 'Not really. They call themselves a wellness collective, but there's no drop-in model. No casual memberships. No one-off appointments. Everything's application-based.'

'That's not illegal,' I said automatically.

'No,' Carl agreed. 'But it's exclusive. You don't book a massage, or a facial. You're *accepted*.'

I straightened. 'Accepted how?'

'Referral-only retreats. Tiered programs. The lingo is strange. Kind of jargony. They don't advertise prices publicly.'

That prickling sensation crept up my spine.

'What kind of "lingo"?' I asked.

Carl hesitated. 'The kind that sounds benign until you read enough of it in a row.'

'Give me an example.'

'OK,' he said. 'They don't say "clients." They say *participants*. They don't run "sessions", but *discovery*. They talk about letting go of things that

stop you from being yourself. Your *true* self.'

His words triggered a memory. It sounded like something Rebecca had said in the café, almost word for word.

'I think Brad might've been a member,' I said. 'There were all those receipts. Money he pumped into the Institute.' I took a deep breath. 'But Rebecca mentioned something Brad said to her. It was eerily similar, about wanting her to have the freedom to be her real self.'

'Right,' said Carl, not sounding surprised at all. 'That makes sense. I came to the same conclusion. Multiple retreats. International travel. Spain comes up more than once, and the retreat there.'

'What did you find on Rebecca?'

'That's where it gets interesting,' he said. 'Nothing public ties her to the Institute. No donations. No listed memberships. There wasn't a whole lot about her at all.'

I could hear it in his tone. There was more.

'What else?'

'Brad registered a second "participant" for at least two retreats,' Carl said. 'Same dates. Same locations.'

I closed my eyes.

'She went with him,' I said.

'Looks that way. But under his name.'

'Control,' I murmured.

'Oh, I'm still not done,' said Carl. 'The Institute uses internal messaging platforms. Encrypted. Not illegal – but closed systems. Think Slack, but spiritual.'

My stomach tightened.

'How can you see it?'

'You don't want to know,' said Carl. 'Let's just say the system thinks my guy who looked into this is one of their members.'

'Isn't that traceable?'

'Sure. If you're looking. But he changed the log, so his activity was deleted. Almost invisible.'

'OK.'

'Do you want to hear the interesting part?'

He knows I'll bite. 'Sure.'

'Brad was active. Very active. Posting reflections. Sharing progress. Talking about *guiding others*.'

That made me open my eyes.

‘Guiding how?’

‘As someone who’d “completed the work,”’ Carl said. ‘There’s language about responsibility. Leadership. Being chosen.’

A beat.

‘Chosen for what?’

‘I’m not sure yet.’

‘Rebecca ever post?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Carl said. ‘But Brad mentions her. A lot.’

‘How?’

‘Not by name,’ he said. ‘He refers to her as *my counterpart*. Says she’s “resistant but close.” That she’ll “come around when the time is right.”’

The words sat heavy between us.

‘Carl,’ I said slowly, ‘does any of this suggest violence?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not overtly. It’s all framed as growth. Renewal. Transformation.’

‘But?’

‘But there’s a fixation on breaking cycles,’ he said. ‘On sacrifice as a metaphor.’

I pictured the fire report.

The circle.

The locked door.

‘I don’t like this,’ I said.

‘Me neither,’ Carl replied. ‘But here’s the thing – none of it is criminal. Not on the face of it. It’s just . . . structured belief.’

Structured.

It sounded like a way to convince people to believe what you wanted them to believe. ‘Email me everything,’ I said. ‘Screenshots. Language samples. Travel dates.’

‘Already compiling,’ Carl said. ‘One more thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘There are others like Brad. People who attend long enough, advance far enough. They climb the ladder.’

‘And become what?’ I asked.

Carl exhaled. ‘Mentors, or gurus, or something. There was also a participant whose name was blocked on the forums. It looks like they were

banned. All their messages were deleted. I'm still working on a deeper search to find out who they are, why they were banned.'

'Nice,' I said.

'I found some stuff online. An anonymous poster with the handle *truthskr*, but they had a lot to say about the Coterie Institute, none of it good.'

'Like?'

'They accused the Institute of murdering someone close to them. They didn't say who. I guess that would've ruined their anonymity. I've got my guy on it. Hopefully we'll have a name soon.'

The line went quiet.

'Are you still there, boss?' asked Carl.

'Yeah, I'm sorry. I was just thinking.'

I didn't tell him I was finding it hard to focus properly, the man from the train intruding on my thoughts. It wasn't just seeing him that had me distracted. It was the way he made me feel, just being near him. So familiar, my body reacting like it always had to Luis.

The man didn't *feel* like a stranger.

'I haven't been able to substantiate the claim, but give me more time. Then there's the essential oils used in the fire . . .' Carl trailed off and I sharpened my focus back on what he was saying.

'A wellness center would be an easy place to get essential oils,' I said, 'but that doesn't mean *Rebecca* used them. She seems smart to me, and that would be too obvious.'

'Of course not,' agreed Carl. 'I'm still looking into it. I've only skimmed the surface.'

'Good work,' I said. I looked at the clock. Almost six thirty. 'Listen, Carl . . . I have kind of a weird favor to ask. Feel free to say no.'

He laughed. 'You sound like you're about to ask me to hide a body.'

'Not quite. But I need you to pick something up for me.'

'You can't get it delivered?' he asked.

'Not really. It's not a "wrap it up and throw it in the back seat" kind of package. It's a puppy. I promised I'd collect her tonight, but I have this grief support group to go to—'

'Aww, I love puppies,' he cooed. 'Of course I can. Send me the address.'

‘You’re a lifesaver, Carl. Just drop her at my place. Key’s under the potted plant. I’ll be home when I can.’

When we hung up, I grabbed my mace from the drawer. I’d started carrying it after Luis died. His death had opened my eyes to how fragile life could be. Even more than being a lawyer had.

How fast normal could shatter.

Jess told me I was being ‘hypervigilant’. I’d call it being prepared.

I slipped it into my coat pocket and sent the address to Carl along with a thank you.

As I got ready to leave the house, I replayed our conversation.

What Carl had found was interesting, but none of it was evidence. It wasn’t proof, but it was the first time Rebecca and Brad stopped looking like a bad marriage that ended in tragedy – and started looking like they were part of something larger.

Something deliberate.

Something that didn’t need to announce itself to be dangerous.

How could a wellness center tear Brad away from home so frequently? Was he working for them? Or did he just really need to unwind?

I realized that defending Rebecca might mean putting myself in a dangerous position between the truth, and people who were prepared to protect themselves and each other.

I just needed to know which side of this Rebecca was on before I really committed.

Chapter 21

Now

I inhaled, the sound of my own breath too loud in my ears. I went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, downing it fast.

Once, this kitchen had been my favorite place in the house. Full of noise and laughter as Luis and I cooked dinner together, music playing, wine glasses half full, the smell of sizzling garlic and butter in the air.

Now, it was somewhere to reheat leftovers.

I looked at the clock. I had to leave now if I wanted to make it on time.

If I was honest with myself, I was glad for an excuse to get out of the house, away from the silence.

The street outside was dark and damp, the air carrying the faint scent of rain. My shoes clicked against the pavement, the sound sharp and hollow. I kept my head down, walking fast, replaying the image of Luis. I had to keep reminding myself I could do this.

The stone steeple of St. Andrew's rose ahead, its pointed roof silhouetted against the dark sky. The church always looked too big for the street, too solemn, as if it knew it was holding more grief than the people inside could contain.

If Luis was alive, I needed to know what could keep him from coming home. Why had he left me behind to bury him?

The streetlights blurred as I walked. My thoughts looped relentlessly, my lawyer brain kicking into overdrive, laying out the possibilities so I could turn them over until I saw something.

What if Luis didn't *want* to be found?

I tightened my grip around the mace in my pocket.

The idea that Luis could have left on purpose made my stomach twist. The only thing worse was if he really was dead.

It didn't seem possible that he could be alive and just not come back. That he'd leave. Not willingly. Not without a good reason. All marriages had complications. No one's was perfect. Especially not ours. But Luis had loved me. Despite everything, I'd always believed that.

What we had was real. And if it wasn't, then I'd rather chase a lie than live with a ghost.

If Luis was out there somewhere, I owed it to him to find out why he hadn't come home.

*

The basement windows glowed yellow. People were already arriving. Their silhouettes moved inside, the folding chairs scraping against the linoleum floor.

My heart thudded. I stopped at the door, hand on the knob.

This was a terrible idea. I'd sit there, spill my insanity in front of a dozen people who'd lost parents, children, partners, and they'd look at me with that same pitying expression Jessica had worn when I talked about Luis.

With each step, doubt crept in a little deeper.

But I was already here.

I exhaled, squared my shoulders, and pushed the door open.

If I was losing my mind, at least I'd find out surrounded by people who would understand.

Inside, it always smelled faintly of dust and candle wax. Someone had tried to brighten the space with plastic flowers and laminated motivational quotes pinned to the corkboard. *Healing takes time. You are not alone.* But under the harsh fluorescent lights, the words looked sterile.

The room was filling.

I saw faces I already knew. The woman who lost her brother in a boating accident, the man who never stopped wringing his hands because he'd crashed the car, killing his wife. There were a couple of new ones since I'd last been here, sitting apart, eyes down, still processing their losses.

I would have turned back right then, but I'd already been spotted.

'Mackenzie!'

Jill, the group facilitator, waved me over with her usual warm smile. 'I wasn't sure we'd see you again,' she said as I took a seat.

'Yeah,' I muttered, clutching my bag. 'Busy few weeks.'

Her eyes softened. 'Well, I'm glad you're here.' She touched my shoulder lightly.

I gave a polite nod and looked away before she could dig deeper.

We began, as always, with introductions. Name, loss, how long it had been since it happened. I worried over what to say when it was my turn, my chest tight. I could feel the words pressing against my ribs, desperate to get out, but what could I say? *Hi, I'm Mackenzie, and I think I saw my dead husband on the train.*

I forced a small smile. ‘Mackenzie. I lost my husband, Luis, in a car accident. It’s been four months.’

There were murmurs of sympathy. Jill gave me the same encouraging nod she gave everyone.

Then the talking began.

The woman across from me, Brenda, spoke about how she’d lost her son to leukemia. She showed a photo of him before he got sick. I had never actually met Mason, but the way Brenda talked about him, recalling little moments from their time together, I felt like I knew him.

An older man picked at the cuff of his sleeve, waiting his turn. I knew it was hard for him to be patient and not interrupt, and it didn’t surprise me that he was struggling not to call out now.

Another man described dreaming of his wife every night. She was always at the kitchen table, always turning away when he tried to speak.

It was comforting in a way, and also deeply unnerving. I’d had dreams like that about Luis too. I listened to the attendees talk, their pain raw and out in the open. Not like mine, which I’d kept tightly locked away, pretending none of this was really happening.

Finally, when the silence settled and the group seemed ready to close, I heard myself say, ‘Has anyone ever . . . seen them?’

The words hung there, sharp and out of place. I instantly regretted them.

Jill rested her hands in her lap. ‘Can you tell us what you mean by that, Mackenzie?’

I swallowed hard. My fingers twisted in my lap. ‘I mean . . . *really* seen them. After they died. Like, you know they’re gone, but you see them anyway. Out in public. Or somewhere familiar.’

There were a few nods. A few uneasy glances. Murmurs from those who’d been there.

Finally, the older man cleared his throat. ‘It’s just grief,’ he said gently. ‘I used to see my wife all the time. A glimpse of her coat, the back of her head. Always exactly like her, until I got closer and realized it was someone who had her eyes, or her laugh.’

He dropped his head, saddened by the disappointment grief brought with it.

Was that all my sighting of Luis had been? A few similar details sewn together?

No, there were too many of them to be coincidence.

Brenda nodded. ‘Me too. In the grocery store one day I thought I heard Mason laughing. I nearly dropped everything to run after him, after that sound. Then I saw a little boy come around the corner, grinning. When he saw me, he stopped laughing. He was frightened by me, by my reaction. He ran back the other way, and I cried right there in front of everyone in the store.’

‘That’s actually more common than you might think,’ Jill said gently. ‘Many people experience memories—’

I could imagine Jessica agreeing, lecturing me about ‘projection’ and ‘visual misidentification’.

I swallowed and pushed on. ‘No. It wasn’t a memory, or just a resemblance.’ I looked from the man to Brenda apologetically. ‘I mean . . . *I really saw him.*’

Now the air changed. The room went quieter.

The man with the restless hands stopped fidgeting. Brenda frowned.

Jill’s expression flickered with surprise. ‘What makes you think it was him?’

My throat tightened. I told her what I’d told Jess. ‘Because it *was* him. Same face. Same hair. Same walk. He looked right at me.’

I didn’t mean for my voice to crack, but it did. ‘He looked right at me, and then he just got on a train like I was no one, so I followed him.’

Someone cleared their throat. A chair creaked.

‘It could have been a stranger who—’ Jill began, but another voice cut through.

‘I’ve seen the same.’

The room stilled.

It came from the back – a man I hadn’t noticed before. Mid-forties, sharp jaw, dark jacket zipped to his throat. He sat apart from everyone else, one leg crossed over the other, his expression unreadable.

Jill blinked. ‘Would you like to share, uh . . . Sorry, I don’t think we caught your name?’

He smiled faintly. ‘Evan.’

Something about the way he said it made my skin prickle.

Jill nodded, hesitant. ‘Go ahead, Evan.’

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘I saw my wife a few weeks after the funeral. Standing outside our old house. She didn’t

speaking, just . . . watched. Like she was sleepwalking. Then, she just wandered off.'

A tremor went through me.

'What did you do?' I asked.

He looked at me then, directly at me, and his gaze was steady, unblinking. 'I followed her,' he said softly. 'Like you did. I wanted to talk to her. I thought something must be wrong, that she wouldn't just let me think she was dead if she was alive.'

The blood drained from my face. 'How do you—'

He smiled, just a little. 'You said he got on a train, right?'

I nodded, my breath catching.

'Sometimes,' Evan said, voice low, 'they don't want to be found. They want to disappear.'

Jill shifted uncomfortably. 'Evan, maybe we could—'

But he wasn't looking at her. His eyes stayed on me.

'I think you should be careful, Mackenzie,' he said. 'If you really saw him . . . he might not be the guy you knew. Just like Annette. It damn near ruined me.'

The air in the room turned heavy, pressing in. I could hear my pulse in my ears.

Jill's voice broke the silence, soft but firm. 'Let's take a short break, everyone.'

Chairs scraped. People rose, murmuring. I got up, turning to find Evan. I had to talk to him.

He might not be who he used to be.

But Evan was gone.

Chapter 22

Now

When I got home from the support group, a blue sedan was parked in my driveway. My hand went instinctively to the mace in my pocket as I approached the door. Whoever it was, I'd be ready.

Then the driver's door opened and Carl stepped out, holding a wriggling bundle. My stomach relaxed a little. I'd completely forgotten I'd asked him to pick up the pup.

'Carl. Sorry I'm late.'

He shrugged. 'No problem. She was getting restless in the car earlier, so I let her out for a run.'

I held out a hand and she sniffed at it, tail wagging like she remembered me. I scooped her up, feeling her warmth against my chest. 'Hey, girl,' I said.

I walked her inside and set her down, her tiny paws scuttling across the floor. Carl leaned awkwardly against the doorframe. 'Carmen . . . she thought I was your husband for a minute there.' He laughed as if that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

My eyes widened, just as shocked as he was. Then I broke into a grin. 'I won't tell Michael if you don't.'

He laughed at the mention of his partner. 'You better not. He's the jealous type.'

I smiled. I'd met Michael a few times and he was definitely *not* the jealous type.

'What are you going to call her?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Legal Beagle?'

Carl laughed. 'You're joking, right?'

'Ally McBeagle?'

Carl looked confused, as if he didn't understand the reference. Everyone knew that show, right?

Ugh. My dad had watched old reruns of *Ally McBeal*, and at some point, I started watching too. It was one of the reasons I decided to be a lawyer, but maybe Carl had missed out by half a generation.

The beagle sniffed around, before taking off through the house.

I found her with her nose buried in a pile of Luis's clothes I couldn't bring myself to throw out. Sometimes, I held them, trying to find a way to

feel close to him.

I quickly shoved them away, embarrassed.

My phone auto-synced and started the podcast I'd been listening to earlier.

'Hey, that's *Final Justice*, right? I love that podcast.'

Well, at least that closed the generation gap a little. 'I love how they end each season discussing how things turned out after the trial.'

Carl scratched the puppy behind the ears. 'You could call her Justice,' he suggested.

'Justice.' It sounded so grown up for a little pup. 'Just-tice.'

'Or . . . Just Tess?'

The puppy gave a little yip that sounded like she was testing what noises she could make, and pressed into Carl's hand, reminding him to keep petting her.

'Tess,' I said, trying out the name. It fit her perfectly. She barked again. 'I think she likes it.'

Carl was rubbing the back of his neck, like he needed to sit. 'Did you want a drink or something?' I asked, finding my keys to open the door.

'No. It's getting late, and I want to get in early tomorrow to keep going through those files.'

I nodded, slightly relieved. I was too tired for guests tonight.

Carl watched me for a moment, as if guessing at the weight I'd been carrying. 'I get it,' he said softly. 'You know, losing someone . . . it's like you're waiting for someone to tell you it's not real so you can go back to your life. Your real life. You have to let yourself feel it, to get used to him being gone. You'll get there in your own time.'

'You lost someone?' I said. It was obvious by the way he spoke.

'My mom.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It was a long time ago. I was just a kid.' He looked at Tess. 'It gets easier. Eventually.'

I nodded. 'I hope so. I hadn't been to the grief support group in weeks, but I went tonight.' I sighed. Continued. 'I went because I thought I saw Luis on the train.'

Carl perked up, finding his second wind. 'What?'

'It was him. Or someone who looked identical.'

'Did you talk to him?' he asked.

I smiled, grateful that his immediate reaction wasn't that I was crazy.

'I tried. I don't think I was close enough. Maybe he didn't hear me.' A small tear escaped. Oh no.

To his credit, Carl wasn't put off by the spectacle.

'OK. Don't take this the wrong way,' he said. 'I'm not saying he looks generic. Luis has classic good looks and whatever, but so do a hundred other guys. Maybe even a thousand.' He shrugged sheepishly.

I laughed. 'You're right. There's a bunch of hot guys out there who all look the same.'

'Really. There are. Girls – and boys – swoon over every one of them. So, maybe you noticed one who looked like Luis, and you were ... swooning?'

I laughed. 'Did you just call me basic?'

Carl's face fell. 'No. Of course not. I'm just saying, *maybe* it was some other classically handsome guy who looked a lot like him,' he joked.

I shook my head.

'It sounds insane, but it was just ... the feeling I got from him. He looked like Luis, but it was more than that. He was familiar. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yeah,' said Carl. 'I think I do.' He frowned. 'So ... what if you did see him? Is there any way we can find out? And why would he want everyone to think he's dead if he's alive?'

'That's what I've been asking myself all day.'

Carl thought about it before responding. 'I mean, there was a body in the car, so someone didn't make it out.'

'Yeah.'

'Well, what did the autopsy say?'

'That he was driving faster than he should've been. Speeding. The model he was driving had a recall, but Luis must've missed it.'

'So,' said Carl, 'they used the car to try and figure out what happened. The car went up in flames. And they couldn't tell much about the body. The fire gutted the car. By the time they put it out, there wasn't much left. So they assumed it was a fault.'

Carl's point was clear.

A body found in his car. A recall of that model. Luis was dead. It was all there.

I let the words sink in, but my heart refused to accept them.

This didn't need to feel reasonable to be real.

'Hi, neighbor,' said a voice, startling me.

Greg from next door was standing out front, eyeing Carl and I, not trying to hide his judgment of me having a man in the house. Stupidly, I'd only closed the screen door. I wanted to ask how archaic he was exactly, but it wasn't worth it.

Carl waved uncomfortably.

'Is this the new boyfriend?' Greg asked, and I couldn't help but laugh.

'No, this is my work colleague. He was doing me a favor by collecting my dog.'

Greg pulled himself up to his full height, and looked at the sweet little puppy like she was a pest. 'Well, I hope she doesn't go digging holes in my garden.'

'Wow,' mouthed Carl, so that only I could see. 'I'm going to get going,' he said, louder, spurred on by my unfriendly neighbor.

We walked past Greg, onto the porch. I said goodbye and watched Carl drive away, but my mind was already drifting back to Luis.

'Goodnight,' I said to Greg, letting myself back inside and locking both doors.

I closed my eyes once I was inside and saw Luis in my memory, exactly how he'd been just months ago, smiling at something I'd said.

I thought about Evan's warning at our grief support group. It sounded like he had been in the same situation. Like maybe he'd talked to Annette, but hadn't got the response he'd hoped for.

There had been an intensity to his words that told me not to discredit them. I wished I could have talked to him more about it.

He might not want to be found. He might not be who he used to be.

I didn't know anything about Evan and Annette. Maybe they didn't have a good relationship, and she didn't want to see him.

But Evan was right about something. Even if I found Luis, it didn't mean things would be like they were before . . .

I made my decision then and there.

Tomorrow, I would keep searching.

Chapter 23

Now

I noticed the envelope resting on the console table as soon as I walked inside. It was placed deliberately, not slipped through the mail slot.

I frowned.

I hadn't seen it there earlier. I hadn't collected today's mail, but most of my mail was digital so I didn't check every day. Someone must have hand-delivered it while I was out. How did they get inside?

I thought of the noise I'd heard inside the house two nights ago. The broken window latch. The feeling of a presence looming over me.

I went to the door and looked outside, like I might catch someone slinking off down the street. I couldn't see anyone.

I went back inside and examined the envelope. It was black, unlike a regular postage envelope. Thicker than regular mail. No stamp. No return address. Just my name on the front, embossed in gold.

Mackenzie Rae Morgan

I slid the piece of black card carefully out of its pocket while Tess nudged at my hand, tail wagging.

A familiar scent jumped out at me. The same scent I'd mentioned to the police a few nights ago.

Luis's cologne.

Tess moved closer. I scratched behind her ears and shifted back to the envelope. The card inside was stiff, like an oversized business card. Seeing my name felt like a dare to read on.

I took a breath. 'It's an invitation,' I said to Tess, reading the tiny gold lettering.

Mackenzie Rae Morgan,

We would like to extend an invitation for a private introduction.

No commitment is required.

Your discretion is appreciated.

I read on.

If you are ready for a conversation,

Please confirm your interest using the enclosed method.

Further details will be shared at the appropriate time.

Enclosed was a smaller card, blank except for a symbol printed faintly in the center. A spiral, looping in on itself over and over.

*We will retrieve your response via the card provided.
Failure to respond will be treated as a declined invitation. No further
invites will be extended.*

Below that was a lightly embossed signature line, almost indiscernible against the card.

The Coterie Institute
Alignment. Renewal. Becoming.

Retrieve. Not receive.

The wording sent a shiver up my spine. They weren't asking me to come to them. They were telling me they'd come back for my answer.

I slid the invitation back into the envelope and tucked it into a drawer, my movements careful, deliberate. Tess padded back into the room, tired from exploring, and sat at my feet, looking up at me like she expected reassurance.

'It's nothing,' I said aloud. Whether to Tess or myself, I wasn't sure.

Could I go to the police with this? It looked like a shopping offer.

A noise from outside startled me. Just a passing car, but someone leaving a note addressed to me inside my house had me unsettled.

After the incident with the casement window, they'd probably assume I was rattled, nervous even. They might think I'd brought in the mail and forgotten about it.

Fuck.

I had been at work all day, so they could've come by any time.

A thought crept into my head. Unwelcome but pressing. It was in my nature to search for answers. I had to consider all the possibilities. Even if I didn't believe them.

Carl.

He had been here alone before I arrived home. He knew where I kept the house key. He could have gone inside and left the note.

But that didn't make sense. I had asked him to pick Tess up at the last minute, so he wouldn't have had time to plan it, unless he already had the card prepared, waiting for an opportunity.

But I trusted Carl. He had no reason to mess with me like that. No, it couldn't be him. He wouldn't.

The thought wasn't as reassuring as it should have been.

If not Carl, then someone else had left it, and that was even scarier. I had no idea who it was, or why they had chosen me.

Why now?

I rested the card against the tip of my nose and inhaled. The scent felt like Luis's arms, wrapped around me.

I thought of the man on the train – Luis – and wondered again if maybe I had seen exactly what I thought I had.

Maybe this was the only way my supposedly dead husband could find to speak to me.

Chapter 24

Now

The puppy woke me Friday morning by crunching on my toes.

‘Ow, your teeth are like needles,’ I muttered, half laughing. ‘Lucky for you, you’re cute.’

If Tess hadn’t been there as a reminder, I might have convinced myself that yesterday had been nothing more than a strange dream. That I hadn’t seen Luis boarding a train in a town neither of us should’ve been in.

But he had been standing just a few feet away from me, almost within reach.

What were the odds of something like that happening? Probably not great.

Carl was right though. There were plenty of guys out there around the same height, with the same hair color. Attractive guys who looked almost the same. But he was the only one who made my stomach somersault.

There was something about him specifically that I couldn’t explain.

There was no way I’d mistake that feeling, and I’d got it when I saw him, even from a distance.

My body had recognized him before my brain could catch up.

I wasn’t going to convince myself to ignore what I’d seen. The niggling feeling in my gut wouldn’t let me. And it was just as well, because it was enough to get me out of bed. I threw the covers off, the sheets tangling around my legs like they were trying to keep me in. Tess barked once, happy I was up.

*

My plans for the day had just changed. I was going to visit Luis’s grave and think.

Downstairs, I retrieved the envelope from the night before, picking it up to make sure it was real in my hands. I inhaled the paper. The scent had faded, but it was still strong enough that I recognized it.

The note hadn’t mentioned a collection date. It could be a week, or it could be a day. I guess they left it off to encourage people to make a decision.

I knew I should just write a big NO on the paper and leave it on my front doorstep for collection so they wouldn’t miss it. Maybe they wouldn’t

bother me again once they got their answer. But then I might never know what happened to Luis. And the need to know for sure is hardwired into my DNA.

Thoughts swirled. Possibilities formed.

I had no way of knowing who had left the note, but I had a strong suspicion.

I didn't want to call Jess because she'd tell me to go to the police for sure. She'd probably come by and drive me there herself.

If it hadn't been for the man I saw on the train, I'd probably have agreed with her, but this was more than a feeling.

Tess gave a small whine, like she was telling me she was busting.

'Sorry, I'm coming,' I called. I took her outside to do her business, the morning air biting at my bare ankles. When we came back in, I made coffee strong enough to strip paint and stared at my calendar.

With everything going on, I had forgotten to book a dog-sitter. I sent a quick message anyway, hoping for a Hail Mary, then looked at the puppy, who had brought one of my Jimmy Choos out to gnaw on.

I didn't want to leave her alone on her first day here. She needed someone to guide her in her new home.

I gently took the shoe from her, trying to salvage the stiletto. 'We need to get you something you can chew on,' I said. 'Something that won't give you a stomachache.'

She gazed at me with sorrowful eyes, sad I'd taken her thousand-dollar chew toy. I did a quick search to see if she needed to visit the vet, checking the shoe to see if she had ingested any of the leather. 'Thank goodness,' I said. She was so tiny, I could only imagine how sore her tummy would've been.

I couldn't leave Tess here alone. The time I'd allocated to set things up to accommodate a puppy had been interrupted by my encounter with the man on the train. If I left her here, she'd probably realize there was a whole closet full of shoes to chew on. And I couldn't leave her outside alone. 'What am I supposed to do with you, huh?'

The puppy tilted her head.

I couldn't exactly take the day off. Could I?

'Why don't we go for a walk and figure it out?' I asked her.

Happy to be having a chat, she bounded over, following me to a utility drawer. I rummaged around, moving things aside. Eventually I found what I

was looking for – the leash Luis had bought when we first talked about getting a dog, before we knew about the dreaded ‘wait list’, which, they had warned, could be months. Sometimes more.

The leather harness still looked new.

‘Come on, Tess,’ I said. ‘I hope you’re not afraid of ghosts. We’re going to visit Luis.’

*

I wasn’t sure what I was hoping to find at the cemetery. It wasn’t as if there was going to be a big hole in the ground where he’d dug his way out, but I wanted to go there and consider the possibility that Luis was still alive.

The cemetery was almost empty, the fall wind whispering through the trees. I used to come here just to be near him. But today, I wondered if I’d feel alone at his grave.

As I approached the headstone with his name on it, I didn’t feel the finality of it weighing me down. I felt hopeful, for the first time since his death.

Tess sniffed the ground, zigzagging toward every stick, every random scent she picked up. It took forever to reach the plot.

The grave looked the same as always: the plaque gleaming a dull silver in the weak sunlight, his name carved deep. *Luis Xavier Tyndale. Beloved husband.* Except now it didn’t feel like a resting place. It felt like a lie carved into stone.

I crouched, brushing a fallen leaf from the plaque. The flowers I’d left last time – daisies – were brown and collapsing in their vase. Guilt twisted in my chest. I hadn’t been back in two weeks. It hurt too much, walking away every time, leaving him here while I pretended to go on with my life.

Only now, my guilt felt like it was for nothing. Like I had been mourning an idea.

I closed my eyes, remembering the day they laid him here.

A sharp tug on the leash jolted me. ‘Tess – wait!’

But the puppy had spotted a bird and bolted. The leash slipped from my hand, the leather burning my palm. I chased her past a row of headstones, rounding a huge oak tree before finally catching up.

I scooped her up, panting, and headed back toward Luis’s grave. ‘You can’t take off like that, you’ll get lost,’ I reprimanded her affectionately.

She squirmed once, then went still. Her ears pricked up. I looked up and froze.

Someone was standing at Luis's grave. Someone I didn't recognize, her back toward me. I stopped and watched her as she brushed dirt from the headstone. The gesture looked tender, like she might've brushed lint off his shirt the same way. The woman hunched forward, her shoulders shaking as she placed something down. Flowers, I realized. Fresh daisies.

'What the hell . . . ' I whispered. My fingers were already on my phone, snapping a photo to make sure my eyes weren't playing a trick, before my brain could talk me out of what I was seeing. I started toward her, heart hammering. Her long blonde hair was pulled into a loose ponytail and she wore a flowing floral dress that was too cheerful for a cemetery. A silk shawl was draped over her shoulders. She looked like she'd dressed up to visit someone she loved. Someone she missed.

My throat tightened.

'Hey,' I called softly.

The woman rose slowly to her feet but she didn't turn all the way around. I could see in profile that she wore dark sunglasses.

'Wait – please,' I said, taking another step forward, moving toward her.

She pulled the shawl up, high against her neck.

Her head shifted and I realized she was eyeing the exit.

'I just want to talk,' I said, hoping I sounded friendly.

The woman froze, still turned away from me, like she hadn't expected anyone to be here.

'What's your name?' I called. 'Why are you here?'

I sped up, trying to get closer so I could see her properly, but she scurried away without answering, half running down the path, kicking the flowers over as she left.

Every cell in my body screamed at me to chase her, demand answers, *force* her to look me in the eye and explain what she was doing at my husband's grave – but she was already moving out of sight, and I'd never catch up to her with Tess to coax along.

Her presence had given me an eerie, familiar feeling. Was she a distant relative of Luis's? A cousin maybe?

Whoever she was, she knew him well enough that she was crying.

But why had she run away when I called her?

And if Luis's death was a lie, what else had he lied about?

Chapter 25

Now

I stayed near Luis's grave, trying to figure out what I'd just witnessed. And then a sickening thought crept into my mind.

Had Luis been having an affair?

Another thing I couldn't believe, but then I wouldn't have believed I'd run into the husband I had buried four months previously.

I sure as hell wasn't going to stand there crying about another missed opportunity, though.

'Come on, Tess,' I said, watching her paw at the ground. 'Let's go figure this out.'

The lawyer in me took over. If I wanted answers, I was going to have to find them.

Luis had told me about an ex. Sofia. From what he'd said, he was once head over heels in love with her. They'd broken up long before we started dating, but she was the kind of ex who left a bruise, not a scar. I'd never met her, but she might've heard about Luis's death and wanted to say her goodbyes.

I looked at the photo I'd snapped and cursed, trying to remember if Luis had ever given me specific details. What color was Sofia's hair? Her eyes?

The photo was terrible anyway. Blurry. Taken from too far away, with shaky hands. Although I'd almost caught the side of her face, I couldn't properly make out any features with the dark glasses she wore. Even if I could, I wouldn't know if it was Sofia because I didn't know what she looked like.

I hated loose ends. They always frayed. Right now, that's how my entire life felt. Like one big loose end. I needed to rule Sofia out.

It might be nice to swap stories about Luis. I'd always wondered who he was back then, before I'd known him. His parents had told me plenty of stories, but I wanted to know what he was *really* like. Not the dialed-down version his parents knew.

I scooped Tess into my arms and started down the path, the gravel crunching beneath my sneakers, the wind tugging at my hair.

I scanned the rows of tombstones, my eyes darting between marble slabs and weathered plaques. There was only stillness now – the kind that hums in your ears when the world's holding its breath.

‘Shit,’ I muttered under my breath.

I walked back to Luis’s grave and sat down in front of the heavy stone that was supposed to mark his resting place. The cold from the grass seeped through my jeans and crawled up my legs.

Tess sniffed the dirt, blissfully unaware.

‘Usually, I’d talk to you about this,’ I said quietly, staring at his name. ‘But there’s no point in doing that now, is there?’

My voice cracked. I pressed my palms to my face. Inhaled. Exhaled. I needed to decide my next steps, but all I could think was how mad I was at Luis for leaving.

I worked through impossible problems every day in my job. I’d faced clients who’d lied through their teeth, witnesses who changed their stories mid-testimony, but I’d always found the truth buried somewhere. I could find it again. Even if this time, the liar was my husband, someone I had trusted.

It was easier when you had both sides of the story to sift through. But whatever Luis’s story was, he wasn’t here to give it.

I’d have to go by the information I found on my own.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. The obvious first step would be to look for something tangible. Evidence. Luis and I had a joint bank account. If he was alive, he’d need money. Food. Shelter. Maybe a burner phone.

I pulled out my phone and opened the banking app we used to share, scrolling through months of transactions.

There was nothing. No transfers, no strange withdrawals. As I scrolled forward again, going back through, Luis’s credits stopped. It was just my salary, the usual bills, the mortgage repayments we made every fortnight. Even in the months before and after he’d gone, there were no strange transactions. No large sums taken out, and no odd accounts paid into. It would be easy enough to squirrel cash away if he’d planned this. It was possible he had an account I didn’t know about. Something his parents had set up maybe? But that would be difficult to find.

I needed to look back through the account history, right back to a couple of years ago. I set a reminder for later. Right now, I just wanted to get out of there.

I chewed my thumbnail, thinking about Luis’s parents. Remembering their tears at his funeral. Maybe they were as in the dark as I was.

I reached down and rubbed Tess's head, her fur soft and comforting beneath my fingers. 'We'll figure this out,' I said, though I wasn't sure which of us I was trying to convince.

First things first, I needed to call work. Then, I needed to somehow find Sofia. If she was the woman at Luis's grave, then I could pick her brain to find out what she knew – about Luis, about the Coterie Institute note . . .

And if it wasn't her, then things might be about to get a lot stranger.

Chapter 26

Now

I read an update from Carl.

Still getting through stuff. Will get back to you later. You in today?

I punched out a message with my thumbs.

WFH. Keep me posted.

Elizabeth wasn't going to like it, but Elizabeth would have to suck it up. I had bigger things to think about than her sudden interest in my life.

*

It turned out Sofia Vega wasn't that hard to find.

All it took was a search with her name and the city they'd lived in before Luis and I met. Within minutes, I had her Instagram, with a smiling baby as the profile picture, and a neglected LinkedIn account that hadn't been updated in almost two years.

Her name popped up on a few social media accounts, all private. No photos to confirm anything, no recent activity. But LinkedIn told me enough. Her business, Little Vega Designs, sold handcrafted baby furniture and accessories.

Sofia's baby store was another reminder of a future I wouldn't have with Luis.

We'd talked about kids, but we were waiting for the right time. Maybe once work settled down, and I wasn't worrying about how long a client might go to jail for something they didn't do if I couldn't find a way to show they were innocent.

I could see how a distance might've grown between us. Maybe I hadn't put him first enough. It was always work, then Luis. Maybe he got tired of waiting.

I tried not to think about it, to focus instead on Sofia's LinkedIn profile.

Her photo was a professional headshot. She looked poised and self-assured, with dark, glossy hair, and a faint smile that didn't reach her eyes. The kind of woman who didn't rattle easily.

The woman I'd seen at the cemetery had lighter hair, but hair dye was an easy disguise.

I checked her employment history, clicked through old posts, and found an address connected to her small business license.

It was a start.

Sofia may have been at Luis's funeral. There were a few people there who I didn't know and hadn't paid much attention to on the day, too lost in my own grief. She could have been one of them.

I considered sending a message, but it was too easy to ignore, or get spam-filtered. If Luis had been important to her once, she deserved to hear the truth face to face.

And I needed to look her in the eye when I asked if she'd been to the cemetery.

I gave Tess food and water, then took her for a quick walk around the block.

'I'll be back soon,' I told her, scratching behind her ear.

An hour later, I pulled into a quiet suburban street. Each house looked like it was ordered out of the same catalogue. Perfect lawns, matching mailboxes, symmetry everywhere. Even the trashcans were lined up neatly for collection.

Sofia's house fit in perfectly. A new Mercedes in the driveway. A toddler's tricycle, bright pink and spotless, leaning neatly by the steps.

I took a breath, trying to steady the nerves fluttering under my skin. What was I doing here?

I hadn't planned what I was going to say. *Hi, I'm your ex-boyfriend's wife. I buried him four months ago, but I think he's still alive. Do you happen to know anything about that? And by the way, were you at his grave this morning?*

Right. Totally normal. I'd definitely need to tone it down.

I knocked on the door.

The woman who answered didn't look like someone who had just been crying at her ex's grave. She looked immaculate. She wore a crisp linen suit in deep sable, lips painted red, skin flawless. I looked at the tricycle again. If she was tired, she hid it well. I scanned her face but I didn't recognize her.

'Sofia Vega?' I asked, feeling very underdressed.

She hesitated, the faintest wrinkle appearing between her brows.

'Yes?' Her tone was polite but cautious.

'My name is Mackenzie Morgan. I'm sorry to show up like this,' I began, suddenly aware how I might seem, turning up on her doorstep to question her about her ex. I cleared my throat. 'I know this is . . . strange,' I started. 'But I think you used to know my husband.'

Her gaze sharpened slightly, like I was accusing her of something. ‘Your husband?’

Sofia was beautiful. There were probably a few exes before she settled down. She had a gentleness about her that suggested she was comfortable in her own skin and used to being around people.

‘Luis Tyndale,’ I said.

I watched as it sunk in, a wistful smile crossing her face. ‘Oh, Luis. Yes.’ She hesitated. ‘Would you like to come in?’ she offered.

‘I won’t take up much of your time,’ I said automatically, but she was already stepping aside.

The house smelled faintly of vanilla and something floral. A half-packed diaper bag sat on the counter, surrounded by toddler paraphernalia. Toys. A bottle. Wipes. Framed photos filled the walls. A radiant Sofia, holding a baby with chubby cheeks and a halo of soft brown curls.

The sight of the man beside her, smiling down at them both, stopped me cold.

Same olive skin. Same dark eyes. Same dimple that used to appear when Luis laughed at one of his own jokes.

For a second, I couldn’t breathe.

‘He’s handsome, isn’t he?’ Sofia said lightly, following my gaze. ‘That’s my husband, Mateo.’

Mateo. Sofia had a type.

I nodded, though my pulse was still hammering. ‘You have a beautiful family.’

‘Thank you.’ She smiled distractedly, picked up a small toy from the floor and placed it by the counter. ‘Our daughter keeps us busy. Since she started crawling, there have been toys everywhere.’ She laughed, more proud than apologetic. ‘She thinks it’s a game. I pick them up and she tosses them everywhere she can reach.’

‘How old is she?’ I asked.

‘She’ll be one next month. Time flies.’

Eleven months.

Luis had been alive eleven months ago.

I tried to sound casual. ‘She looks a lot like her father.’

Sofia gave a soft laugh, but there was a hesitation before it. ‘Everyone says that.’ She checked her watch. ‘She’ll be up from her nap in around twenty minutes.’

I smiled, but my throat felt dry.

When she gestured to the kitchen table, I followed, sitting opposite her. She moved with the kind of curated composure that comes from control – someone who plans her mornings down to the minute, whose world doesn't just *happen* to her.

'So,' she said, folding her hands. 'Did you want to ask something about Luis?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Do you remember much about him?'

Sofia's smile widened. 'How could I forget Luis. He was a big part of my life once.'

I knew that tone. It made me wonder if Luis was Sofia's 'one that got away'.

I listened, hesitant to interrupt.

'He was charming. Infuriating sometimes, but we were young and very in love. Though, if I'm being honest, it was never going to last.' She tilted her head. 'We wanted different things.'

It was the kind of statement that sounded rehearsed. Tidy.

'Have you seen him since you broke up?'

Sofia hesitated. It was subtle, but I caught it, the pause before she spoke. 'No. Not in years.' Then, a quick, bright laugh. 'Why? Is he in trouble?' She shifted uneasily.

I didn't blame her for being hesitant. A woman claiming to be her ex-boyfriend's wife knocks on her door, asking questions about their relationship; she's obviously looking for dirt.

'Not exactly,' I said.

I felt a sudden urge to blurt, '*I thought he was dead, but he's not. I buried him, and then I saw him catching the train.*' But I bit it back. I didn't know Sofia well enough to unload. I would have to stick with the facts for now.

'He died,' I said.

The words landed like shattered glass between us.

Sofia's hand flew to her mouth. 'Oh my god.' Her eyes shimmered, but she didn't cry. 'How? What happened?'

'Car accident,' I said. 'The police told me it was instant. He was driving and he crashed.'

She was clearly shocked by the news. If she already knew he was dead, she was a great actor. She fell silent, gathering herself before she spoke

again.

‘I did see him once,’ she said. ‘It would’ve been a few years ago.’ She seemed to swallow back emotion. ‘It was just after he met you, actually. He was happy. He couldn’t stop gushing about you, but it wasn’t like where you run into your ex, and you’re both just trying to win the breakup, you know? He asked me how I was, and when I asked him, he looked almost bashful about it. Like he didn’t want to admit how happy he was. Like he knew we’d done the right thing breaking up.’

I felt a lump in my throat. It wasn’t what I was expecting to hear when I came here. I waited a beat, then pulled out my phone. ‘There’s something else,’ I said carefully. ‘There was a woman at his grave earlier today. When I saw her, I wondered if maybe it was you.’

Her brows knit together. ‘His grave? No, I— Why would I be . . .’

I turned the screen toward her, showing the photo I’d taken. It was a terrible shot, barely more than a distant blob, but it was clear the woman was standing over Luis’s grave, delivering something. ‘She brought daisies,’ I said.

Sofia’s eyes fixed on it. ‘Well, it’s not me,’ she said, almost defensively.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘But whoever she is . . . she knew where to find him.’

She pushed the phone gently back toward me. ‘I’m sorry. I wish I could help.’

A sound crackled through the baby monitor. A soft cry. Sofia excused herself and disappeared down the hall.

I stayed seated, my gaze drawn back to the family photo on the wall. The baby’s eyes were the same deep blue as Luis’s.

I could almost hear his voice. ‘*You’re overthinking it, Kenzie. A lot of people have blue eyes.*’

Maybe. But my gut didn’t trust anything. This could have been Luis’s life if he had married Sofia instead of me.

When Sofia returned, she had the baby on her hip, half asleep against her shoulder. ‘Sorry,’ she said softly. ‘She doesn’t like being alone when she wakes.’

‘No problem,’ I said.

Her voice was gentle again, composed. ‘Luis was . . . complicated. But he had a good heart.’

I nodded, unable to speak. It felt like she was trying to tell me something.

‘Is there anything else you want to ask?’ she said, and I could see it lurking behind her eyes. There was something more she wanted to say, but couldn’t find the words for.

‘What was he like back then?’

I couldn’t leave without knowing. I’d spent years trying to piece Luis together from the fragments he’d let me see, but there were whole chapters of his life that were still a mystery.

If I’d met him back then – before the army, before the drinking, before the walls he built – would we still have fallen into that easy rhythm? Would I have seen what was coming?

Sofia’s expression softened, her gaze drifting somewhere far behind me. ‘He was fun,’ she said, her voice threaded with nostalgia. ‘Restless. He didn’t take himself too seriously. Always chasing the next thrill, always with some wild idea.’ She smiled faintly, but it faded almost as quickly. ‘He never really grew up. He had this boyish quality, spontaneous, a free spirit.’

I nodded like I understood. Although he had moments when he’d kick back and be spontaneous, the Luis I knew was more measured. Every so often I’d glimpse the Luis Sofia had described, like somewhere inside, that devil-may-care boy still existed, but with me he had always been more assured, more grown up. That playful streak emerged when he wanted something . . .

‘He couldn’t be pushed into anything he didn’t want to do,’ Sofia continued. ‘His parents tried to steer him, but he always had his own ideas. They thought he was wasting his life. People thought he was some rich kid whose parents handed him everything, but he wasn’t like that. He enlisted in the army to prove them wrong.’

Her expression darkened. I knew what the army did to him, but Sofia would’ve seen the change in him after he returned. I remembered the nights when he’d go quiet if the topic veered too close to that part of his life. The light in his eyes would dull, the silence thickening between us until I changed the subject.

I let out a slow breath. ‘I know his time in the army affected him, but he never really told me what happened.’ My throat tightened. ‘I remember the nights he couldn’t sleep. The drinking. I thought it was his way of coping.’

Sofia’s voice dropped, quieter now. ‘He came back different. There were things he wouldn’t tell me either. Sometimes he’d joke about it, but . . .’ She trailed off, something unreadable crossing her face. ‘You should

talk to Keith. They served together. If anyone knows what happened there, it's him.'

'Keith?'

'Yes—' The baby started crying and Sofia was distracted, jiggling her on a hip. She passed her a toy and she settled.

Keith. The name sounded familiar. I was pretty sure Luis had mentioned him once or twice. But like all his stories from the army, it was always vague, always guarded.

I shot a look at Sofia, but she was still focused on the baby, smoothing her hair. Beneath her poise, I saw the exhaustion now.

I suddenly felt like I was intruding. 'I should go,' I said, pushing to my feet.

'Wait,' she said suddenly, reaching out to touch my hand. Her fingers were cool, trembling slightly. 'Whatever Luis was mixed up in . . . be careful.' Her eyes flicked toward the baby, then back to me. 'He didn't always choose the right people to trust.'

Her words sent a chill down my spine. 'What do you mean?' I asked, but she was already turning away. The conversation was over.

'One last thing,' I said before she disappeared down the hall. 'Keith — how can I contact him?'

'I'll text you his number,' she called back. 'Can't promise it still works.'

I recited my number so she could send it and waited for the familiar *ping*.

'Thank you,' I said when a message popped up on my screen.

Outside, the air felt cooler than it had when I'd arrived. I stood at the curb for a moment, keys in hand, watching my breath cloud in the air. *Didn't always choose the right people to trust.*

Sofia's words echoed long after I got into the car.

Had Luis been mixed up in something he couldn't get out of?

Chapter 27

Now

When I got home from Sofia's on Friday afternoon, it was late enough to justify opening a bottle of wine.

Tess lay curled in her bed, paws twitching as though she was chasing a phantom in her dreams. I sat cross-legged on the couch, staring at the photo frames lining the mantel. Luis grinned at me from every shot. Birthdays, picnics, beach days. One of us together on his parents' yacht.

I should have shut the laptop and gone to bed. I had already checked everything I needed to, reviewed our previously shared bank account, confirmed there were no mysterious transfers, nothing that set off warning bells in the months before Luis died.

Maybe I was just chasing ghosts at this point. Sad and depressed, struggling to accept what had happened, just like everyone thought, but didn't want to say to my face.

But the urge to dig, to figure out what was going on, to *know*, wouldn't go away.

And then I started thinking about the people at the funeral. The ones I hadn't known, but who knew Luis at some point.

Photos were taken on the day. Maybe the blonde woman was in one of them. I unlocked my phone, scrolling to Jess's contact number.

Call her. Don't text.

My mind shouted at me, but my fingers typed anyway.

Do you still have the funeral photos? I need to see them again.

The dots appeared. They lingered. They disappeared. Then a reply:

Kenzie. Please don't do this to yourself. You're spiraling. I'm worried about you.

I swallowed a huge gulp of wine, ignoring the sting.

Jess wasn't going to deter me, no matter how well-intentioned she was.

I just need to check something. Please. Send them.

A minute later, the photos came through.

I scrolled, my thumb sliding across the images. Black coats, somber faces, tissues clutched in hands. My own expression was a blank, hollow mask staring back at me from the screen. Did I really look that bad?

Then, I came to one that made me stop scrolling.

There. Half-hidden by the branches of a maple tree at the cemetery, standing away from the crowd. It looked like the woman I had seen at

Luis's grave. Her blonde hair peeked out from underneath a fascinator with a veil, her face tilted down, sharp cheekbones just visible. Wearing a floral dress, printed with white daisies, maybe, against a dark background. My heart hammered.

'Who the hell are you?' I whispered, leaning closer, knocking into my glass and sending a splash of wine across my jeans. My frustration peaked. If I could just see her face, I'd be able to dig further.

Tess lifted her head, ears pricked at my tone. She sensed my unease. I reached down and stroked her soft fur, trying to calm us both.

'She was there, Tess. At the funeral,' I murmured, voice tight.

Why hadn't she introduced herself? Why hadn't she approached anyone, shared a memory, shed a tear alongside the rest of us?

There was no doubt now. She'd known Luis well enough to come to his funeral. I knew his friends, mostly from work, but I didn't know her. Was she an ex he hadn't thought to mention?

The way she ran from me told me enough. She was hiding something. I just had to find out what.

My gut told me she knew something. Maybe she didn't know why Luis was alive and catching a train, but in this photo, she looked like she was standing at the edge of the crowd. She didn't want to be seen.

I opened my phone and scrolled to the message Sofia had sent. Keith. He had served beside Luis. You didn't spend that much time around someone without learning a thing or two about them.

Maybe Keith could enlighten me.

I hesitated. Drained my glass of wine. I should've stopped there, but I poured another. It gave me the courage to cross to the drawer where I'd thrown the Coterie Institute invitation. I still hadn't written anything on it, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know whether they'd been to collect my response.

I stood by the drawer, my fingers gripping the handle. Afraid.

Not that they'd been in my house again, but that I'd missed my opportunity.

I pulled the drawer open and fumbled inside, sifting under a notepad and some pens.

I thought I'd left the card at the very top, but I couldn't see it. Maybe it had been dislodged when I shut the drawer.

Then I remembered: I had taken it into my room with me before I went to sleep. The scent was comforting. I'd fallen asleep holding it.

I moved through to the bedroom and pulled the made bed apart. Covers, sheets, and finally the pillows.

There it was, slightly crumpled at one edge.

The blank card.

I took it and scrawled a 'yes' on the front, hoping it would show up well enough on the dark surface. Then I tossed it back into the drawer and returned to my phone.

If Luis really was dead and I'd somehow hallucinated seeing him that day on the train, that was one thing. But the woman in the picture was alive.

If Keith thought I was crazy, fine. He could join the club. At this point I had nothing to lose.

My thumb hovered over the call button, my nerves prickling. But I'd had just enough wine, and it had started to take effect.

I hit call.

The line began ringing.

Once. Twice.

Maybe he was more of a text message person.

'Keith,' a gravelly voice answered on the third ring. I waited for something more, but that was it. I guess that made sense, since I was the one who called.

'Uh, hi. My name's Mackenzie Morgan. Is now a good time to talk?' I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

'I mean, I was just sitting down to a beer at the bar, but sure. What are you selling?'

I gripped the phone tighter, nails pressing into the cover. 'I think you knew my husband . . . Luis Tyndale.'

There was a pause. A low chuckle, rough and amused, but not exactly friendly. 'Knew him? Yeah . . . you could say that. Hell of a soldier. Terrible taste in beer.'

I tried to ignore my nerves. There was something intimidating about this man. 'I need to ask you some questions, if that's OK?'

'You're his wife, you say?' Keith asked. I could almost see him, leaning back on a barstool, smirk tugging at his mouth.

'Yes,' I said.

‘What, you didn’t like his name? Wanted to keep yours? It has kind of a ring to it with the m’s.’

‘More like . . . I’ve had this name long enough that it was easier to keep it.’ I didn’t mention my partnership at the law firm, my name on the plaque, and how much that had contributed to my decision.

‘Yeah. I heard about the accident.’ His tone was flat, clipped, like Luis’s death was an unfortunate occurrence, but he wasn’t going to cry over it. ‘I’m sorry for your loss.’

I heard the crunch of something in his mouth, then. Peanuts, maybe. The sound made my skin crawl.

‘I have some questions,’ I said, trying to sound casual. ‘I was hoping you could answer them.’

‘How’d you get my number?’ His voice carried a sharp edge now.

‘Sofia Vega gave it to me. I . . . I hope that’s OK—’ I said. I didn’t want to get Sofia in trouble, but I doubt she would’ve given it to me if she thought it would be a problem.

Keith cut me off. ‘Sofia! Jesus. It must’ve been like a million years since I saw Sofia. I’m flattered she considers me a good enough friend that she kept my number.’

‘She thought you might be able to help,’ I said softly, careful not to push too hard.

Keith crunched another peanut. Louder this time.

This was my last lead. After that, I was scratching around in the dirt. I steeled myself and spoke. ‘I’m calling because I saw something impossible. A man who I’d swear was Luis, at the train station. I think maybe it was—’

I heard a sound, like chair legs scraping the floor. ‘No.’ His voice dropped, quieter, almost a growl. ‘Listen . . . you don’t want to talk about this over the phone.’

‘Please,’ I said, my throat tight, words trembling despite myself. ‘I need to know the truth.’

A long pause. I could hear the faint hum of the bar in Keith’s silence. Someone laughing in the distance, a glass clinking. Probably Keith finishing a beer. And then he spoke.

‘All right. You in Boston? Haul ass down to O’Malley’s. You know where it is?’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘Buy me a round, and I’ll tell you something about Luis you won’t find in any obituary.’

The line clicked dead before I could respond.

I stared back at my reflection in the darkened phone screen. Tess whimpered softly at my feet, tail thumping once against the hardwood then falling still. My hand shook slightly, the wine I’d poured hours ago suddenly bitter on my tongue.

I’d had two glasses over two and a half hours. I was OK to drive.

I ordered a ride anyway. Just in case. Then I sat frozen for a moment.

Why did it feel like walking into that pub would shatter everything I thought I knew about my husband? But after seeing Luis, then the woman at his grave, and now the photographs from the funeral, I knew I had to go.

I grabbed my keys and purse, locking the door on my way out.

As I turned around, I saw a car pull up in front of my house.

It didn’t look like my ride.

Shit.

Chapter 28

Now

I forced a smile as Officer Murphy and Officer Davidson stepped out of their car and made their way to my front step.

‘Sorry to interrupt your Friday evening like this,’ said Officer Murphy.

‘That’s quite all right,’ I said, feeling worse for them. After they left, I was done, but they had to go back to work.

‘Can we come in?’

I opened the door, Tess pressing against my leg as I made my way back inside. I held her gently around her chest so she didn’t escape.

‘You got a dog,’ said Officer Davidson. ‘Can I?’ He moved to scratch her ear.

I nodded, hoping they’d get on with it. I didn’t know how long Keith would wait for me to show up, and I wanted to know what he couldn’t say over the phone.

‘We’re following up on your report,’ he said.

‘About the window?’ I asked.

‘And a few other things,’ said Officer Davidson.

The officers didn’t rush in. They looked first at the threshold, the latch, the hinge side of the door, like the house itself might still be talking if you knew where to listen.

‘We had a chance to look closer at the photos we took,’ Murphy said. ‘The latch wasn’t splintered from the inside.’

I waited.

‘The fracture pattern suggests outward pressure,’ Davidson added. ‘It wasn’t a bad seal or weather stress. Someone manipulated it. They would have to have been standing under it.’

‘So, it *was* a break-in,’ I said.

‘An attempted one,’ Murphy corrected. ‘Or an entry and exit without theft.’

Davidson shrugged. ‘It happens more than you think. Our guess is they were looking for something.’

They were too late. I had already figured out that the culprit had broken in and left that invitation, but if I told the police that, I was afraid I’d compromise ever seeing Luis again.

Murphy glanced around the room and wrote something down in a script I couldn't read. 'We wanted to ask if you've noticed anything else unusual since then. Anyone stop by?'

My pulse ticked up, slow and steady.

I thought of the envelope.

The weight of it. The spiral.

We will retrieve your response.

I hesitated.

Davidson mistook my silence for consideration. 'Anything at all,' he said. 'Even if it feels unrelated.'

I considered my options the way I did in court – what to give, what to hold back. The invitation wasn't evidence of a crime. It wasn't even overtly suspicious. But it wasn't nothing.

'There was a letter . . . an invitation,' I said finally. 'Hand-delivered.'

Davidson's head tilted. 'Who was it from?'

'A wellness institute,' I said. 'The Coterie Institute.'

Murphy's pen paused. 'Do you still have it?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'But it doesn't ask for money. There's no threat. No address. Just an invite.'

'To what?' Davidson asked.

'They didn't say,' I replied. 'The invite says they'll follow up.'

Silence settled.

Murphy exchanged a look with Davidson.

'Do you mind if we take a look at it?' Davidson asked.

'Sure.' I went to retrieve it, Tess following behind, like she was afraid of missing out on something.

Murphy put on some gloves and took a look, Davidson leaning over his shoulder. 'It looks like fancy junk mail,' Davidson said. 'What do they call it . . . targeted advertising.'

Murphy smelled the card. 'That smells too expensive to be used for advertising,' he said. 'Have you had contact with this group before?'

'No,' I said. 'Not directly.'

'Anyone close to you?' Murphy asked.

I kept my voice neutral. There was no point telling them the fragrance was the same scent Luis wore and that I was sure I'd seen him boarding a train. If I couldn't get my own best friend to take this seriously, I doubted two strangers whose job it was to be skeptical would either.

‘I’m a criminal defense attorney. I encounter a lot of organizations adjacent to cases.’

That answer landed the way I intended it to. True, but not expansive.

Murphy made a note. ‘We’re asking because this kind of delivery aligns with what we see in targeted approaches. Not criminal, necessarily. But deliberate.’

‘Targeted how?’ I asked.

‘People don’t usually hand-deliver invitations unless they know the recipient will open the door.’

My skin prickled.

‘I found it inside the house,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t here when it was delivered.’

‘We know someone tested your house. That someone returned. And they didn’t want to be seen.’

It seemed pretty elaborate to do a test run just to deliver an invitation. If I was going to meet with them, and they believed I would, wouldn’t I see them eventually anyway?

‘Should I be worried?’ I asked.

‘Hard to say, but they haven’t made any attempt to hurt you.’

That wasn’t reassuring.

They took a few more details and looked around before standing to leave. ‘If they make contact again – another visit, another letter – call us. Day or night. And don’t engage with them.’

‘Sure,’ I agreed, non-committal.

After the door closed behind them, I watched to make sure they’d gone.

I hadn’t told them everything. But I’d told them enough. Somewhere between the broken window and the invitation, a thread had been drawn tight – and the police had just marked it. Whatever the Coterie Institute thought it was doing, it wasn’t operating in the dark anymore. I had just told the police exactly where to look for me if things didn’t work out.

As I stepped outside, I caught movement across the street. Greg’s head popped up at the window, eyes fixed on my house. He looked like he was scoping out the place. Or maybe just keeping watch. He must have noticed the police leaving. I shivered, telling myself it was probably nothing, and let Keith know I was on my way.

Chapter 29

Now

The pub was loud. The sound of conversation, clinking glasses, and fried food sizzling in the kitchen hit me the moment I walked in. I paused in the doorway, letting the warmth of the crowded room wash over me, until the smell of stale beer and smoke hit, making my nose wrinkle.

I hadn't made much effort, just thrown on pants and a pair of comfortable pumps.

Keith was in the corner, perched on a stool with a pint in hand, grinning like he'd been waiting for me all day. He looked rougher than I'd pictured — stubble edging into a beard, hair longer than it should've been, bags under his eyes like he hadn't slept in years. He could've been anywhere between thirty and sixty.

'You came,' he said, raising his half-emptied glass. 'Wasn't sure you would.'

I felt the same nervous flicker I'd felt talking to Sofia. Like whatever I was about to hear about Luis, I might not want to know. And once I knew, there was no going back. It wasn't as if I could ask Luis to verify whether anything Keith said was true. I was relying on Keith sticking to the facts . . . and looking at him, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

'I almost didn't,' I said, sliding into the seat across from him, wrapping my coat tighter around my shoulders. 'You said you had something to tell me. So tell me.'

Keith leaned forward, his grin fading into something guarded, careful. 'You're not gonna like it.'

I braced myself. 'Try me.'

'First,' he said, raising a finger as the server passed, 'I want you to know I believe you. About Luis, I mean.'

'Just like that?' I asked, skeptical.

I had come prepared to explain myself, to leave knowing I could add Keith to the growing list of people who considered me a lost cause, desperately hoping my dead husband would come back.

Keith beckoned the server for another drink, holding up two fingers. He turned back, staring right into my eyes. I fought the urge to look away.

'Just like that,' he said. 'I've seen crazy shit. Crazier shit than this even. Hell, in the army, there was always crazy shit going down. I'm sure Luis

told you all about it.’ He leaned an elbow on the table. ‘Did he mention they sent him home?’

‘Luis didn’t really talk about his time in the army. He tried drinking the memories away.’

‘Can’t say I blame him,’ Keith said, like someone who had lived it. I watched him suck the froth from his glass, emptying every last drop before setting it aside to be collected. This guy looked like he could handle anything, but he shrank in on himself when he started talking about the army. Whatever had happened, it had got to him, just like it got to Luis.

I accepted the beer when it arrived. The wine I’d been sipping earlier wasn’t enough. I would need more courage, something to numb me before Keith started talking.

‘There was always something,’ Keith said, voice low. ‘The army’s not all training exercises and roasting marshmallows by the campfire singing kumbaya.’ He let that hang in the air, then added, ‘You didn’t hear about the overseas op we got pulled for? Hostage recovery?’

I shook my head.

‘Don’t feel bad. It’s not exactly dinner conversation.’ His eyes went distant, fixed on some invisible point past my shoulder. ‘It was supposed to be clean. In and out. But by the time we got there . . .’ He paused, jaw tight. ‘The hostages were gone. Civilians too. Murdered.’

He leveled his gaze at me, as if deciding how much I could handle hearing.

‘Worse. Bodies mutilated. It was like something out of a nightmare. You never forget it.’

My chest tightened. ‘And Luis, he was there?’

‘Yeah. They pulled him in for the follow-up, too. Officially it was called “psychological resilience prep.” Some classified training thing. But he came back different . . . Like someone had scraped out his soul and left him raw.’

I swallowed hard. ‘Is that when they dismissed him?’

Keith’s laugh was humorless. ‘No. That was after the mission. They tried to keep him. But he wasn’t the same. Couldn’t follow orders. It was like he took matters into his own hands, decided the best way forward.’

Keith shook his head. ‘Luis had some strange ideas about the way we should train. One day, he just clocked a superior officer. Honestly, the guy deserved it. He was heckling another soldier just for the hell of it. But Luis,

he didn't hold back. A couple of guys wanted to try his way of doing things.'

'What about you? Did you want to try Luis's way?'

Keith shook his head. 'He tried to convince me, but I stayed out of it. Didn't want to get involved. He was burning a few bridges by then. Eventually, they cut him loose.'

I couldn't imagine Luis hitting an officer. I hadn't seen that side of him. He'd never told me any of this, but I was curious about his ideas.

'What was "his way" of doing things?' I asked.

'I didn't really get into it. It was heavy psychological shit. It's like, whatever they threw at us, he would take it to the extreme. Fasting, sleep deprivation, drills. Some of the guys thought he was going crazy.'

I clasped my hands on the table. 'Did you speak to him, after you both left the army?' I asked.

'Right before ...' Keith paused, lowering his voice, 'before his accident, Luis reached out to a group of us online. Out of the blue. Asked if we ever thought about that op. About what happened to the hostages. If we ever wondered why they sent him back in with Thomas.'

He stopped talking, waiting to see if I recognized the name he mentioned.

I didn't, but still my pulse hammered, ticking through my body. My ears, my chest, my throat. I'd always wondered what happened out there, but I couldn't press it, not when Luis clearly hadn't found a way to process it. 'Did you respond?'

Luis had been distracted those last weeks before the accident.

Keith's mouth pulled into a grim line. 'I told him we all wondered why Thomas never came back. A few of the guys thought it was weird. Some of them thought maybe Luis was crazy enough to kill him. Maybe he did it to save himself, who knows. I didn't believe it. He was too cut up about it to be truly responsible. But—' He leaned in closer, his voice a rasp. 'The way he'd asked about the op ... it wasn't just guilt. It was like he'd finally realized something. Like he was hoping to confirm something he already knew.'

Keith dragged a hand down the side of his face, like it weighed heavy on him.

What was he struggling with? Something to do with Luis, or his old army memories? Keith looked at me, deciding how much to reveal. Finally,

he said, 'If he was drinking, it was for a reason. He went in with Thomas, but only one of them came out alive.'

I stared at my beer, the foam still clinging to the sides. If Luis had to leave someone behind, that would explain why he was so riddled with guilt. The thought twisted in my gut.

'Do you think me seeing my dead husband has something to do with that special ops mission?' I asked cautiously. Keith hadn't come right out and said it, but I got the feeling he was working towards it.

'What do you think?' he asked. 'Did he ever say anything to suggest he could be in danger?'

'No. He didn't.' I suddenly wasn't sure I should be talking to Keith about this. I didn't know him, and Luis's army days had been a long time ago. He could be different to the man he was when Luis knew him.

'I think it sounds like some crazy conspiracy bullshit,' I added.

That got a laugh. 'Yeah, you and everyone else. That's why I keep it to myself.'

'It's no crazier than me telling people I saw Luis, when he died months ago,' I said.

Keith shrugged, drained his second beer and smacked the bottom of his glass down on the table with new resolve. 'Honestly, I don't see Luis being part of some army conspiracy. He was a pretty boy who was a damned good soldier, but he didn't belong in the army. He signed up to piss off his rich parents. They thought they could buy everything, and I think Luis wanted to show them that they couldn't buy him.'

I couldn't help a small, bitter smile. I couldn't imagine Luis with a gun, let alone shooting it.

'That's what Sofia said too. About Luis joining to piss off his parents.'

'Yeah, well she's not wrong. No one else wore Tommy Hilfiger under their greens. His parents were shitting themselves, thinking he'd get himself killed. They offered him money, trying to bribe him to come home. To be honest, he's lucky he got sent home. We were all a little worried. And surprised he got picked for the op.'

That sounded exactly like Luis. Smart, stylish, ill-fitted for the horrors of war.

'There was a joke going around that he paid his way into the squad.' Keith shrugged. 'I don't know. I still think maybe he did. He had a lot of grit, but he was a protector, not a fighter.'

I set my jaw. 'If there's a chance this has something to do with that op, we should talk to my friend Jessica.'

'Jessica, huh?'

'She's a psychologist. She's done a lot of work on conditioning, like army conditioning. She might be able to help.'

'And does Jessica know you saw your dead husband walking around like a regular fucking Casper?'

I rolled my eyes. 'She knows.'

'Well, she's a psych, so, what did she say?' He sounded skeptical, but behind it was a morbid curiosity.

'She thinks I'm grieving, but—'

'But,' Keith interjected, already filling in my plan, 'you think with me to back up your story, she might listen.'

I looked hopeful. There had to be a reason why Luis had let me believe he was dead. Could it be because of some army mission he wasn't allowed to talk about? I was hoping Keith was as curious as I was, that he'd help.

'If this is about the op, maybe Luis is already gone,' Keith said, staring into the bottom of his beer glass. 'You should think about letting him go. It might be safer.'

His comment riled me. 'What, I should just wait for someone else to figure out what's going on, to stay *safe*?' That wasn't how I operated.

'That's not what I meant,' he said. 'I'd say the same to anyone – and you've got a lot riding on the answer. Makes people think less clearly sometimes.'

'You're right,' I said. 'But I'm going to follow this through anyway. With or without your help.'

He nodded thoughtfully, as if he hadn't just dropped a live grenade between us, dangling the possibility of finding some answers.

'Well, then,' he said, like that was exactly what he needed to hear before we took this any further. 'Let's give Jessica a call.'

Chapter 30

Then

Nothing ever happens the way people warn you it will. Even falling in love.

The night I fell for Luis, there was no lightning. No grand declarations. No sense that I was stepping over a line I wouldn't be able to come back from.

We were lying on the floor of my apartment, backs against the couch, the movie we'd put on hours earlier long finished. A half-empty bottle of wine sat between us, forgotten. The city hummed through the open window. Sirens called somewhere in the distance, laughter drifting up from the street. A train rattled somewhere below, as if it were a million miles away.

Being with Luis felt effortless.

'Tell me something you've never told anyone,' I said, mostly to fill the quiet.

Luis smiled. Not stalling. Deciding what to share.

'How many secrets do you have?' I joked.

He laughed. 'I'm good at walking away,' he said finally.

I frowned. 'From what?'

'From situations that aren't going anywhere,' he replied. 'People, too. Friends. Girlfriends. I don't drag things out. If something isn't working, I leave before it turns ugly.'

It sounded reasonable. Healthy, even. The kind of self-awareness therapists seemed to find important.

'That's not really a secret,' I said.

'It is,' he replied softly. 'Most people don't like admitting how easily they can detach.' He reached for my hand then, tracing the inside of my wrist with his thumb – slow, absentminded, like he was memorizing the shape of me. It was something he did when he thought I wasn't paying attention.

I searched his face. 'Have you ever regretted walking away?'

His gaze met mine, steady. 'Regret doesn't help anyone.'

It sounded like something you'd say after doing some heavy soul-searching.

'But that's not really my secret,' he added.

'OK,' I said, rolling onto my side so that I was facing him.

For the first time that night, his easy confidence slipped. Just enough for me to see what was underneath.

‘I’m good at walking away, but I don’t think I could walk away from you,’ he said. ‘No matter what.’

The words settled low in my chest. Warm. Heavy.

I didn’t answer him with words. Instead, I leaned toward him, closing the space between us, my mouth finding his, as if I’d been waiting all night. He kissed me back with a hunger that surprised me, pulling me closer, pulling my shirt up over my head, tracing his way back down my arms. He unhooked my bra and pulled it free, pulling me gently toward him until there was no space left to doubt what he meant.

Our bodies moved against each other until there was nothing but breath and heat, the soft city noise drowned out. The world narrowed to the feel of his body against mine as my legs wrapped tighter around him.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard, our foreheads touching. Luis brushed his thumb along my jaw, pulled the throw rug from the sofa and covered us as we lay there.

‘Your turn,’ he said quietly. ‘Something you’ve never told anyone.’

‘I don’t like losing control,’ I said finally. ‘Not just in court. Anywhere.’

But that was exactly how I felt when I was with him. Like I wasn’t in control.

He didn’t interrupt. Just watched me.

‘When things start to spin,’ I went on, ‘when I can feel the ground shifting, something kicks into gear. I don’t wait for permission. I act.’

‘That’s why you like winning,’ he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

‘I prefer results,’ I corrected. ‘I’d rather ask forgiveness than permission.’

‘The world doesn’t reward hesitation,’ he said.

I nodded, relieved he hadn’t recoiled. Relieved he hadn’t looked at me like I’d just confessed something ugly.

He pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my lips. ‘We’re the same that way,’ he murmured.

At the time, I thought he meant ambition. Drive. Discipline. Later, I’d understand he meant something much darker.

We stayed on the floor long after the wine was gone, talking deep into the night. He asked about my childhood, my first case, the moment I

realized I liked standing up in a courtroom with everyone watching. I asked about his time overseas, careful not to push where he wasn't ready to go.

He told me stories that were funny, self-deprecating. But he also told me just enough about his time in the army to show how it had changed him.

We were still on the floor, the wine bottle empty and tipped on its side like it had given up on trying to stay upright. I told him about a client I had who kept bringing me blueberry muffins. 'Even after I told her I hated them,' I said. 'She was about as unlikable as her muffins.'

'Why'd she keep bringing them?' he asked.

'I don't know. I think it was all she could make.' I laughed. 'But I defended her anyway. Not because she was innocent – she wasn't. But because she would've folded under pressure and admitted to more than she had actually done, just to make it stop.'

'Why did you defend her if you didn't like her?'

I looked at him like I didn't quite understand his question. 'If I needed to like everyone I defended, I'd go out of business,' I said. 'I just need to believe they shouldn't be crushed. That they deserve a chance.'

He turned his head toward me then, his expression unguarded, something warm and genuine breaking through.

'See,' he said without thinking, 'that's why I love you—'

He stopped. The air shifted.

I lifted my head, looking at him. 'Did you just say you love me?' I teased, trying to keep it light, like my chest hadn't just tightened.

He didn't joke it away. Didn't retreat.

'I did,' he said simply. 'I wasn't planning to. It just . . . came out.'

I searched his face, waiting for doubt, for backtracking. Nothing.

A smile crept over my mouth before I could stop it. 'Good,' I said. 'Because I was just thinking I might be falling for you.'

He exhaled, pulling me closer. We kissed slowly.

Much later, when he finally fell asleep beside me, one arm heavy across my waist, I lay awake listening to his breathing, feeling absurdly content. Like maybe we'd found something special. I remember thinking how rare that was – to show someone your sharp edges and know they wanted you anyway.

I curled up in his arms and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 31

Now

I dialed Jessica's number, half expecting her phone to be off as her world wound down for the night. My hands shook slightly as I held the phone.

'Hey, it's me,' I said when she answered. My voice sounded steadier than I felt. 'Can you come meet me? It's . . . kind of urgent.'

'Uh, Mackenzie, it's ten p.m. Are you drunk?' Her tone was equal parts disbelief and worry.

'No. Not really. Just – please. I need to talk to someone who can think straight.'

She let out a breath, heavy with reluctant concern. If she didn't think I was drunk before, she probably did now. 'I'm only doing this because you're my best friend . . . and I'm worried about you, Kenz.'

'Thank you,' I said, meaning it. She was the only person I trusted enough to help make sense of the impossible – even if she didn't believe I'd seen Luis.

Maybe that was a good thing. She could stress-test everything that had happened.

But after what Keith said, it felt more urgent. If Luis was alive, he might be involved in something dangerous. No mission was so secret that you should have to die to be a part of it. Literally or figuratively.

Whatever it was, it sounded like it might get him killed. For real this time.

I texted Jessica the address. Forty minutes and another beer later, she arrived, looking every bit the professional she was. Blazer, slacks, hair carefully done, subtle makeup. It was second nature to her; she was always 'on'. I rarely saw her in jeans and a sweatshirt, let alone track pants. To say she caught the attention of the bar's clientele was an understatement.

She stepped inside and immediately noticed me perched tensely on a barstool, half-empty glass of beer beside me.

Her brow furrowed. Then she caught sight of Keith sitting next to me.

'Hey,' she said, approaching us warily.

'Jess!' I hadn't been sure she'd actually come. But there she was, awake and ready to listen.

‘Who’s . . . this?’ Her voice was tight, cautious. I could see the judgment already forming in her eyes as she took in Keith’s appearance. Scruffy hair, stubble, wrinkled clothes. She looked him up and down like she was assessing a wild animal.

‘This is Keith,’ I said, trying to sound casual, measured. ‘He . . . he’s a friend.’ I tried to control the slight slur in my voice. If Jessica thought I was too drunk, she wasn’t going to take me seriously.

Keith gave a small nod. A smile. ‘Evening.’ His grin didn’t reach his eyes. He looked rough, intense, and just a little intimidating.

Jessica was clearly put off by him, and the smile she offered in return came off as more of a grimace. She shot me a pointed look. ‘You didn’t tell me you had company.’

I gave a sheepish shrug. ‘I wasn’t sure you’d come.’

‘I wouldn’t have,’ she muttered, but there was no real bite to her words.

‘Well, there you go. Lucky she didn’t tell you,’ Keith countered.

‘It’s OK,’ I said quickly, ‘he’s chill.’

Maybe I’d had a little more to drink than I should have.

“Chill”?” she echoed disbelievingly. ‘OK.’ She slid onto a stool like she already knew she was making a mistake.

I leaned forward, elbows on the table, trying to convey urgency without panicking. ‘Keith and I – well, we’re trying to understand something about Luis. About his military past. His PTSD. We think it’s . . . relevant to the stuff that’s happening now.’

Jessica glanced at Keith, then back at me. ‘Relevant to what stuff?’ she asked, her eyes slightly narrowed.

I wasn’t winning her over.

I swallowed, trying to keep my voice steady. ‘We think his “death” might not have been what it seemed. It might’ve been planned. Keith told me Luis was part of an op in the army, and we’re wondering if they weren’t done with it yet.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You mean . . . the army faked his death to send him on a secret mission?’

Keith leaned forward. ‘Well, when you put it like that . . .’ he said. ‘Listen, when I knew Luis, his transformation was . . . strange. He was picked for training and kinda went rogue. We think maybe he was part of a military program or something similar. I’m wondering if that had something to do with his unfortunate early “death”.’

‘Or worse,’ I added. ‘Maybe his special ops days caught up to him. There’s always the other side of war. The side you’re fighting against.’

Jessica recoiled slightly, glancing between the two of us. ‘I . . . I don’t know. I can talk about PTSD, stress responses, military conditioning – but I’m not sure it’ll help right now.’

‘That’s all I want,’ I said. ‘To learn what I can, see if this starts making any sense.’

Keith nodded like he agreed.

Jess seemed surprised I’d found someone who believed me. She stared openly at Keith, doing that silent observation thing I’d seen her do.

Keith’s grin widened. ‘Relax, Doc. I’m just here to help figure out what the hell happened to her husband.’

‘Keith and Luis were in the army together,’ I explained, leaning closer, my voice dropping. ‘Jess, I need your help. We need to understand if . . . Luis could’ve been manipulated.’ I told her about the way Luis took their tasks to the extreme, like Keith had said, but then I added, ‘I’m wondering if he might be capable of things he wouldn’t usually do.’

I wasn’t ready to tell Keith all of it yet. I didn’t know him well enough, and there were things I wasn’t ready to tell Jessica either.

Like how I suspected my husband had been keeping things from me for months.

I focused on what I could say. ‘Sometimes, Luis struggled with what happened during his deployment. He grew distant, drank a little more, but it usually passed.’

Keith shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he knew what it was like to hide.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that before?’ Jessica looked at me, then perhaps not expecting an answer, and weighing the situation, the hour, and the desperate look on my face, said, ‘Fine. I’ll stay. But only if you stop drinking.’

‘Done,’ I said, pushing my half-empty beer glass away. The beer wasn’t great anyway.

Keith picked it up and drained the remainder. ‘Just so you’re not tempted,’ he said, holding up a hand, mock-sworn in. ‘I’m done, too.’

The three of us sat in tense silence for a moment. Once we started digging, there was no going back.

Chapter 32

Now

Jessica leaned back on her stool, stretching to her full height, trying to ignore Keith's stare.

'All right,' she said, voice careful. 'So, you want to know about psychological conditioning in the military.'

'Nah,' said Keith, waving a hand. 'I'm familiar with the conditioning part. We want to know how some people might respond to it. Like if sometimes it can make people apathetic.'

'OK,' said Jessica. 'So, you already know the military trains its soldiers to respond automatically to commands, to suppress emotional responses, to follow orders under extreme stress. It's not just discipline – it's almost like rewiring the brain to cope under extreme conditions, so it doesn't freeze.'

My eyes sharp, the beer starting to wear off, I was absorbing every word Jessica said.

'Could that same training be weaponized to persuade a soldier to attack an innocent person?'

Jessica frowned. 'It's possible. If the conditioning is extreme. Combined with trauma or manipulation, people can act against their moral compass. PTSD doesn't make someone violent automatically, but conditioning and trauma together . . . they can create obedience, aggression, even dissociation from their own actions.'

Keith thumped the table, voice urgent. 'That's exactly it. Maybe someone broke him down.'

Jessica turned in her seat. 'OK. Let's not jump to any conclusions.' Her gaze homed in on me. 'Why did you bring me down here in the middle of the night to ask me about this? Did Luis ever hurt you, Kenzie?' she asked.

A look passed between me and Keith. How much were we willing to tell Jessica? Right now, we were trying to figure out why Luis had walked out on his own life.

'No,' I said carefully. 'There was one time . . . He'd just woken from a nightmare. He wasn't really awake. He . . . he grabbed me by the throat. But only for a moment. He didn't know it was me. When he realized, he was . . . terrified at what he'd done.'

Jessica's face tightened, unease flashing in her eyes. 'A trigger might cause that reaction, like a dream,' she said softly. 'Something sets him off,

he responds violently without realizing why. It's a sleep-induced reaction. He isn't aware of it while he's doing it. It can be a very scary experience.'

Keith nodded sharply. 'Exactly. And that's why we wanted to talk to you, Doc.'

Jessica frowned, glancing at me. 'Why do you want to know about this now, when . . .' She didn't need to finish her sentence. *When he's dead.*

'If he's alive,' said Keith, 'he could be different to how he was before. We don't know what he's caught up in, but I've heard things. Not officially, but . . .'

Jessica shot him a look. 'I understand why Mackenzie wants to believe Luis is alive, but why are you encouraging her?' she asked.

'Because,' said Keith simply, 'I believe her.'

'I need to know why he didn't come home, Jess. And before you tell me it's stress and whatever else talking—' I stopped, my voice raw. 'I know how it sounds, OK? But I'm not crazy.'

Keith leaned in, eyes sharp. 'OK,' he said, trying a new angle. 'Assuming Luis is alive, we need to know how he's changed. We need to make sure she's safe.' He shot me a concerned glance, like he could feel every ounce of fear I was trying to hide.

I could tell Jess still didn't believe us, but she wasn't writing it off entirely either. Not anymore.

'Assuming Luis was alive, that what we've told you is a possibility, if he came back home, could he be dangerous?' asked Keith, shooting another worried look my way, like he thought I'd be the first one he came after.

Jessica's lips pressed into a thin line. 'If he's had some kind of break, it's possible. But that's very rare. You would probably notice the deterioration over time.'

Keith's eyes lit up, like she'd just made a good point. 'Time? Like four or five months?' He clasped his hands, cracked his knuckles. 'That's how long he's been gone, right?'

Jessica ignored him, fixing her gaze on me. 'And you're sure it was him? You saw *Luis*?'

'I saw Luis,' I said firmly, heart hammering. 'Unless he has an identical twin he never told me about. The only thing that made me doubt it for even a second is the fact that he didn't seem to know me. He didn't react to me at all.'

Keith leaned back, finally looking satisfied. 'Then we find him. Confirm it was Luis for the princess here.' He gave a little tilt of his head toward Jessica.

Jessica shot him a look that could cut glass.

'I've already searched,' I said. I'd checked out a few things while I was going through our bank account. 'Wherever he is, he's not going by Luis. He could have changed his name, or he's lying low.' I pressed a hand to my temple, the noise in the bar suddenly overwhelming. 'I don't know what to think. Maybe he wants to disappear, or he's hiding.'

I knew there were worse options.

'Or maybe, wherever he is, someone is stopping him from talking to Mackenzie,' said Keith, voicing what I couldn't.

'I'm not sure we should be digging around in this,' said Jessica. 'Even if Luis is alive, why would he want to change his name and disappear?' Her eyes darted left and right. This conversation was making her nervous. 'Maybe he had a reason for disappearing, and he doesn't want to be found.'

'A reason?' I said, suddenly angry. 'For letting me think he's dead?'

'Calm down.' She shook her head. 'It's not likely, is it?'

I took a breath. I did need to calm down. Getting mad at Jess wasn't going to help anything. 'I just need to make sure he's all right and then I'll leave it alone. If he doesn't want to be a part of my life anymore, that's fine. I'll respect that.'

Keith rapped on the table. 'Then let's get to work, start mapping out what we know. Where he was when you saw him, and anything else we can put together. Maybe we can figure this out.' Jessica rubbed her temples, muttering under her breath, 'I feel like I just walked into a war zone.'

I gave a grim smile. 'More like a minefield.'

Jess yawned. It was getting late.

'Maybe we should come up with a strategy somewhere a little quieter. Like my house,' I said.

Chapter 33

Now

We drove back to my place, Jess waiting for me to buckle into the passenger seat of her car before leaving the parking lot.

The ride was silent except for the rhythmic swish of tires against wet asphalt, the city stretching away behind us like it wanted no part in what we were doing. Streetlights streaked past the windows, blurring into something indistinct.

It was close to midnight when I flicked on the living room lamp, the low amber glow throwing long, spidery shadows across the walls. The room felt colder than it should, like a window had been left open. I went to the casement window and checked, just to be sure, but it was closed and locked.

Tess padded out from the hallway, tail wagging.

‘Well, who’s this?’ Keith asked, crouching low, his voice instantly lighter.

‘Oh, that’s Just Tess,’ I said, the joke even funnier to my tired brain in the middle of the night.

‘Tess!’ Keith gave a sharp whistle. The pup bounded over, tripping over her own paws in her rush to greet him.

Jess smiled despite herself. ‘Hi, Tess.’

‘Nice place,’ Keith said, straightening. His gaze skimmed over the furniture, the framed photos, the orderliness of it all. ‘I don’t know where to sit. Don’t wanna mess anything up.’

‘Sit wherever you like,’ I said.

Keith drifted toward the window. Tess followed, nails clicking on the floorboards, her head tilted toward him like she already trusted him. He peered through the glass, and my stomach dipped when I realized what he was looking at.

I joined him at the window.

Next door, Greg’s house sat in darkness, except for one light still flickering upstairs. Was Greg still up, or was it just faulty wiring in a forgotten attic?

‘What’s with the haunted house?’ Keith asked. His tone was casual, but his eyes betrayed his curiosity.

‘That’s Greg’s house,’ I said.

‘He live alone?’

‘Yeah. I think so.’

‘In that big house, all by himself? And he’s home Friday night? The guy needs some adventure in his life.’

I looked at Keith. I could imagine him taking off on an adventure if he ever got too comfortable. He seemed like someone who liked to stay on his toes. He probably slept on the floor, working on his survival skills, keeping his body tough and his mind strong.

Keith’s stomach growled, the sound amplified in the contemplative quiet. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘You got anything to eat?’

I found a half-stale bag of chips in the cupboard and tossed it to him. ‘Might want to check the expiry.’

He didn’t. Two handfuls later, he held the bag out to Jessica, who shook her head, watching him like you might watch an animal at the zoo during feeding time.

Keith was about to dip back into the bag, but my words stopped him.

‘There was a break-in,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘They tried to get in through the kitchen window.’

‘Let’s take a look,’ said Keith, sounding almost eager to have something to do instead of sitting around talking.

I led them into the kitchen. Jess was unusually quiet, and I felt bad for keeping her awake so late.

‘Here,’ I said, stopping at the kitchen window. Up close, you couldn’t see where it had been damaged, but Keith angled his head, as if seeing something I couldn’t.

‘They painted over the crack,’ he said, going to the kitchen bench and gesturing toward the knives. ‘Do you mind if I . . .?’

I saw Jess shift uncomfortably.

‘Go ahead,’ I said.

He pulled a knife from the block and went back to the window, scraping at the brand-new paint, sliding the tip of the knife along the edge so that the paint came away, exposing the damage. ‘See, the hinge has been replaced, but the wood was painted over.’ He dug out some paint and poxy until he got to what he was looking for. ‘Someone worked at it,’ he said, running the knife along the crack. ‘You should have it fixed properly.’

‘So the police were right,’ Jess murmured.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Someone tried to get in. Or got in but left without taking anything.’

Keith nodded, locking in. ‘All right. What else do we know?’

I hesitated, then went to the console table. I opened the drawer and took out the envelope. Keith took it from me, turning it over. He opened it, inhaled, then covered his nose with his hand, his expression changing.

‘Jesus,’ he muttered. He held the card away slightly and looked at me. ‘Was he still wearing that shit?’

My stomach dropped. ‘You recognize it?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘It got passed around when we ran out of deodorant. We were worried the enemy would smell us. I guess it was better than the stench of sweat, which would’ve given us away anyway. That smell’s kind of burned into my memory.’

‘He wore it all the time,’ I said quietly.

Keith read the message and slid the card back into the envelope. ‘This wasn’t random.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘They wanted me to write my answer on a piece of paper. They said they’ll collect it.’

Jess folded her arms. ‘How?’

‘They didn’t list a number,’ I said. ‘They don’t want me to contact them. They said they’ll come back for it, but they didn’t say when.’

Jess looked away, like she wasn’t sure how to respond.

‘Are you gonna go?’ Keith asked.

The house creaked softly around us, settling.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘You could go to the police,’ suggested Keith.

‘Wouldn’t that be dangerous?’ asked Jess, unexpectedly.

I turned, surprised. Usually she would’ve been all for it.

‘I’m just saying,’ she clarified. ‘In these situations, don’t people eventually ask for ransoms, or something? If he was alive, you could be putting him in more danger.’

Keith’s lip jutted. ‘Ransom? Unlikely after so many months. See, the problem here is, no one’s gonna believe Mackenzie saw her husband. So, an exclusive Tupperware invitation might not get their attention.’

‘So you don’t think they want money?’ Jess asked Keith, who shrugged.

‘I told the police about the note,’ I said. ‘They pretty much agreed with Keith, that it looks like some fancy junk mail I’d forgotten about.’

Keith nodded once. 'OK. So we don't wait for them to follow it up. We find out what we can. What else?'

I drew a breath. 'Luis got off at Barkley Station the day I saw him.'

Jess frowned. 'Barkley? Does he know anyone there?'

'Not that I know of,' I said. 'But a lot can change in four months.'

Keith wiped his hands on his jeans. 'I think I've got our next move,' he said.

I felt my pulse kick. 'Go on.'

'We check out Barkley Station.'

Jessica blinked. 'You're not serious.'

Keith grinned. 'Why not?'

Jessica looked at me, silently begging me to come up with a reason why we couldn't go. But I was already thinking it through – Luis getting off the train, the timing, the note. 'It makes sense,' I said. 'We should take a look.'

'Even if Luis was there then,' reasoned Jessica, 'it doesn't mean he's there now.'

'Maybe not,' I admitted. 'But it's a start.'

Keith tilted his head, a shadow passing across his face. 'Here's the thing,' he said slowly. 'When Luis was dismissed, he mentioned he was going somewhere to debrief. We talked about it because we were both from Massachusetts.' He cleared his throat.

'Where was he going?' I asked.

'Barkley,' he said.

The room felt suddenly smaller. That couldn't be a coincidence.

'We need to go to that station,' I said.

I was getting closer to finding out what really happened to my husband. I could feel it.

Chapter 34

Then

When I first noticed something was wrong, it didn't feel dangerous.

It felt inconvenient.

Like a patch. Something we could iron out if we took the time to.

Luis started coming home later than usual. He always had a reason. A problem at the office. A meeting that ran long. Someone who needed him. One drink that turned into two. 'Sorry,' he'd say, kissing my cheek, already distracted. 'I lost track of time.'

I believed him. At least, I wanted to. But there was always something, just outside of my consciousness, that stopped me.

We were still good. Better than good. When we were together, we only had eyes for each other. We still slept tangled together, limbs overlapping like we were afraid the other might slip away if we let go. On weekends we stayed in bed too long, sunlight creeping across the walls while we talked about everything and nothing.

But sometimes, when his phone buzzed, he'd turn it face down without thinking. It was a small thing. Easy to rationalize. Everyone needed privacy. But I couldn't shake the feeling there was something he wasn't telling me. Something I should know.

I remembered Luis telling me he loved me, the same night he'd said he was good at walking away. He'd said he'd never walk away from me, but maybe that was just a line. Maybe he knew he'd walk away one day. Disappear out of my life.

Around that time he started asking more questions too, mostly about my work. Not the kind he used to ask, curious. Proud. But sharper. More strategic than interested.

'Do you ever worry,' he said once, swirling wine in his glass – we'd just finished dinner – 'about the people you defend?'

I laughed. 'That's kind of the job.'

'I mean morally,' he pressed. 'Do you ever feel like you're protecting the wrong people?'

I studied him. 'You don't usually talk like this.'

He smiled, quick and charming. 'Just thinking out loud.'

'Everyone deserves a chance to prove their innocence,' I answered, starting to clear plates. I'd told him this once before, and I still believed it.

He threw his napkin down on his plate as I whisked it away, swallowing a mouthful of steak. 'You don't need to handle everything yourself,' he said, looking for something to wipe his hands on.

I tossed him the napkin he'd discarded. 'Well, you're never here in time to help with dinner, and the dishes need clearing, so I'm clearing them,' I retorted.

'That's the problem,' he said. 'You didn't even ask if I was finished.'

'Are you finished?' I asked, sarcastically.

He wiped his hands and threw the napkin back on the plate. 'I am now.'

I took the dishes into the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher, careful not to place them in too hard in case they chipped.

When I returned to the kitchen, Luis was still seated. 'You spend plenty of time at the office too,' he said.

I bristled. 'I defend people who would be spending their lives in jail, Luis,' I said.

He looked hurt, and I knew what he was thinking. That I thought my job was more important. That if I spent extra time at the office, it was because it was meaningful.

'I know.' His voice was calm. Tired. 'But it's always about your cases and clients. You don't leave room for anyone else.'

I snapped then, sharp and immediate. 'You knew who I was when you married me. You used to like that about me.'

Something flickered in his eyes. Not anger. Assessment. 'I just thought eventually you'd ease off a little and make time,' he said. 'For us.'

I scooped up the salad and left the room. Why was I justifying my office time when he was the one who'd come home late again?

Later, he apologized. He always did. He was good at it, but it didn't have the same effect anymore. Tomorrow, he'd probably come home even later, the stench of beer lingering underneath his cologne.

I awoke that night and found the covers on his side of the bed pulled back. Luis was gone.

I lay there quietly, waiting for him to return, but I waited long enough that I drifted back to sleep. The next morning, his side of the bed was still empty, and he'd left a pack of my favorite bagels in the kitchen with a note.

Had to go in early. Love you.

He'd even written it on fancy stationery. Black embossed card with white ink. Like a chalkboard.

The worst part was how good we were when things were good, and how much we could hurt each other when they weren't.

When Luis wanted me, he wanted *only* me. His attention was consuming. Intoxicating. It made the doubts feel small and petty by comparison.

I didn't want to be the kind of woman who nitpicked happiness to death.

So, when I was at work one afternoon, going through some files, and I found Luis's name in our system, I told myself it was nothing to worry about.

When Elizabeth waved it off, saying it was a misunderstanding, a business matter that had already been resolved, I chose to believe her.

Because believing meant I didn't have to look closer and risk losing the thing I was most afraid to lose.

Later, lying beside Luis in the dark, his hand resting possessively on my waist, I wondered – not for the first time – whether love was supposed to feel this tight.

This consuming.

Or whether I was mistaking suffocation for love.

At the time, I pushed the thought away.

Some imperfections, I told myself, were just the cost of loving deeply.

It never occurred to me they were the first warnings that something was very wrong.

Chapter 35

Now

Jessica yawned and stood. 'It's late,' she said. 'I need to get home.'

As much as I wanted to disagree and keep going, my eyelids were getting heavier by the minute.

She moved closer and hugged me. 'I'm sorry, Kenzie. I'm working a half day tomorrow.'

'On Saturday?'

Jess scoffed. 'Like you're one to talk.'

She looked over her shoulder, lowering her voice, making sure Keith couldn't hear us. 'But I'm not comfortable leaving you here with him.'

I looked over to where Keith was scratching Tess's ear and frowned.

'He's not that bad.'

She snorted softly. 'He's creepy. He smells like old beer and cigarettes. You're obviously not thinking clearly.' Her tone was teasing, but her eyes weren't. 'Just . . . call me if you need to. And don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

That didn't leave many options, but I smiled anyway. 'Are you sure you don't want to crash here? You know I make a mean breakfast bagel.'

Jessica yawned. 'No, I've got an early start. Promise you'll call?'

'Promise.'

She hugged me tight, leaving behind the scent of her perfume and the weight of her warning. When I turned back, Keith was sitting cross-legged on the floor, one hand out for Tess. She was gnawing on his finger a little too hard, tail wagging.

'She's got spirit,' he said with a grin. 'She needs a bone to chew on.'

'I'll get her one tomorrow,' I said, hoping he'd take the hint. It was late. I was tired. We knew what our next steps were, but we had to be awake enough to execute them.

He didn't move, apparently immune to social cues. Instead, he leaned back against the couch, legs stretched out, eyes tracking me with lazy amusement. 'What did you think of your friend's assessment?'

'Good,' I said too quickly.

He laughed under his breath. 'You sure you're not just saying that because she's your friend?'

'You don't agree?'

‘I don’t disagree.’ His grin widened, playful but edged. ‘Now that she’s gone, we can get down to real business.’

‘It’s past midnight,’ I said.

He tilted his head, eyes glinting. ‘You tired, counselor?’

My skin prickled.

‘I am tired,’ I said. ‘And I don’t need a lecture.’

Keith smiled, unbothered. ‘Good. I hate lectures.’

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, then remembered himself and tucked it back away. Tess watched the movement with interest.

‘I’m not saying we do anything tonight,’ he said. ‘I’m saying there’s something you should know before tomorrow.’

I folded my arms. ‘About what?’

‘Barkley.’

‘What about it?’ I asked.

He didn’t answer straight away. He scratched Tess behind the ears, slow, methodical, like he was buying time.

‘There’s a reason people get off there,’ he said finally. ‘And it’s not because it’s convenient.’

‘That’s vague,’ I said.

‘Intentionally.’ He glanced up at me. ‘You ever notice how some places don’t advertise what they’re for, but people are drawn to them anyway? Barkley is like that.’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘I’m saying, I don’t think it’ll be immediately obvious. We might have to look beyond the tourist shit. You know?’

I think I did. Whatever it was that brought Luis there might not be clear at first.

‘Listen, if we get there and we find nothing, fine. But that doesn’t mean we should give up. That’s all I’m saying.’

‘What do you think is happening?’

Keith shrugged uncomfortably, like maybe he had a theory he didn’t think I’d like. I watched him expectantly. He wasn’t getting out of it that easily.

‘OK, fine,’ he said. ‘In the military, we’d usually debrief after a mission. You know, talk about it and whatever. But sometimes, real debriefing means getting away from it all and just taking a break.’

‘You think he needed a break from me?’ I asked, disbelief making my voice rise.

‘I’m just saying,’ he said, holding up his hands in mock innocence. ‘Not from you, but from his life. Or something in it.’

‘Then he could’ve just gone on a holiday,’ I protested. ‘Not faked his own death.’

‘Maybe he’s running from something,’ said Keith, finally realizing it was time to leave. He stood, stopping at the door. ‘We’ll figure it out.’

The door clicked shut behind him before I could respond, leaving me thinking it might be the last I saw of him.

Chapter 36

Now

The knock came just after eight on Saturday morning.
Not the polite, tentative knock of a well-meaning neighbor.
Three firm taps.

Whoever it was sounded impatient.

I went to the window first to see what I was dealing with, expecting Murphy and Davidson's patrol car to be sitting out front. Instead, there was a sporty-looking Honda Civic I hadn't seen before.

'Who could that be?' I asked Tess, but she looked as stumped as I was.

I opened the door and found Sofia standing there, coat still on, hair pulled back tight, eyes already scanning past me into the house.

My eyes widened. She wasn't who I was expecting. 'That your car?' I asked, thumb pointing toward the Civic.

'Yeah,' she said, slowly noticing my surprise. 'What? I like cars and when you're driving a baby around all night trying to get them to sleep, sometimes changing gears is all you've got to keep you awake.'

I smiled. Luis liked cars too. It had obviously been a shared interest of theirs. 'I didn't picture you as a rev head,' I said.

'Yeah, well . . . You alone?' Sofia asked.

'Yes,' I said.

She stepped inside without waiting for an invitation and shut the door behind her, clasping her hands.

'I should have told you something before,' she said. 'But I didn't want to cause any more trouble. You seemed like you had enough going on.'

I went to the kitchen and reached for two mugs. 'Tea or coffee?'

She didn't look thrilled by either option.

'Mimosas,' I amended, pulling two champagne flutes from the cupboard and filling them with Prosecco and OJ.

Sofia smiled and took hers. 'Thanks.'

'Thanks for stopping by,' I said once we were settled at the island bench. I didn't remember mentioning where I lived. In my line of work, I was careful where my information was shared and who might access it. 'What's up?'

She didn't answer right away, looking around the room. At the couch, the window, the framed photos of Luis and me. I looked outside to where

Tess was exploring the backyard, a chew toy in her mouth. When I looked back, Sofia was staring out the window, fidgeting nervously with the stem of her glass.

Whatever she had to say, she wasn't sure she should be saying it.

'Sofia, are you all right?'

She nodded unconvincingly. 'When Luis and I were together,' she began, then stopped. Swallowed. 'Things went from a kind of fairy tale to a nightmare.'

There was sadness in her tone, not just sadness for herself and what she'd lost, but for Luis too.

'I told you that after he came back from service . . . he was different?'

I nodded. We'd gone over this before, but I could see Sofia needed to ease herself back into it before she could tell me the rest.

'He was angry,' she continued. 'Not all the time. That's the thing. It came in waves. I didn't notice it at first. He started therapy, but it was almost like that made it worse.' She stopped, resting her hand against her mouth. 'I guess it brought it all up again. Made him relive it. Maybe it was too much. I don't think he was ready for it.'

'So, you're saying his behavior changed *after* he left the army?'

She looked at me, like she didn't want to say it, like she wasn't sure what it meant. 'He'd be calm, charming even. And then something would snap, like a switch had been flipped. He hit me once.' She glanced at the framed photograph of Luis and me on the wall, but didn't comment on it.

My chest tightened.

'He'd never done that before. He was looking for ways to cope,' she said. 'He was drinking every night.'

I knew exactly what she meant. I had been through it with him too, some of his darker moods making me feel disoriented, like the life I thought we had had been flipped on its head. It left me feeling like I didn't know who I was, trying to justify to myself why I stayed. I hadn't known him before the army, but I could imagine Sofia's shock at the change. He'd never hit me, though.

'He hated the idea of being broken,' said Sofia. 'It made him feel weak.'

I shifted my weight, suddenly very aware of how still the room had gone. I couldn't ask Sofia to trust me with her story if I wasn't offering something of my own.

‘Sofia, my friend is a psychologist,’ I said carefully. ‘We were talking recently about military conditioning, what repeated exposure to violence or torture can do to someone. She said it can make people more susceptible to manipulation, or push them to act out of character.’

Sofia considered that, her gaze fixed on something past my shoulder.

‘I don’t think Luis’s behavior had anything to do with the military,’ she said finally. ‘I think it was whatever happened after that changed him.’

Jess’s words surfaced unbidden. *The combination of conditioning and trauma can rewire someone.* Then what Keith had said. *Maybe someone broke him down.*

Maybe Luis hadn’t snapped. Maybe something had unraveled him. One piece at a time.

‘One night,’ Sofia said, her voice dropping, ‘a couple of months after he got back, he came to bed late.’

My breath hitched. At what she was about to say, or at the thought of them in bed together?

‘I was already asleep,’ she continued, ‘but when I heard him, I woke up. I didn’t realize it was him. It didn’t feel like him.’ She shook her head slowly. ‘The sound of his footsteps. The . . . presence. I lay there, completely still, trying to work out if someone had broken into the apartment.’

Fear crept up my spine, cold and intimate. Dread at what was coming next.

‘I spoke to him,’ she said. ‘I said his name. I still don’t know if he ignored me, or if he couldn’t hear me at all. It was like he was somewhere else. Like he’d left his body behind.’

Exactly like how he had been at the train station.

Sofia tightened her grip on the glass. ‘He took a pillow,’ she said quietly, ‘and pressed it over my face.’

The room lurched.

For a moment I couldn’t breathe. My vision narrowed, the edges dimming, like my body had decided this was too much to process at once.

‘I don’t even know how I got free,’ Sofia went on. ‘Instinct, maybe. I rolled. Kicked. I ran. I left that night.’ Her voice faltered. ‘I don’t let myself think about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t.’

The words settled heavily between us, pressing down on my chest until it hurt to inhale. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said numbly. The apology felt inadequate.

Useless. But my instinct, which had guided me more times than I could count, told me she wasn't lying.

'Mackenzie,' Sofia said, 'I don't know what Luis was involved in, but I think whatever it was, it was dangerous.' She hesitated. 'I wouldn't go digging into it.'

I didn't respond.

She watched my face, trying to read my expression, deciding on her next move. 'I hoped if you spoke to Keith, he might put you off,' she admitted. 'But then I remembered the look on your face when you came by my house. Nothing was going to stop you.'

I didn't deny it.

Her mouth tightened. 'I hope this does.'

There was a roaring in my ears now, my pulse thrumming loudly. Images collided – Luis's calm smile, his steady hands. But beyond that, the way he'd always insisted on order. On being *strong*. Underneath it all, was there a broken man, the man Sofia was describing? Luis had never seemed broken. He was always so collected, so put together.

'I haven't stopped thinking about the photo you showed me,' Sofia said. 'The woman at his grave.'

My stomach dropped. I hadn't stopped thinking about her either.

'I think I might know who it is.'

Something sharp cut through me – fear, yes, but also something else.

'Luis used to have this friend,' Sofia continued. 'They were . . . close.' She searched for the right word. 'I wondered if they were more, but he always denied it.'

My hands curled into fists at my sides. It would explain why she appeared to be crying at his grave.

'What was her name?' I asked.

Sofia hesitated.

'Elena Farrell.'

I hadn't heard that name before. 'Luis never mentioned her,' I said. 'Maybe they had a falling-out.'

'Maybe,' said Sofia. 'They were best friends, but Luis was good at compartmentalizing. To the point of being secretive. And I was never invited into their friendship.'

I pictured the woman again. The bowed head, the stillness of her body, the way she'd stood just far back enough to avoid being noticed.

‘If you knew about her . . .’ I asked. ‘Why wouldn’t he have told me?’
Sofia’s answer was quiet. Careful.

‘Because whatever she shared with Luis,’ she said, ‘wasn’t meant for his wife.’

The room felt colder.

I thought of the life I’d built with him. The parts he’d let me see. The parts he hadn’t.

I wondered whether Luis’s secrets were kept out of deception, or out of necessity.

*

After Sofia left, the house didn’t feel empty. It felt like there was someone close by, watching.

I went to the drawer, where I’d left the invitation, not sure I’d find what I was looking for.

It wasn’t at the top, so I dug deeper, turning over bits and pieces I’d accumulated when I couldn’t think of where else to put them. Pens. Books. Old mail. A sewing kit I’d never used.

I pulled the drawer from its runner and tore everything out.

The invitation wasn’t there.

Whatever Luis had been a part of didn’t end when he died.

It was still watching.

Chapter 37

Now

My phone buzzed. After searching for Elena Farrell online, and coming up empty-handed, I'd left it on silent to enjoy my Saturday afternoon walking Tess.

I hadn't called Keith after last night. Not yet. I wanted to be sure.

Tess raced through the park, nose to the ground like she was tracking something only she could see.

I fumbled around her harness to answer the call. 'Hey Carl,' I said, adjusting the earbuds in my ears.

'Mackenzie!' He sounded rushed. 'I've found something. A few somethings actually.'

'On a Saturday? Shouldn't you be spending time with Michael?'

The afternoon sun suddenly felt undeserved while Carl was still looking for answers.

'Don't get sentimental. He's quite happy enjoying some sun on the deck. You *know* Saturday night is when I shine.'

I slowed my pace, tightening my grip on Tess's leash, smiling to myself, glad of the levity. Carl was an endless stream of energy. 'OK. Start talking.'

'I looked into the Coterie Institute. They trade under Farrell Enterprises.'

I stopped walking.

Farrell.

Elena Farrell.

The woman Sofia had said was friends with Luis.

'What kind of enterprise?' I asked.

'Consulting,' he said. 'Formed three years ago. Registered out of Delaware. No listed employees.'

'A shell company,' I said.

'Textbook,' Carl replied. 'Here's the interesting part. They don't advertise. They don't solicit. They don't invoice in the traditional sense.'

'How do they make money?' I asked.

'They don't,' he said. 'They *move* it.'

A chill crept up my spine.

'I pulled bank activity tied to the firm,' he went on.

'*Our* firm?'

‘Yeah. Routine stuff at first. Trust accounts. Escrow movements. But about six months ago, there’s a line item that doesn’t fit.’

I already knew what he was going to say.

‘A retainer,’ he said. ‘Paid into the firm’s operating account. Not huge. Just enough to look ordinary.’

‘From Farrell Enterprises,’ I said.

‘Yes.’

I closed my eyes briefly.

‘And before you ask,’ Carl added, ‘no client file attached. No billing narrative. No corresponding case number.’

‘That shouldn’t be possible,’ I said.

‘It is,’ he replied. ‘If the payment came through Elizabeth’s, or your, discretionary intake channel.’

Of course. ‘Well, it wasn’t through mine,’ I said.

‘I figured.’

Tess tugged at the leash, impatient. I followed her to a nearby bench and sat, the world rushing around me.

‘How many times?’ I asked.

Carl hesitated. ‘Four.’

I swallowed.

‘It gets better,’ he said. ‘Guess who paid for representation for your new client, Rebecca?’

‘Farrell Enterprises?’ I guessed, tongue-in-cheek.

‘Farrell fucking Enterprises.’

The pieces didn’t click so much as slide into place, quietly, like they’d always been waiting.

I quickly told Carl about Elena Farrell. ‘I’m starting to think “Elena” isn’t a person so much as a function. An alias tied to an account for a specific purpose,’ I said, wondering if the woman, Luis’s friend, was really called Elena.

‘That’s my read,’ Carl agreed. ‘A financial mask. Something you route things through when you don’t want names attached.’

‘But why use it now? I couldn’t find anything on Elena Farrell online. It’s like she doesn’t exist—’

‘—because maybe she doesn’t,’ finished Carl.

I looked down at Tess, blissfully gnawing on a stick. ‘Carl,’ I said, ‘how exposed am I?’

There was a pause on the line. ‘Legally?’ he said. ‘Not yet. You didn’t authorize the intake. You didn’t control the account.’

‘But?’

‘But you’ve defended at least two people whose fees trace back to the same source,’ he said. ‘That’s a pattern. And patterns get noticed.’

I exhaled slowly. ‘OK.’

‘I’m not done,’ Carl said. ‘There’s something else.’

My stomach tightened. ‘Go on.’

‘I got a call from a contact at the DA’s office,’ he said. ‘Off the record.’

I didn’t like the sound of that.

‘They’ve picked Rebecca up,’ he said. ‘An hour ago.’

‘What?’ I stood abruptly, Tess scrambling to keep up.

‘She’s been arrested,’ Carl confirmed. ‘Arson-related charges. They’re moving fast.’

‘That’s too fast,’ I said. ‘They didn’t have enough evidence.’

‘They do now,’ he replied. ‘Search warrant turned up something they’re calling “new corroboration”.’

‘Do you know what that something is?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Carl said. ‘But whatever it is, it pushed them over the line.’

I closed my eyes, my thoughts racing.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘We’re not supposed to know about it yet, so we sit on this until she calls. In the meantime, keep digging. Tomorrow we compare notes.’

‘And tonight?’ he asked.

I clipped Tess’s leash shorter and started toward home. ‘Tonight, we don’t do anything.’

We hung up.

And I went home to do exactly what I had told Carl not to do.

Chapter 38

Now

When we got in, I filled Tess's water bowl and kicked my shoes off by the door. She skidded across the tiles, nails clicking, already over the small thrill of the walk and on to the next thing.

I grabbed a cold Coke from the fridge and cracked it open, the hiss sharp in the quiet kitchen. The caffeine wouldn't help much, but the cold did. I rolled the can across my forehead, eyes closed, willing the headache behind my eyes to back off.

That was when I noticed the drawer.

It wasn't open enough to be obvious. Just enough to feel wrong.

I set the can down slowly and crossed the kitchen. Instead of closing the drawer like I'd intended, I opened it. It slid open with a soft scrape.

There was a new envelope inside. Sealed with an insignia. A circle with two snakes, eating their own tails. The double ouroboros.

I knew what it was before I touched it.

I shimmied open the wax seal, keeping the envelope intact.

We invite you to join us for a private gathering.

Sunday.

Details enclosed.

My pulse thudded once, hard.

The location was outside the city, near Barkley, with 'transport arranged if required'. The time was precise. The kind of precision that didn't invite negotiation.

Barkley. I felt my heart rate pick up and took a few breaths.

Then I checked the date again. Tomorrow.

I sat at the kitchen table, the invitation flat beneath my palm. I smelled the envelope, inhaling that familiar scent.

Luis.

It was a silent message. They were using his scent to lure me like a shark to blood. They assumed I wouldn't be able to resist.

And they were right.

Because if Luis was anywhere I could reach him – if there was even a chance of talking to him – I wasn't going to stay home and pretend restraint was the same thing as strength.

I folded the card carefully and put it back in the envelope.

Then I picked up my phone.

Keith answered faster than I expected.

‘Yeah?’

‘You need to learn to answer your phone like a normal person,’ I said.

‘Normal?’ he asked with a snigger. ‘What does that look like?’

‘Friendly. Maybe start with “hello”.’

A pause. Then, with a faint grin in his voice, ‘I know you didn’t call to lecture me. What do you want?’

‘Are you still up for that trip to Barkley?’

‘Hell yes,’ he said immediately. ‘When are we going?’

‘Tomorrow,’ I said. ‘I’ll message you the details.’

‘I’ll be ready.’

He hung up without a goodbye.

I stared at the phone for a moment, then set it down.

Tomorrow I’d ask Keith about Elena Farrell. Tomorrow, we’d follow the thread far enough to find out what had really happened to Luis.

But tonight, all I could think about was Luis, and why he hadn’t contacted me. What we would say when we saw each other.

Was I too late? Maybe they’d hurt him. But that didn’t make any sense. Why keep him alive for months after he supposedly died, only to kill him now?

The invitation sat where I’d left it, quiet and patient, like it already knew I’d decided to go.

For the first time since Luis died, I wasn’t chasing answers.

I was walking straight toward him.

Chapter 39

Now

My phone rang as I was pulling on a jacket.

Unknown caller.

They took their time letting her make her call.

‘Mackenzie?’ Rebecca’s voice was thin, controlled to the point of breaking. ‘They arrested me.’

‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘County. Intake just finished. They—’ She swallowed. ‘They said I can make one call and recommended I call my lawyer.’

‘I’m on my way,’ I said. ‘Do not talk to anyone else. Not a word.’

‘I didn’t,’ she said quickly. ‘I asked for you.’

‘Good,’ I replied. ‘I’ll be there in twenty.’

I hung up and grabbed my keys.

*

The county jail squatted low and unlovely against a slate-gray sky, concrete softened only by a chain-link perimeter and a flag snapping in the wind. Inside, everything smelled faintly of disinfectant and metal.

I showed my bar card and signed the log. The officer behind the glass studied me, then nodded toward a row of plastic chairs.

‘Attorney visit,’ she said. ‘She’s in holding. We’ll bring her through.’

I waited.

When Rebecca appeared, escorted by a female officer, she looked smaller than she had in the café. No makeup. Hair pulled back with an elastic that had seen better days. She looked like a different woman. She sighed when she saw me – relieved.

They led us into a narrow interview room. No window. A bolted table. Two chairs. A camera dome in the corner. The officer closed the door. ‘You’ve got thirty minutes,’ she said. ‘Knock when you’re done.’

Rebecca sat as soon as the door shut. I didn’t.

‘Did they read you your rights?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Did you answer any questions?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I told them I wanted my lawyer.’

I nodded and sat. ‘Good. Like we discussed before, you say nothing without me present. They might try to get you to talk. If that happens, you don’t make eye contact. You just ask for me.’

Her hands were shaking. She folded them together and tucked them under the table like she was ashamed of them. ‘What are they charging me with?’ she asked.

‘Arson resulting in death,’ I said. ‘They’ll call it homicide, but don’t let that worry you.’

Her breath caught. ‘They said they found something,’ she whispered. ‘They wouldn’t tell me what.’

‘That’s normal,’ I said. ‘They might’ve found something they think is of importance when they executed the warrant, but that doesn’t mean it *is*. Or that they can use it in court.’ I paused. ‘They’re going to hold you overnight. You’ll be arraigned in the morning.’ Then I remembered it was Saturday so there could be delays over the weekend. ‘Or Monday. I’ll be there. We’ll argue bail.’

‘I can’t stay here,’ she said, panic leaking through the composure. ‘I can’t—’

‘You can,’ I said. ‘And you will. This is temporary. What matters is what you *don’t* do.’

She swallowed hard.

‘Rebecca, why do you think they detained you?’

She looked down at the table. ‘I don’t know. I told you what happened.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But I’m asking if there’s something you *didn’t* tell me.’

Her jaw tightened. ‘I panicked,’ she said. ‘I left. I didn’t call for help. I’ve already told you that.’ She looked increasingly anxious. ‘I don’t know what else you want me to say.’

‘I want to make sure I’m not walking in blind,’ I said. ‘Because once we’re in front of a judge, your credibility matters. If it looks like you lied to me, they’ll assume you’re lying to them.’

Her eyes flicked up. ‘Are you saying you don’t believe me?’

‘I’m saying belief doesn’t keep people out of jail,’ I said gently. ‘Facts do.’

She leaned back, crossing her arms, a defensive posture I’d seen a hundred times before. ‘There is nothing else,’ she said. ‘I didn’t light the fire.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Then this is how it’s going to work.’

I laid it out simply. Bail strategy. No contact with anyone but me. No calls, no messages, no passing notes. If anyone tried to talk – guards, other inmates, investigators – she says one sentence and one sentence only: *‘I’m represented by counsel.’*

Rebecca nodded, repeating it under her breath like a mantra.

The officer knocked on the door. ‘Time,’ she said.

I stood. Rebecca did too, but hesitating, like she wanted to say something else.

She didn’t get a chance. The officer opened the door, ushering her out of the room. As they led her away, Rebecca looked back once, fear and something else flickering across her face.

I needed to find out exactly what the police thought they had – and why they’d decided to move now – but if I asked here, I’d just get the runaround.

I was halfway down the corridor when my phone buzzed.

Carl.

I answered the phone and walked out the doors, straight to my car. ‘You must’ve heard me thinking about you,’ I joked.

‘I’m flattered,’ he said, laughing.

I updated him on my meeting with Rebecca.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘I was wondering when she’d call.’

‘I was just about to call and see if you figured out why they moved now.’

‘Off the record,’ he started, code for he didn’t have it in any official terms yet, ‘it was because of the blood they found.’

‘What blood?’

‘There was trace blood at the scene,’ Carl said. ‘Not enough to notice initially. Not part of the burn pattern. It was recovered from a surface that didn’t get fully destroyed.’

My grip tightened on the phone.

‘They ran it against Brad,’ he said. ‘No match.’

‘And Rebecca?’ I asked.

‘No match there either.’

I leaned against the wall, the concrete cool through my coat.

‘Then whose was it?’ I asked.

Carl exhaled. ‘They don’t know yet. That’s the problem.’

‘That’s not enough for an arrest,’ I said. ‘Maybe that’s their guy.’

‘That’s what I said too,’ Carl commiserated, ‘but the counterargument was that with everything else, it was enough. Someone else was in the house? The chances of her not knowing about it if she was there are low.’

‘Which means, they think she lied about what happened.’

‘Exactly.’

‘What was the DA’s theory?’ I asked.

‘That Rebecca didn’t act alone,’ Carl said. ‘Or that she knows more than she’s saying.’

‘Or,’ I said quietly, ‘that someone else was hurt.’

‘Yes,’ Carl agreed. ‘And that’s why they acted.’

I closed my eyes.

‘Do they have a profile?’ I asked.

‘Partial,’ Carl said. ‘Not enough markers yet. But once it hits CODIS—’

‘They’ll know,’ I finished.

‘Yes.’

I stood there for a moment longer, letting the implications line up.

Brad might not have been alone when he died.

And Rebecca wasn’t the only one who left that house marked. Whatever really happened that night, it wasn’t just arson. It was interrupted.

I made a quick call. A friend of mine who worked in forensics.

‘Meg,’ I said. ‘How are you?’

We got the small talk over with and I cut to the chase.

‘I have a favor to ask,’ I said. ‘An arson case that resulted in the death of a white male, in his thirties.’

She took the details and promised to check it out. ‘If it’s there, I should be able to get it to you by tomorrow morning.’

Even if I couldn’t use it in court, I could use it to figure out just how impossible Rebecca Ryan was going to be to defend.

PART TWO

Chapter 40

Then

Luis

A week after I got back from the army, there was a knock on my door.

I hadn't shaved since I landed. My apartment smelled like sweat, beer, and whatever was growing in my fridge. I figured whoever it was would take one look and leave.

They didn't. *He* didn't.

He introduced himself as Silas.

He stood there smiling, like I wasn't obviously half drunk. Said he was from some Veterans' Outreach program. His tone was careful, like he wasn't sure how I'd react to being told I needed help.

He said he wanted to 'help me find my footing.'

'My footing's fine,' I retorted. He glanced at the beer bottles on the counter and smiled again. 'We can help with the nights,' he said.

That one hurt. The nights were the problem. I hadn't slept a full night in months. Not since I'd walked away and left Thomas to die.

So, I let him drive me.

I was reckless, with nothing to lose.

The place wasn't what I expected. From outside, it looked like a building with a huge garden. Inside it was renovated. Everything looked brand new, like a wellness getaway for rich people. There were natural elements around the facility, lots of plants; there was marble and wood and a huge fountain bubbling in the background. It smelled of fresh coffee beans, essential oils and fresh air.

Clean.

The receptionist smiled. 'Mr. Tyndale? They're expecting you.'

Behind her head was a logo, etched in black marble. The Coterie Institute, the name cleverly threaded into the 'O', which was two giant snakes, eating each other's tails.

I frowned.

I didn't remember telling the woman my name, but she knew me as soon as I walked in. I guess she came across it when she was organizing Dr. Avery's calendar.

*

The first session started like I imagined therapy would.

Dr. Avery sat across from me looking almost too composed for a therapist. Immaculately calm, like nothing ever rattled him. He was dressed in soft gray. No sharp edges. He had the voice for it too. Low and even. Reassuring in a way that made you want to keep talking.

He asked all the right questions and listened in that deliberate way therapists do when they're building trust.

Somehow, we ended up talking about Thomas. About how I'd left him behind. How I'd made a decision that would haunt me for years to come.

Dr. Avery didn't interrupt. He listened without judgment. When he finally spoke, his voice carried sympathy.

'You did what you had to do.'

There was a weight behind his words. Like he not only knew what it was like to make difficult decisions, but what it was like to live with those decisions long after you'd made them.

'Beating yourself up over it won't change what happened,' he continued calmly.

But it wasn't that simple.

'You can't just turn off the pain,' I said.

He leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on his knees. 'What if you could?' he asked.

That got my attention.

If there was a way to quiet my mind, if I could get one full night of sleep without replaying what happened, I'd be willing to try it.

'Pain comes from resistance,' he said. 'From clinging to who we were, or pretending to be who we think we should be. Real peace comes when we integrate both sides of ourselves. The shadow, and the version we present to the world.'

I didn't know what the hell that meant, but he smiled like it was something profound I would come to understand.

'It might be beneficial for you to join one of our group sessions,' he said. 'You'll see how this work has helped others.' He smiled. If he could smell the alcohol on me, he didn't say it.

'OK,' I said. 'Sure.'

I didn't believe it would help, but my head was spinning, and I was trying not to throw up.

In that moment, it didn't feel like I had many other options.

Silas led me to a room, and the smell of clean linen bedsheets is the last thing I remember before I gratefully passed out.

The next morning I woke to find myself in a clean white room, sunlight pouring in through the window. There was a knock on the door: it was Dr. Avery coming to check on me. He had brought me food and some strong coffee for the hangover, to hide the real reason for his visit: to see if I remembered our discussion, and if I knew where I was.

This place wasn't like the shitty apartment I was about to lose if I didn't pay the rent. It was clean and comfortable in a calm, minimalistic way. The built-in cupboards and benches were all natural wood. The windows let in natural light.

I was happy enough to rest and recover, which Silas encouraged when he stopped by to see how things had gone with Dr. Avery. By then, I was starting to suspect this wasn't just a day spa.

'What is this place?' I asked, wondering what they were going to ask of me.

'It's a wellness center,' he said. 'People come here to relax and get back on track.'

A part of me wondered if it was really a fancy rehab center, but no one seemed to be monitoring what I drank, and food was provided three times a day.

The group session came a few days later.

They called the space a Reflection Room. There were about a dozen of us, seated in a loose circle under low amber lighting. Mostly veterans. Men who looked about the same as I felt. Everyone spoke about their experiences after they returned from service.

I passed on my turn. I didn't want to share what I'd done. It was an unspoken rule, and I had broken it. You don't leave your squadmates behind, unless you absolutely have to.

Unless you can't move, or they're already gone.

I snapped back as someone started talking about *repurposing pain*.

About *shadow work*.

About *transformation*.

It sounded like a bunch of crap to me. Therapy buzzwords to give people false hope.

At first, I was skeptical. Then, uncomfortable.

The man leading the group with Dr. Avery looked right at me. He spoke with a voice that could've sold fresh air when he said, 'There's no healing without destruction,' as if he were reciting a fact. 'The self must die to be reborn.'

Something about him unsettled me. It didn't feel like I was in a group therapy session anymore. This was something else.

I stood before the session was over and left the room, half expecting to be stopped by someone. But no one did.

I didn't say goodbye to Dr. Avery, or Silas. I wasn't planning on returning.

And yet, as I stepped outside into the cool night air, one thought wouldn't leave.

Transformation. They weren't trying to heal us. They were trying to remake us.

What if by walking out of there, I'd just missed my chance at real peace? At finally forgiving myself for leaving Thomas behind to die?

Chapter 41

Now

The next morning, I made coffee and opened my inbox before the sun was even up. A new email at the top made my heartbeat quicken. Meg must have sent it before she went to bed. It was timestamped 2.30 a.m.

I opened it quickly.

Subject: DNA Match – Case #4521 – Prelim Report

From: Megan Reynolds

My fingers trembled slightly as I opened it. This was it – the information I'd been waiting for.

DNA source: Blood sample collected from crime scene (297 Ashby Drive, Charlesville)

Result: Match identified

Database reference: DoD DNA Registry

I froze. The DoD? The army? That registry was only for soldiers – samples for identification if someone fell in battle. My stomach sank as I scrolled to the next line.

Match: Luis Tyndale

I blinked. No. That couldn't be right. My pulse thundered in my ears as I leaned closer, rereading the line, willing the name to morph into someone else's, anyone else's. But it didn't.

Luis was a match.

I scrolled further.

Sample integrity: Optimal.

Degradation: Minimal.

Collection timestamp: Recent.

My throat tightened. This wasn't some old, archived blood. This was fresh, drawn within weeks, maybe days. Whoever's it was, it had been collected recently.

I dialed the number Megan had left for the Dutton Street sample, my hands still trembling.

'Meg. It's Mackenzie Morgan.'

'I hope you got the results,' she said.

'Yeah. Thanks,' I said, forcing my voice to stay steady.

'Was there a problem?' Megan asked.

I swiveled in my chair, lowering my voice. 'The blood recovered . . . It's a match for Luis Tyndale?'

A pause crackled through the line. I could hear her typing. 'Just double-checking.' She cleared her throat a few moments later. 'That's what the

database spat out.'

'He's dead, Megan. He died in a car accident four months ago.'

'Of course,' she said. 'I'm sure there's an explanation.' But she didn't sound sure of that at all. 'Maybe it's a mistake. They don't happen often but they do happen. . .'

I cut her off. 'Can you tell how old the sample is?'

'Physically, it's recent. Red cells intact, minimal protein decay. Drawn within the last few weeks, maybe even more recent.'

Weeks. That was consistent with when the fire happened.

The room seemed to tilt. If Luis wasn't dead . . . then who had been in that car? Who had they buried?

'Is there any way to find out who was in the car?' I asked.

'I can probably cross-check,' Megan said. 'I'll see what I can do.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'Please – don't put anything else in writing yet. Just . . . call me.'

'I will,' Megan replied, hesitating. 'Mackenzie – are you OK?'

'I will be,' I said, and meant it in the narrow, professional sense of the word.

Personally, I was trying to hang on.

Luis's blood. At my client's house.

Not degraded. Not a clerical error.

Recent.

Which meant one thing, and one thing only.

Luis really wasn't dead.

My gaze drifted to the kitchen window. Sunday light spilled across the counter, catching dust motes in the air. Ordinary. Quiet. The kind of morning you weren't supposed to have revelations on. If Luis was alive, then it wasn't him in the car.

The closed casket.

The body no one had really seen.

Someone else had burned to death.

Someone else had been buried.

A knock at the door broke the silence. Who would be calling before eight on a Sunday? For a second, in my shock, I let myself believe it was Luis, coming home to me.

I found my feet and stood slowly.

The knock came again. Harder this time, impatient. Whoever it was, they weren't leaving.

I went to the door to open it, checking through the peephole first, but they weren't directly in view. I thought of the invitation. I was supposed to be at the Institute today. Maybe they had come to escort me there.

'Open the door,' a man's voice called.

Not Luis.

Not the police either.

'Come on, Mackenzie.'

Keith.

Relief flooded through me – I couldn't answer Murphy and Davidson's questions right now. I unbolted the door.

He was standing on my stoop in jeans and a jacket, coffee in one hand, something that had caught Tess's attention in the other.

'You didn't answer my text,' he said, handing me the coffee. 'I thought you might chicken out.' He crouched down to greet Tess. 'Brought something for you too, girl.'

He looked up at me before giving it to her. 'I hope that's all right?'

I nodded and he unwrapped a large chew toy and handed it over. Tess took it immediately, tail wagging. Then Keith looked at me properly for the first time since he'd arrived and stopped smiling.

'OK,' he said slowly. 'You look like someone just rewrote your entire understanding of reality.'

I stepped back to let him in. Better that he was inside, away from nosy Greg, who'd probably have a heart attack if he saw me letting another man into the house.

'Why are you here so early?'

He grinned. 'I had an idea.'

'Luis is alive,' I said, ignoring him.

'Shit.' He thought for a second. 'You confirmed it?'

'Yeah, as good as.'

'How?'

'They found his blood,' I said. 'Fresh. Not degraded. Matched through the DoD registry.'

Keith's expression hardened. 'Where?'

'At my client's house.'

Keith blinked once. Then he nodded, like he'd just had confirmation of something he'd been carrying around quietly. 'That'd have to be a hell of a coincidence,' he said.

'Yeah.' My nerves kicked in. I still didn't understand what it meant. Why would Luis even be inside Rebecca's house?

'So, who was driving his car?' asked Keith.

'That's what I'm trying to find out. A friend is looking into it.'

He folded one arm around the other, and I could see him recalibrating. 'The Institute,' he said. 'Are we still doing that today?'

'Yes,' I said, more determined than ever.

He set his coffee down, suddenly all business. 'Then that's where we're going.'

I hesitated for half a second. 'One more thing,' I said.

'Sure.'

'Sofia mentioned someone. A friend of Luis's named Elena Farrell. Do you know who she is?'

He thought for a moment, his face blank. 'Doesn't ring a bell. Why?'

'I think she might be the person who was at his grave . . .' I stopped, deciding if I wanted to say more. I didn't know for sure, but I had a theory. 'And I think she might have sent the invitation.'

Whatever game Luis thought he was playing, he'd just made one critical miscalculation. He'd left evidence behind. And this time, I wasn't walking toward him in the dark. I was bringing the light with me.

'Well, we can stand around here all day wondering, or we can go find out,' said Keith. 'I just want to make one stop before we go to the Institute. We should leave now, before it gets too busy.'

'Where are we going?'

'I'll tell you on the way.'

Tess looked at me with big puppy dog eyes. Keith saw it too.

'Grab her leash,' he said, ushering us to hurry up.

He looked determined to get some answers.

Maybe today would be the day.

Where are you, Luis? And what do you remember from before the accident?

Chapter 42

Now

I jumped into Keith's pickup truck, Tess beside me.

I leaned forward. 'So where are we going?'

'To answer some questions,' he said, the truck rumbling.

I was surprised when Keith pulled up outside the cemetery gates, gravel crunching under the tires as he pulled off the road. He'd been sketchy with the details of the plan, and now I could see why.

The hum of the truck faded into nothing, replaced by the heavy hush of the air around us. Even the crickets seemed to have gone quiet.

'We need to know who was in that accident, because it wasn't Luis,' said Keith. 'But it might point us in the right direction. I'm guessing it has something to do with why Luis disappeared.'

'We could check the missing persons records,' I suggested.

Keith gave a hollow laugh. 'Have you seen how many people go missing each year? We've got nothing but a rough age and height. It could be anyone,' he said. 'Who knows, maybe he was a loner and no one reported him missing.' Keith rested his elbow against the window trim on the driver's-side door. 'This is insane.'

'OK, if you've got a better idea, I'd love to hear it,' I said.

'I don't know. I think we go to your "appointment" at the Institute and see what they have to say, but I just . . .'

He trailed off, leaving the question there for me to ask. 'You just . . .?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I guess I want to see what we can find out first. Get a better idea of what we're dealing with.'

That made sense. I wasn't sure I trusted anyone except myself anymore.

'What if they're dangerous? We don't know who these people are, but they're being pretty fucking cryptic if they're legit.'

'They're completely visible online. The Coterie Institute is a legitimate business,' I said.

'Then why do they have your apparently dead husband's cologne all over their shit?'

I smiled. He was now where I was at, and ready to take the next step. 'That's exactly what we're going to find out. What if Luis didn't want to disappear?' I said. 'What if someone set him up?'

The cemetery loomed ahead, silent and sprawling, most of the paths disappearing deep into rows of graves.

Keith got out and went to the back of the pickup, popping a lock box open. He pulled out something that looked like a piece of home-rigged lawn equipment. I frowned. 'Doing some early morning groundskeeping?'

'Ground-Penetrating Radar,' he said, matter of fact. 'It shows what's buried underground. At least we'll know if there's anything there.'

I crossed my arms. 'You just . . . keep one of those in your car?'

He arched a brow. 'Would it surprise you if I did?'

'Not really,' I admitted. 'You have that whole conspiracy-theorist-in-a-trench-coat vibe. What do you even do for a living?'

'I'm a PI,' he said, like that explained everything.

At least it explained the gear.

He glanced toward the gates. 'Cemetery's still closed. So this technically counts as trespassing. You OK with that?'

'Technically?' I muttered, following him as he started toward the fence. He was a strange person.

'Listen, I was going to come out here anyway,' he said. 'It won't tell us if it's Luis, but it'll tell us if there's someone down there. If there is, we know it's probably the guy who died in the crash, but I just want to make sure.'

I stopped him with a look. 'Why bring me?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Because I don't know you very well, but I'm pretty sure you'll want to see for yourself.'

He wasn't wrong. If there was even a chance Luis's grave was empty, I needed to see it with my own eyes.

'Fine,' I said. 'Let's find out.'

We climbed the gate, our shoes crunching softly on the gravel path beyond. Tombstones leaned at crooked angles. We stopped at Luis's grave. My stomach twisted. Seeing his name etched into the stone felt obscene now. Like a lie carved in granite. I placed my hand atop the stone, something catching my eye. A small, metal charm, the kind people wear on a chain around their neck. A symbol. Two snakes, swallowing each other's tails.

I quickly pocketed it.

Keith knelt beside the grave, setting up the device. The screen flickered to life, casting cold blue light across his face.

I crouched beside him, eyes locked on the scrolling lines. ‘What exactly are we looking for?’

‘Disturbed soil layers. Voids. Anything that says the ground’s been tampered with. Maybe a coffin shape if we’re lucky.’

‘Lucky?’ It didn’t feel lucky to me.

‘You wanted answers. That’s the best I can give you without digging someone up.’

The lines rippled across the screen, waves of color and noise mapping the earth below.

‘With proper burial sites it’s harder to tell than with makeshift ones,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘They’re buried deeper.’

The words hung there while Keith worked the machine.

I watched in fascination. I had no idea what he was reading on the little graph, but he seemed to know what he was doing.

‘Looks like a rectangular cavity,’ Keith muttered. ‘About six feet down. Consistent with a burial.’

My throat went dry. ‘So, there *is* something there.’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But I’m not getting any density variation.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning, it could be hollow.’

‘You mean . . . the coffin’s empty?’ I asked.

Keith adjusted the sensor, running it again. ‘Could be. It’s not conclusive, but – yeah. It doesn’t read like there’s a body inside.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ I said. ‘There wasn’t a lot left to bury. But where there’s a coffin, there’s usually a body.’

I tapped a finger against my elbow while I thought. ‘We could request an exhumation,’ I said, my lawyer instincts kicking in. ‘But it’d take weeks and we’d need permits.’

A sound cut him off. Rustling. Grass shifting.

My heart leapt into my throat. ‘Keith—’

It was still too early for visitors. The gates hadn’t opened yet.

‘I heard it,’ he whispered.

Either the morning rounds had begun, or someone was following us.

Either way, it was time to get out of there.

Chapter 43

Now

‘I need you to do me a favor,’ I said, turning to Keith once we returned to the car.

He glanced at me from the driver’s seat. ‘Yeah?’

I took that as an invitation to tell him what I wanted. ‘I need you to drive past a house. I just want to see something.’

He didn’t ask why. Just nodded and took the next turn when I told him to.

Rebecca’s street was quiet in the way affluent streets often were on a Sunday morning, with expensive cars tucked neatly into driveways.

‘That one,’ I said, when it came into view. ‘Slow down.’

Keith eased off the accelerator.

The Queen Anne sat proudly on the street, void of all the activity from my last visit.

The shutters were drawn, the lawn aggressively well kept.

‘My client’s house,’ I said.

‘Right. So, Luis’s blood was found in there? Where did they say the fire started?’ Keith asked.

‘Back bedroom,’ I said. ‘Second floor.’

He craned his neck slightly, eyes scanning the façade. ‘Hard to tell anything from here.’

‘I’m not looking for the fire,’ I said.

He shot me a sideways look. ‘Then what?’

I didn’t answer.

As we rolled past the front steps, I saw it. ‘Pull over,’ I said, barely waiting for the car to stop.

‘Mackenzie, what are you—’

Keith’s voice vanished behind me as I sucked in a breath and stopped in my tracks.

The knocker was bronze. Antique-looking, maybe original to the house or chosen to look that way. At first glance it could have been decorative, even tasteful. But it wasn’t the usual wreath design. And it wasn’t abstract.

It was a serpent. Its body curved into a perfect half circle, where it met the tail of another serpent. The scales were etched in delicate detail. The heads turned inward, jaws closing gently around each other’s tails.

A double ouroboros.

My chest tightened.

I pulled the symbol I'd found at the grave and the invitation card from my pocket for comparison. The scales followed the same smooth pattern. Almost the same, but different.

I went back to the car. 'Keith,' I said quietly. 'Those things on the door, the snakes.'

He squinted his eyes, trying to make it out. 'Yeah?'

'They poured the accelerant in a circle,' I said. 'Around Brad. I think they were trying to contain the fire.'

Keith went still.

'Luis's blood was somewhere in that room,' I continued. 'On a surface that didn't ignite.'

I sat back slowly.

'He was here,' I said. 'Before the fire. Or after.'

Keith exhaled through his nose, looking at the door knocker through the windscreen. 'That's not décor.'

'No,' I agreed. 'It's a marker.'

'For what?'

I read the signature line on the invitation.

Alignment. Renewal. Becoming.

'I think it's a boundary,' I said. 'A signal.'

Keith put the car back in gear.

'The murder, it was ritualistic,' I said. I watched the door recede in the side mirror, the double ouroboros shrinking into the distance. I swallowed. Whatever it was, it had been closing its circle for a long time. The world spun dizzyingly around me.

There was one more place I needed to go before we went to the Institute.

*

I called the Boston Correctional Facility and told them who I was, my voice sharper than I intended. 'I need to book a consult with my client. She's at risk of self-harm, and there's a transfer motion under review.'

The officer hesitated, then finally said, 'If you can get here by ten thirty, I'll put you on the list.'

Perfect. An hour and a half. That gave me some time. I thanked him and hung up before he could change his mind. I knew the mental health angle

would make them listen. If Rebecca hurt herself, questions would be asked. Especially if my request was denied.

It wasn't even a lie. I'd filed a request for a mental health assessment after my last visit. I wasn't sure Rebecca would hold up well in prison if I couldn't organize a way out, and I'd slightly exaggerated how soon I thought I could get her released with the charges she was facing.

Keith turned to me. 'I guess I'm driving?'

'I guess so,' I agreed.

*

She'd been moved from county. Good. That was an even shorter drive.

The correctional facility loomed over us, a giant, depressing concrete slab, all narrow windows and shadows pressing in. The kind of place where hope came to die.

A guard scanned my pass and nodded me through.

'No devices past the second gate,' he said without looking up.

My heels clicked down the sterile corridor, echoing too loud in the still air. Gate after gate buzzed open, each one heavier than the last.

Rebecca was already seated when I entered the interview room. She didn't look like she'd slept. Her face was stripped of makeup, and dark circles shadowed her pretty eyes, which were less honey today and more green. Bordering on hazel.

She smiled when she saw me. 'You're back,' she said, as if she knew I would be.

I dropped my bag onto the table and sat opposite her. 'Let's not waste time.'

Her smile didn't falter.

'They found blood in your house,' I said. 'It wasn't Brad's. And it wasn't yours.'

Rebecca's eyes flickered.

'I assumed you'd find out,' she said calmly.

My pulse ticked faster. 'Whose blood was it, Rebecca?'

She tilted her head. 'You already know.'

'I'd like you to confirm it.'

That did it. Her breath changed. Not a gasp. Just a slow, deliberate inhalation.

'Luis Tyndale,' I supplied. 'You know my husband? Where is he? Why was his blood in your house?'

Silence stretched between us.

Then Rebecca smiled again, softer this time. Almost fond.

‘You’re asking the wrong question,’ she said.

I leaned forward. ‘Then help me ask the right one.’

‘Why *wouldn’t* Luis be there?’

A thin chill crept up my spine. It was an odd thing to say.

‘Because he was declared dead,’ I said carefully. ‘Because he supposedly died in a car accident four months ago.’

Rebecca smiled faintly, like I’d missed something obvious.

‘Supposedly,’ she echoed. She leaned back in her chair, studying me as though I were the one under observation.

‘Was he hurt?’ I asked. ‘Is that where the blood came from?’

Her gaze held mine, and I wondered if she was enjoying this.

I leaned forward. ‘You know, given that I’m your lawyer, this complicates things.’

Her brow lifted, just a fraction. Like she was interested in how this might play out.

‘If Luis Tyndale is alive,’ I continued, ‘and if he was present in your house, injured or otherwise, then my ability to represent you is compromised.’

‘Why is that?’ she asked.

‘Because it’s a conflict of interest,’ I said. ‘I can’t ethically defend you if my husband might be connected to the crime.’

She considered that, tapping one fingernail lightly against the table.

‘So, you’re saying you’d drop me,’ she said.

‘I’m saying I might be required to,’ I replied. ‘And if I don’t, anything we do from here on out is vulnerable. Motions, testimony, strategy – everything.’

‘You’re worried you won’t be able to separate the two,’ she said.

‘I’m *concerned*,’ I said evenly, ‘that you’re withholding information that directly affects your case.’

Rebecca leaned forward now, mirroring me. She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she glanced toward the door, at the guard, who couldn’t be less interested in what we were talking about.

‘You should think very carefully about what you want me to say,’ she said. ‘Because once I answer that question, you won’t be able to un-know it.’

‘That’s not your decision,’ I said.

Rebecca smiled, calm as ever. ‘Isn’t it?’

I stood abruptly, chair scraping against the floor. ‘If you’ve done something to him—’

‘I haven’t,’ she interrupted gently. She rose, smoothing her clothes as though this were a business appointment concluding on schedule. ‘You should go,’ she said quietly. ‘You’re already running late.’

‘For what?’ I demanded.

Her smile curved, serene. ‘For your meeting.’

‘Is he alive?’ I asked, my voice strangled.

Rebecca’s eyes shone with something like amusement.

‘Does it matter?’ she said. ‘You’re going anyway.’

The guard shifted in the corner.

Time.

‘What makes you so sure?’ I asked.

‘You’d follow him anywhere. Until you knew for sure he was dead,’ she said.

Chapter 44

Now

I walked to the truck in a daze, the sound of my heels scraping against the cracked pavement too loud in the still air. The correctional facility loomed behind me, its walls humming faintly with the buzz of the electric gates as people came and went. I didn't look back.

Keith and Tess were waiting for me to return. I slid into the passenger seat and put on the seatbelt, gripping it hard enough that it bit into my palms. My reflection in the rearview mirror didn't look like me. My face was pale, hollow-eyed. Like I'd been scraped out, and parts of me left behind in that room with Rebecca.

Her words replayed in my head.

You should go. You're already running late.

I pressed my fingertips to my temples, trying to steady the pounding in my head. Did she kill Brad? Did she kill *Luis*? Why?

My phone buzzed in my bag. I fumbled for it, my fingers clumsy. 'Hello?'

At first, nothing – just faint static, like the whisper of breath through a wire. Then a woman's voice, soft and strange. Muted.

'They know who you are.'

The world seemed to fold in on itself.

My stomach lurched. 'Rebecca?'

No, it couldn't be Rebecca.

The call had ended. I pulled the phone away and stared at the screen. 00:14. No number. Just *Unknown Caller*.

My reflection stared back at me from the black glass. Wide eyes, the color drained from my face, my lip caught between my teeth. I tried calling back, but the line wouldn't connect, didn't even ring once. There was just dead air. Someone was messing with me.

'Are you all right?' asked Keith.

'Yeah. I'm fine. I asked Rebecca about the blood, about Luis, but she wouldn't talk.'

Keith made a sound in his throat, like he wanted to say something comforting but wasn't quite sure what.

'It's time,' I said. 'We need to go to the Institute.'

My phone buzzed again. I jumped.

This time it was just a court notification.

Request received. Transfer Request: Pending Review.

Shit. Was I going to regret that?

*

As we drew closer to the Coterie Institute, I felt my pulse quicken.

‘You sure you wanna do this?’ Keith asked, glancing from the road to my nervous hands fidgeting with the seatbelt.

I nodded and slid out of the truck.

Keith followed, clutching Tess’s leash.

Inside, the lobby was spotless. Floor-to-ceiling windows, soft lighting, the faint hum of air-conditioning. The scent of an herbal diffuser wafted through the place, promoting calm. A sign on the far wall read:

C O T E R I E I N S T I T U T E

Find yourself.

I stared at the plaque, unease tightening my throat. I was struck by the odd spacing. Then I saw it, etched faintly into the ‘O’. Two snakes eating each other’s tails.

The symbol from the invitation.

‘I think we’ve got the right place,’ said Keith, his posture stiff.

A woman stood at the front desk, smiling, a lanyard saying ‘Annette’ around her neck.

Annette. Something registered about that name. Not that there weren’t thousands of people called Annette. Then I remembered: Evan at the support group.

Her voice, when she greeted us, was the kind you’d expect from a mindfulness app. Pleasant and calm. It was immediately soothing. ‘Good morning. Welcome to the Coterie Institute. How may I help you?’

I used my bubbly, professional tone. The one I used when I needed people to underestimate me. ‘Hi, I’m Mackenzie Morgan. I have a meeting scheduled for 11.30 a.m.’

‘Certainly, who were you meeting with?’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t recall,’ I said apologetically, looking around at the marbled walls.

‘Just let me have a quick look,’ she said, tapping away on a keyboard.

‘This is a beautiful building,’ I said. ‘Has it always belonged to the Coterie Institute?’

Her expression didn't flicker. There was just a tilt of the head as she accessed some internal script. 'The Phoenix Reentry Program, for returning soldiers was the previous tenant. That program was disbanded and the Institute took over shortly after.'

Keith leaned against the counter, scanning the office beyond. 'What kind of institute are we talking about?' he asked.

'We're a wellness center. We encourage balance, and help people to get in touch with their inner selves. Discover who they really are,' she said, and although it might have sounded corny, she made it sound like a worthwhile pursuit.

I nodded, trying to convey how impressed I was.

'Our lead researcher, Dr. Avery, has been doing award-winning research showing that meaning is the key to recovery. Many of our staff come from the original Phoenix program.'

My stomach dropped. 'There are staff from the old program?'

'That's right.' Annette didn't blink. 'They transitioned seamlessly into the new model. Many of them find it deeply rewarding.'

'That's fascinating,' I said, giving her my full attention.

This time, she hesitated, just for a beat, but I could tell she wanted to keep talking about it. That she was proud to be a part of whatever they did here.

I nodded encouragingly and she continued. 'Dr. Avery is one of our staff who worked in the original program. He specialized in rehabilitation and group psychology for the military. He took over from his predecessor, who sadly passed away. They've been developing a renewal process.'

Keith glanced at me. 'Renewal,' he muttered.

'Yes. Mind. Body. Spirit. All three must be aligned to live a healthy life.'

Keith scoffed, as if it were all a load of garbage.

The woman scrolled until she found what she was looking for. 'It looks like you have an appointment with Dr. Avery. If you'd like to step this way, I'll show you in.'

I started moving, Keith following behind with Tess.

'I'm sorry, your dog won't be allowed beyond this point. But I can have someone wait with her?'

As if on cue, a man in a casual shirt walked into the lobby and introduced himself as Brian. I got the feeling he was talking to Tess more

than to Keith and me, but I said hello anyway.

Keith clutched Tess's leash, looking at me with a question in his expression.

I nodded. I wanted to hear what Dr. Avery had to say, and ask a few questions of my own.

Chapter 45

Now

Rebecca

The lights dimmed for midday count, the corridor settling into a hush that will last only as long as is necessary to get the guards to move through quickly.

I sat on the edge of the bunk, hands folded neatly in my lap, listening.

Keys. Footsteps. A brief pause outside my door. When the footsteps passed, I smiled.

In the bunk above, someone shifted. A whisper flared then died. The air conditioner hummed to life. All the sounds merging to form a chaotic noise in my head.

I had left the bedlam behind, and I didn't care for it now.

I lay back and eyed the bunk above, picturing the lobby. Glass and light, the soothing sound of a waterfall feature off to the side.

Mackenzie was probably right there now, seeing all of it. Wondering when she'd find out if her husband was alive, and why he lied to her.

People thought faith arrived all at once.

It didn't.

It arrived in steps. In invitations. In the choice to keep going when turning back was still possible.

I closed my eyes as a guard passed through my cell block.

Choose, I thought

Across town, a door would open.

And the circle would tighten.

Chapter 46

Now

The office was warmer than the lobby, the lighting softer. Wood instead of marble. Bookshelves instead of glass. The kind of room designed to make you forget you were being assessed.

Large enough to house a boardroom meeting table. The office of someone important.

Dr. Avery stood when I entered.

He was older than I expected. Late fifties, maybe early sixties. Neatly dressed in an open-collared shirt, wire-rimmed glasses perched low on his nose. He had the calm authority of someone used to being listened to – and obeyed.

‘Mackenzie Morgan,’ he said, extending his hand. ‘Thank you for coming.’

His grip was firm but brief. Controlled.

‘Of course,’ I said, taking the chair opposite his desk.

Keith hovered in the doorway, looking like he’d prefer to be back in the lobby with Tess. Dr. Avery glanced past me once, taking him in, then returned his attention to me as if Keith had already been dismissed.

‘Your colleague is welcome to wait outside,’ he said pleasantly. ‘This conversation may be . . . personal.’

Keith looked at me. An unspoken question.

I nodded once.

Keith cracked his knuckles and left.

When the door closed behind him, the room felt smaller.

Dr. Avery sat, folding his hands. ‘You accepted our invitation?’

‘I did,’ I said, wondering if he was the one who had sent it.

‘It says a great deal,’ he said. ‘That you came.’

I smiled politely. ‘I’m curious by nature.’

‘So is everyone who finds us,’ he replied. ‘Curiosity is often the first sign of readiness.’

‘Readiness for what?’ I asked.

He tilted his head, studying me. ‘Before we get there, I’d like to understand what brought you to us now.’

I met his gaze. ‘Because you invited me here?’

He looked perplexed. Whoever sent the invite, it wasn't him. Was it Luis?

'Your Institute took over the Phoenix Reentry Program,' I said, glossing over any misunderstanding.

'Yes.'

So this must be where Luis had come when he left the army. If Dr. Avery had been around since the Phoenix Reentry Program, maybe he remembered him?

'I think my husband was involved with Phoenix,' I said. 'After he returned from deployment.'

A flicker. Small. Almost imperceptible.

'Luis Tyndale,' he said.

The way he readily spoke Luis's name was unsettling. I wondered what else they knew about me, and about Luis.

'You worked with him?' I asked.

'Briefly,' Dr. Avery said. 'Luis was . . . exceptional.'

'In what way?' I pressed.

'He struggled,' Avery said evenly. 'But not in the ways most men do. He wasn't fractured. He was . . . unfinished.'

Unfinished. My pulse quickened.

'Phoenix failed men like Luis,' Dr. Avery continued. 'It treated trauma as something to be soothed, medicated, filed away. We believe pain is instructive.'

I kept my expression neutral. 'That's a controversial position.'

'Progress often is,' he replied.

I leaned back. 'My husband died four months ago,' I said, watching his response the way I would a witness on the stand.

'Yes,' he said softly.

The air shifted.

Avery looked at me, more interested in my reaction to Luis's death than his own. 'Loss is destabilizing. Particularly when it's . . . unresolved.'

I felt the weight of the word settle, but I couldn't be sure it meant what it seemed to mean.

'Unresolved?' I asked. 'What do you mean?'

He studied me carefully. 'Have you found closure?'

'No,' I said honestly.

A faint smile touched his mouth. ‘What if I told you that you didn’t need to?’

My heart kicked hard.

‘You’re suggesting—’

‘I’m *asking*,’ he corrected.

I bit back a retort. Condescending prick.

‘We have a process here,’ he continued. ‘A way of tapping into our thoughts and beliefs. Of confronting the parts of ourselves we’re taught to suppress. Of becoming who we were truly meant to be.’ He slid a glossy brochure across the desk.

I picked it up and skimmed it.

THE FOUR STAGES OF ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION

Nigredo (Blackening) – Confrontation with the Shadow Self: Explore hidden fears and unresolved trauma to prepare for new growth.

Albedo (Whitening) – Purification and Awareness Elucidation/Illumination: Cleanse the psyche of negativity. Illuminate unconscious material.

Citrinitas (Yellowing) – Illumination and Insight Education: The stage of dawning wisdom and integration.

Rubedo (Reddening) – Completion and Rebirth Transformation: Consolidate personal transformation. The old self dissolves. The new self emerges.

Each stage was paired with a symbol, and the final one stopped me cold. Two serpents devouring each other’s tails.

The double ouroboros.

I realized, with a dull thud, that I recognized it. All of it.

‘This is Alchemical Psychology,’ I said. ‘I studied it in college before I knew law was my calling.’

‘Very good,’ Dr. Avery said. ‘Carl Jung used it to describe the process of individuation . . . this is about breaking down the ego to rebuild the self.’

I looked through the brochure again. ‘Is this what you teach here?’

‘Some of what we teach, yes,’ he said.

I reread the last stage. Transformation. The old self dissolves. The new self emerges. This wasn’t just therapy jargon. It was doctrine. There was structure, a belief system.

I thought of Luis’s death. Not a literal death, but metaphorical.

An architecture.

What would the dissolution of the old self look like? A few lifestyle changes. A new perspective.

A death?

A feeling settled in my stomach. The symbols. The language. The timing. The way Luis's life had seemed to narrow before it vanished altogether.

All of it came to a head as I realized that my feeling had been right.

Luis wasn't just involved in some illegal business deal, like I'd thought.

Before the crash, there had been so many small things that didn't look like much on their own, but which, taken together, formed a shape I couldn't ignore.

The time he spent at 'work'. Meetings at all times of the day, night and everything in between. If I asked where he'd been, he'd answer – but never directly. Enough truth to stop the question, never enough to satisfy it.

Then there was the woman.

I never caught them together in a way I could prove, but I'd seen her name pop up on his phone more than once. Messages deleted before I could read them. A number saved under a single initial. He had said they worked together. When I asked about her, he didn't deny it – he deflected. Told me I was reading too much into things. That I was letting my job rot my instincts.

And I believed him, because I had Carl, and we worked outside work hours too. That was when he'd started closing parts of himself off. Becoming guarded. Careful with his words. Watching me the way people do when they're figuring out how much someone else knows.

After that, I found the document.

A case file I wasn't supposed to see – restricted access, flagged and rerouted before it hit the general system. Luis's name buried halfway down the page, glimpsed just before the screen went blank. When I asked Elizabeth about it, she didn't even look surprised.

'It's nothing,' she'd said calmly. 'A misunderstanding. A business deal gone wrong. Luis's name was mentioned in passing. Nothing even worth mentioning, really.'

She'd smiled when she said it. The same way she smiled when she was reassuring clients about something they didn't need to understand.

I'd wanted to believe them both. I had no reason not to trust them, but Luis's behavior after that conversation was a little guarded. I hadn't realized he was bracing for impact.

I hadn't thought *cult* then.

I'd thought manipulation. Something operating just outside the law, protected by money and silence.

Something I couldn't afford to be adjacent to.

I hadn't thought Luis might be directly involved, or I might have pushed Elizabeth for more, instead of taking her at face value.

'Mackenzie,' said Dr. Avery, bringing me back from my thoughts.

'I'd like to invite you to stay.'

I smiled politely. 'Why?' I asked, hoping to jar him into a truthful answer.

He returned the smile. 'I would like you to experience what our facility has to offer. I think it will make it easier to understand when I tell you what really happened to your husband.'

I tried not to react, keeping my arms still and my hands at my sides. He thought he had the upper hand, that I would jump at the opportunity to find out what happened to Luis, but after coming to the Coterie Institute, I had no doubt he was alive. All I needed to know now was why he had hidden it from me.

'I have a few conditions,' I said.

'Of course. I'm open to discussing those,' he said, unaffected by my request.

'My friend outside, he stays, too,' I said, waiting for him to agree before I continued.

'That shouldn't be a problem,' said Dr. Avery. 'What else?'

'I want to speak to Luis,' I said. 'No games.'

Chapter 47

Then

Luis

For a while after I left the center, I tried to do things the regular way.

I got a job. A routine. A life.

But I couldn't seem to make it stick.

I landed a job on a construction site, until I mistook the sound of a power tool for a grenade and dropped an expensive power drill mid-shift.

They asked me to go home, and my name wasn't on the roster the next day. Or the day after that.

The walls of my apartment seemed to close in tighter each night, my excuses for not paying the rent on time growing thinner. Empty takeout boxes took over the bench space. Half-empty bottles of beer were left wherever I passed out. The hum of the fridge was louder than my own heartbeat.

I couch-surfed at friends' places. The nights were the worst. The quiet pressed too close and I drank to knock myself out. Sometimes it worked.

My dad offered me a job at his company, said it'd 'straighten me out.' I told him I'd rather drown. He said he'd cut me off completely if I didn't sort out my life.

I didn't think Mom would let that happen, but she did.

I was in the parking lot of the liquor store, head down, when I heard someone join me.

It startled me so badly the bottle dropped from my hand, shattering on the curb.

I was as drunk as I was going to get with empty pockets, so I looked up and said hello. It was him. The man from that wellness place whose name I couldn't remember. Sil— Sil-something.

'Luis,' he said, like we were old friends picking up a conversation mid-sentence. 'You didn't come back.'

I rubbed the back of my neck. 'Yeah. Not really my scene.'

He smiled. Teeth like porcelain. 'You think you're broken.'

I laughed under my breath. 'I didn't say that.'

'No,' he said, still smiling. 'But they did. And you believed them.'

I stood, swaying on my feet, but he held out a hand to steady me.

‘You wake up every day wishing your body didn’t remember what your mind tries to forget. You think that means you’re damaged. But you’re not.’

I kicked a piece of broken glass, the alcohol trickling down the gutter. ‘Then what am I?’

‘Your body’s fighting itself,’ he said softly. ‘It’s trying to destroy the part that’s still holding on. We can help you stop fighting.’

His voice was . . . smooth. Like warm water. Like sleep. I didn’t want to believe him, but I also didn’t want him to stop talking.

‘So, you think I need therapy? That’s what my girlfriend thought too.’

Sofia had told me that when she left. She didn’t like the new me, returned from a hell I couldn’t escape.

‘Not therapy,’ said the man . . . Silas. ‘I want to show you how to break the cycle. Let me help you. No more fighting.’

That night, I slept. Not all night, but better than I had in months.

When I woke up the next morning, I called Silas, telling myself I wasn’t committing to anything. It was just a follow-up. I could still walk away if I decided it wasn’t for me.

We met at a café by the river. He ordered for me – black coffee, no sugar – and somehow, it didn’t feel presumptuous. It felt like he was paying attention. Like he saw me. Food, too. A burger and fries.

‘After the state you were in last night,’ he said, ‘I figured this might help.’

He wasn’t wrong.

Silas had a way of talking that made everything else fade. He didn’t interrupt, didn’t fill the silences. He was patient, like what I had to say was worth waiting for. I told him things I hadn’t told anyone else, about the army, and the explosion. Things I couldn’t say in the group therapy session. About the guilt that sat in my chest like shrapnel.

‘If you’d tried to save Thomas, you’d both be dead,’ he said. ‘All you would’ve achieved by going in would have been to give your squadron two shitty phone calls to make back home to your parents. But you were smart enough to know the better of the two options. You don’t have to keep reliving it, regretting something you couldn’t have changed. You need to go easy on yourself.’

‘Yeah, that’s what the army therapist said.’

I’d spoken to one briefly, when I left the army.

Silas nodded. ‘Therapy tries to reason with pain. We teach you that it might be there, but it doesn’t have to rule you. We teach it obedience.’

‘Obedience?’ I repeated.

‘Your mind’s a soldier that hasn’t stopped fighting,’ he said. ‘We’ll show you how to make it stand down.’

Silas slid a business card across the table. No name. No number. Just a familiar address.

‘Come tonight,’ he said. ‘You’ll see what I’m talking about.’

‘Why do you care?’ The question surprised me, slipping out before I could stop it.

Silas didn’t answer right away. He looked out toward the river, watching the current move like it had somewhere to be.

‘Because I’ve seen what happens when men like you are forgotten,’ he said finally. ‘The world doesn’t know what to do with you once you’re done being useful.’

I snorted softly. He turned back to me then, really looked at me.

‘You remind me of someone,’ he said. ‘Someone I failed.’

I was already feeling down, and I didn’t want to be his redemption project. ‘Yeah?’

Silas’s gaze was lost in the river, dredging up old memories.

‘I don’t make the same mistake twice,’ he said under his breath.

The resolve in his voice caught my attention.

‘You don’t know me,’ I said. ‘You don’t owe me anything.’

‘I know enough,’ he replied. ‘You don’t need to be fixed. You need to be *understood*. And you need structure. Purpose. People who won’t flinch when you tell the truth about who you are.’

He stepped closer to the water, throwing a rock in and watching it sink. ‘Most people want to change you – or want you to be *their* version of you.’

‘And you’re different?’ I said, the sarcasm heavier than intended.

He folded his arms. ‘You’ve spent your whole life following other people’s rules. The military. Your parents. Doctors. Therapists.’

‘That’s what happens when you screw up,’ I said.

‘No,’ he corrected. ‘That’s what happens when you’re powerful enough to survive and no one teaches you how to use that power.’

Was this guy for real? I was ready to walk away, my back already turned, but he continued.

‘I think you survived something most people wouldn’t,’ he said. ‘And instead of being honored for it, you were punished. Drugged. Pacified. Told to make yourself smaller.’

He slid the card closer to me with two fingers. I’d thrown away the last one.

‘I care,’ he said, ‘because men like you either destroy themselves . . . or they learn to belong again.’

I stared at the card.

No name. No number. Just an address.

‘Come tonight,’ Silas said. ‘You don’t owe anyone anything. Just come and see.’

I looked up. ‘And if I don’t?’

His expression softened – not disappointed. Patient. ‘Then I’ll know I was wrong,’ he said. ‘And I’ll let you go.’

But the way he said it told me he didn’t think that would happen.

Chapter 48

Now

Dr. Avery didn't even pretend what I'd said was impossible. Instead, he considered my request. 'Excuse me for just a moment. I'll be right back,' he said.

'Of course.' I watched as he disappeared through a set of doors. Luis *had* been here.

I tried not to pace as I waited. A woman in linen pants and a cotton blouse opened the door. 'Dr. Avery asked me to invite your friend back in,' she said. 'The doctor shouldn't be long.'

Keith stepped out from behind her and entered the room.

'I'll leave you to it.' The woman was gone before I could thank her.

Dr. Avery was trying to gain my trust. Showing he was willing to grant the first part of my request. Would he grant the second?

My phone buzzed. Jessica. I snatched it up, silencing it quickly and stepping away from Keith. 'Now's not a good time, Jess. I—'

'Mackenzie, what's going on? I received a transfer request from the correctional facility. Apparently, you wanted an assessment for a Rebecca Ryan?'

Shit. I didn't have time for this. Not now.

'Yeah.'

'Well, someone must've agreed with you. Your client tried to hang herself earlier today, and they put the request through immediately. We sent someone over to collect her, but she didn't arrive.'

Shit.

I checked the time. 'How long ago?'

'About an hour. The transport vehicle should've arrived twenty minutes ago, but there's no sign of them.'

I tried to lighten the mood. 'Maybe someone stopped for coffee?'

'Now's not the time to joke,' she snapped.

Humor was my go-to when things got stressful. Jess knew that better than anybody.

'Kenz, where are you?' asked Jessica.

'I'm—'

'Mackenzie, we gotta go,' said Keith, ignoring my shushing.

'Oh my god. Is that conspiracy guy still there?'

I sighed. Denying it would only make me seem more guilty.

‘I knew you two were fuc—’

‘Jess!’ My face scrunched up at the thought before I could stop it. ‘It’s not like that.’

Keith picked up on our conversation, the speaker volume on the phone too loud. ‘Well, thanks,’ he said. ‘That’s offensive. And you could do worse.’

‘I don’t trust him,’ said Jessica.

I looked at Keith, expecting a reaction, but he seemed to have stopped listening.

‘You don’t trust anyone, Jess,’ I pointed out.

‘What’s that sound? Where are you really?’

‘Nowhere. I’m . . . just doing some research for a case I’m working on.’

‘Rebecca Ryan?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Something like that. Listen, I think she might be part of a cult.’

‘Really?’

I looked at the walls around me. I couldn’t tell Jess I thought Luis was mixed up in it too, but she might still be able to help.

‘Your thesis was on cults, right?’ I asked.

‘It was on psychological programming and the influence of coercive social systems,’ she said. I guess you weren’t actually supposed to say ‘cult’.

‘Jesus, that’s catchy,’ said Keith sarcastically.

I shot him a warning look.

‘How would you get someone out of a . . . coercive social system?’ I asked.

‘It could take a long time to deprogram someone from cult activity, and how successful it is would depend on how involved that person is and the methods that were used to influence or change their beliefs in the first place.’

‘So how would I convince someone to leave?’

‘It would require voluntary exit and counselling over time, while they reconnected with the outside world.’

‘They seem to already be a part of the outside world,’ I said, thinking of Luis, and how he’d acted almost normal, besides ignoring me. ‘And in

terms of methods, I think they're using psychological doctrine to manipulate them.'

'I mean, it could still be an isolating social system, but it's not easy to show that. You can't just go in and take someone out of there.'

'No, I know,' I said, pretending that wasn't an option. I wasn't above doing what I had to do. I heard the click of the door being opened.

'I need to go,' I said to Jess, ending the call and pocketing the phone.

Dr. Avery walked in and eyed Keith, who was pacing, looking more comfortable on his feet than if he were sitting.

'I'm sorry. It's just Mackenzie from here. You're welcome to get a massage or visit our hot pools while you wait?'

Keith looked at him like he'd asked him to perform his own dental surgery.

'He comes with me,' I said, and Keith nodded his agreement. I didn't trust Dr. Avery, and apparently Keith didn't either. We were safer together.

'Where's my dog?' I asked.

'She's taking a walk around the grounds,' he said. 'Dogs aren't allowed in this part of the building, but some residents have pets in their homes.'

'Residents?'

'Yes. The Coterie Institute is home to some of our staff and students,' he said.

'What are they studying?' asked Keith.

'A variety of things. Philosophy, psychology. Business. Medicine.' Dr. Avery smiled tightly. 'If you'll follow me, please.'

'Where exactly are we following you to?' asked Keith.

Dr. Avery looked at him like he was a petulant child asking questions on a car ride, and didn't answer.

Keith hesitated, so I overtook him. 'Do you want to find out what's going on or not?' I whispered as I went past. I'd come this far. I was going to find Luis.

Chapter 49

Then

Six months before he died, Luis stood at our dresser, fastening his cufflinks with more care than usual.

I watched him from the doorway, leaning against the frame, still barefoot. He was wearing his navy suit. It was my favorite. It sat perfectly across his broad shoulders and made his eyes look even smokier. 'Big meeting?' I asked.

He smiled. 'You could say that.' He lifted a small glass bottle and tipped it toward his wrist.

The scent reached me instantly. Warm. Resinous. Something dark beneath the top notes.

I crossed the room and wrapped my arms around him from behind before he could finish, pressing my cheek against his back, breathing him in.

He stilled for half a second, so brief I almost missed it, then relaxed into me.

'Too much?' he asked lightly.

I murmured something incoherent.

He smiled at our reflection in the mirror before he turned in my arms and kissed the top of my head. 'I like that you notice things.'

'That's my job,' I said, half-joking.

He slid his hands to my waist, thumbs brushing the bare skin where my shirt rode up. 'One of the many reasons I married you.'

I smiled into his chest. It was easy to forget everything else when he touched my skin like that.

'You're nervous,' I said.

He exhaled a laugh. 'Am I that obvious?'

'Only because I know you,' I assured him.

'It's just a meeting,' he said to himself in the mirror.

'With who?' I asked.

The question came out casual. Practiced. The way I asked things in court when I already knew the answer might matter.

He wasn't usually rattled like this.

'It's nothing,' he said.

I tilted my head. 'That's vague.'

He kissed me before I could ask any more questions. Slow. Familiar.
'It's nothing. Really,' he said quietly. 'Don't worry about it.'

It made me worry more. It felt like he was shutting me out. How was I supposed to be supportive if he couldn't tell me what I was supporting?

I stepped back, studying him. 'That's not how we do things.'

He reached for his jacket. 'It's just business, Kenz. You'd probably find it boring anyway.' I was about to press, but his phone buzzed on the dresser.

He glanced at the screen. Didn't pick it up. That, more than anything, made my stomach dip. Luis never ignored his phone.

It buzzed again. And again.

I caught a glimpse of what was on the screen before it went dark.

E.

I frowned. 'Who's "E"?'

His head snapped up fast.

He recovered just as quickly, smile already back in place, but I'd seen it. The recognition. 'No one,' he said.

I crossed my arms. 'That's not an answer.'

'She's just someone I used to work with.'

If he wanted to play it like that, then game on. 'Were you friends?'

He ducked the question, grabbing his laptop bag to start packing for the day. Then he stepped closer, lowering his voice. 'Why are you interrogating me like I'm on the stand?'

The words stung.

'I'm not,' I said. 'I'm asking because you're my husband and I'm interested in your friends.'

'Jesus, Mackenzie. I told you we *were* friends, now can we just drop it?'

The phone buzzed again.

This time, he picked it up.

'I have to take this,' he said.

He kissed me quickly – too quickly – and stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

I stood there, staring at the dresser. The open cologne bottle. A suit he had chosen not to wear laid out like a uniform.

The apartment felt quieter without him.

When he came back a minute later, his expression had shifted. He was focused. Energized.

‘I’m sorry I snapped, I’m just nervous,’ he said. ‘They moved the meeting up.’ He was already reaching for his jacket. ‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Luis—’

He paused at the door. ‘I’ll be late.’

‘How late?’

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. ‘Don’t wait up.’

The door closed behind him. I stayed where I was long after his footsteps faded, the scent of his cologne hanging in the air. It clung to everything.

I’d spent years watching guilty men shift under questioning, counting every tell.

Standing there, watching him, I was learning what Luis’s tells were.

Chapter 50

Now

Dr. Avery didn't look back to check if we were following.

He didn't need to.

The empty corridor stretched ahead of him, seeming almost endless. Soft lighting and clean lines created a sense of peace and tranquility, every design choice carefully calibrated to calm the mind.

No signs on the doors.

No indication of where the corridors led. Maybe the regulars didn't need them.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'We don't have signage plastered around,' he said, as though reading my mind. 'It's important to think about where you're going. To seek out places without being led. A few wrong turns along the way are a blessing. They teach you unexpected lessons.'

Keith exhaled beside me, raising his eyebrows, as if asking if this guy was for real.

'That's not an answer,' he said.

Dr. Avery ignored him. He kept walking like he had all the time in the world.

But in the pit of my stomach, I couldn't curb the anticipation of seeing Luis again.

How would he react?

Would he be glad to see me, or would he be shocked I'd found him?

The building changed the deeper we went.

Not dramatically.

Subtly.

The air felt thicker. Quieter. Like sound didn't travel properly here. The waterfall feature cascading down the wall was muted, making me think of a cave.

We passed an open door.

Inside, a man sat at a table.

His hands were folded in front of him. His eyes were open. But he was completely still. Not moving, not blinking.

I slowed, pausing in front of the doorway. He was looking toward me, but it was as if he looked right through me.

He didn't react at all. Didn't acknowledge that we were even standing there.

'Is he—' I started.

'Engaged,' Dr. Avery said, sounding particularly pleased. 'A sort of meditation. He's doing important work.'

It didn't look like work. He looked vacant, like he was daydreaming, but not about anything good.

Dr. Avery gestured for us to keep walking.

Reluctantly, I kept going, fighting the urge to turn back and ask the man if he was OK. I wasn't an expert on meditation, but I wasn't sure you were supposed to do it with your eyes open. It looked creepy, like he was thinking about something very unpleasant.

We turned a corner.

A woman crossed the hallway ahead of us.

She stopped when she saw me. Her gaze held mine for too long, like she was forming an opinion.

Then, she smiled unexpectedly.

It didn't reach her eyes.

'Are you new?' she asked, looking from Keith to me.

'We're just visiting,' I said.

Her smile deepened slightly. 'Everyone's just visiting,' she said.

Before I could ask what she meant, she walked past us.

So close her shoulder brushed by mine. Deliberately. I turned to watch her go but she didn't look back.

'Do they all talk like that?' Keith muttered.

'They're learning to express themselves more honestly,' Dr. Avery said.

'That didn't feel honest.'

'Honesty can be uncomfortable.'

We kept moving, slower than before. Or maybe it just felt that way.

The people seemed to be getting stranger the deeper we went. More distant. And we still hadn't arrived at wherever Luis was.

Another woman passed us, her face expressionless. She walked with a perfectly straight back, like she had been trained to do so. She carried a tray with a lid on it. Possibly delivering a meal to one of the rooms. It was impossible to tell.

Voices drifted towards us from somewhere up ahead. Low and measured. I strained my ears, trying to hear what they were saying. I

couldn't make out the words at first. Then, a man's voice. Calm and controlled.

'It won't happen overnight. It takes time.'

Something in my chest tightened.

I stopped walking. For a second, it sounded like Luis.

But maybe it was just me, hyper-aware and looking for signs of him in this place.

Keith glanced at me. 'What?'

'Listen.'

The voice continued.

'... what you think you saw doesn't—'

Silence. The words cut out abruptly. Like someone knew we were there and had stopped talking.

Dr. Avery had stopped ahead of us. Waiting.

'Something wrong?' he asked.

'I heard people talking,' I said. 'It sounded like ...' I shook my head. His name stuck in my throat. I didn't dare to hope. Now that I was this close, I was more scared than ever of losing him for good.

We passed a glass panel. Frosted, but not completely. We stopped in front of it. There was movement behind it. Shifting figures. Another figure stood still, facing right toward us.

I slowed. The outline didn't move. Didn't turn. Didn't leave. Just stood there. Watching us.

My pulse kicked. 'Is someone in there?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Dr. Avery. 'But he is busy. We need to keep moving.'

I wanted to stay, to look inside and make sure it wasn't him. 'Is it Luis?' I asked, trying to prepare myself for the crushing blow of being told it wasn't him.

'It could be,' said Dr. Avery cryptically. 'Do you want to go inside and find out?'

'Is this a "three doors and you're out" kind of deal?' asked Keith. I looked at him. It was a fair question. We both waited for Dr. Avery to answer.

'No. It's up to you if you want to go inside,' said Dr. Avery after a pause.

Was he enjoying watching me sweat like this?

The door ahead was closed. Unmarked, like all the rest. Was this a meeting room? Or was it someone's quarters? The rooms here were laid out like apartments, but they might still be workspaces.

Dr. Avery looked at me, waiting to see what I'd do.

His gaze was long and measured. Like he was waiting.

I lifted my hand to knock on the door.

'Before you go in,' he said quietly, stopping me, 'you need to understand something.'

'She doesn't need a speech,' said Keith, clearly thinking that Dr. Avery was stalling.

'She might.'

Avery turned back to me and made a show of starting again.

'You accepted our invitation because you were expecting a reunion,' he said. 'That's not what this is.'

My hand tightened at my side.

'Then why did you invite me here?' I asked.

'We select our members carefully. And you are a potential candidate. We think we could offer you just as much as you offer us.' He smiled. 'That's why we've agreed to your requests so far. We want you to consider our offer carefully, were we to make one.'

I stepped up to the door. If he was playing games, if Luis wasn't here, I'd walk right out of there and never look back.

I swallowed hard, wondering what I would do if he was inside.

I still wasn't sure. I pressed my knuckles against the door, thinking before I knocked. The glass was cold against my fist. I was hesitant not because I was having doubts, but because something in me already knew this wasn't going to be simple. What if I found Luis sitting there like the man I'd seen earlier? What if he looked straight through me, too?

I sucked in a breath and knocked. Three raps in a row.

Then, I waited.

Chapter 51

Now

I didn't see him at first.

The room was larger than I expected. Dimmer. The lighting soft, indirect, designed to obscure edges rather than define them.

For a moment I thought it was a trick. That the room was empty, and Dr. Avery was about to give us a lecture on self-reflection and searching for something.

I entered after Dr. Avery, Keith following behind me.

I jumped as the door closed behind us with a thud. Then, nothing. It was silent.

I heard a sound from around the corner, coming from a small nook.

'You shouldn't be here.'

That voice, a familiar baritone, steady and low. It washed through the air, comforting in a way that nothing else was.

Dr. Avery turned up the lights, just enough for me to see a little clearer.

My pulse surged, heat flooding my chest so fast it stole my breath. For a split second, the walls, the people, the soft hum of conversation all blurred. There was only him.

I walked further into the room and stopped dead. Luis stood at the far side, clean-shaven, hair freshly cut, dressed in a crisp white shirt like he belonged here. Like this was where he'd always been meant to stand.

I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe that he'd look a little more haunted, like the man down the hall had been. More like someone who missed their old life. Something that told me I hadn't made a huge mistake in coming here.

The sight of him made my body ache – an almost physical pain, sharp and intimate.

'Luis?' I breathed, but my voice sounded wrong. Too thin. Like it didn't belong in the room. He turned when he heard me. Something flickered across his face, real and unguarded. It turned to relief. It lit up his eyes, softened his mouth, and for one dangerous moment I believed that everything I'd hoped could be true, was.

My heart slammed.

'Luis, I searched for you.'

This time, it wasn't a question. It was more certain.

‘Mackenzie, you came for me,’ he said. The sound of his voice, saying my name, shattered whatever restraint I had left. I crossed the room without thinking, my heels too loud against the floor, my heart pounding so hard I was sure he could hear it.

I closed the distance between us. Slowly this time, scared that if I moved too fast, he might disappear. My hand lifted, hesitating just short of touching him before settling against his chest.

He was warm. Solid. Exactly the way I remembered him. But he didn’t respond straight away. Not the way I expected. Not the way he used to.

There was a slight pause, just long enough to notice, before his hand came up and covered mine. Carefully, like his reaction was contrived.

He stepped closer, closing the gap I hadn’t realized was still there, and pulled me into him. The scent of him – *that scent* – flooded my senses.

My face pressed into his chest, I laughed. It came out as a broken sound that turned into a sob before I could stop it. He was here. It was crazy, and yet somehow, it was true.

My fingers clenched in his shirt like if I let go, he might disappear again.

‘Luis,’ I whispered against him.

His hands moved slowly up my back.

‘You’re alive.’

He held me tighter.

‘I am,’ he said quietly.

His words settled.

For a moment, the world disappeared.

No lies. No questions. No four months of grief hollowing me out and rebuilding me back into a warped version of myself. Just us, exactly as we’d always been – intense enough to wonder if anyone else would understand.

When he finally pulled back, his hands framed my face, thumbs brushing the skin beneath my eyes like he was checking for tears.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked softly, but my lips were on his mouth. Hungry for him.

I had made mistakes. Stupid mistakes, but maybe this was my second chance.

He kissed me back, but only for a few seconds before he pulled away.

I let out a shaky breath, still smiling, still dizzy with him, running my fingers along the length of his arm. 'I thought . . . I thought you were leaving clues,' I said. 'The break-in. The dog. The invitation. I thought you wanted me to find you. I saw you at the station . . .'

His expression didn't change. Not immediately. But something shifted behind his eyes – something subtle, almost imperceptible. A calculation sliding into place.

'You shouldn't have come,' he said. There was something new in his tone now. Something I'd heard before, when he woke up from one of his dreams, thinking he was still in battle.

He held on to me, but I pulled back. Hurt that he hadn't wanted me to find him. Would he have let me keep searching forever? He looked at Dr. Avery, who nodded, and stepped out of the room. Keith hung back, giving us some privacy.

Luis lowered his voice. 'I didn't want you to come here,' he said gently, as if that were somehow better.

'I saw you stepping onto the train. You looked right by me,' I said, gripping his arm now.

'You weren't supposed to see me. Anton saw you at Bodhi's. He said you were struggling. I was worried, Kenzie. I wanted to make sure you were doing OK.'

Anton? The strange man in the café?

'Who is Anton?' I asked.

'He works here. He recognized you from a photo I keep of you.'

'The receipt,' I said. 'That wasn't a receipt at all. Was it?'

'No.'

'What was on it?'

Luis looked away. 'Anton tried to do a stupid thing.'

'What?'

'He thought it would be a good idea to tell you I was alive. I was relieved when he said you ran. It wasn't his business to meddle in.'

'You let me think you died,' I said, my voice cracking. 'I buried you. How was I supposed to be doing OK?'

'I know,' he said.

Not *I'm sorry*.

Not *I had no choice*.

Just *I know*.

I stepped back, really looking at him now. At the way he stood: grounded, composed. Not hunted. Not afraid. Not the man I'd imagined, who'd been trapped or coerced.

'You're safe,' I said slowly.

'Yes.'

'You're not here against your will.'

'No.'

The room suddenly felt too small.

'And you didn't want me to find you,' I said, the truth clicking into place with a quiet, devastating certainty.

His gaze held mine. 'I didn't think you would,' he said.

Something twisted in my chest. A memory stirred – not a clear one, but a sensation. A tightening. A warning I'd ignored because it threatened everything I was.

'You look . . . happy,' I said, and hated that my voice shook.

He studied me for a long moment, like he was deciding how honest to be.

'I'm where I need to be,' he said finally.

That wasn't an answer. And in that space – between what he said and what he didn't – I felt it. The shift. The realization that whatever had brought him here hadn't just *happened* to him.

It had been a choice. A plan. Calculated.

A flicker of something unreadable crossed his face. There wasn't an ounce of guilt.

He knew something.

And from the way he was looking at me, I could see it clearly now. It wasn't about this place.

It was about me.

The thought slid into my mind, unwanted and electric, sending my pulse skidding.

He knows.

Chapter 52

Now

My heart pounded. The warmth of the reunion had cooled, replaced by something sharper. More dangerous.

I thought of the months leading up to the crash. The documents I wasn't supposed to see. The meeting Elizabeth had told me not to worry about. The change I'd seen in Luis that had kept me digging to figure out what was going on.

The papers I'd found, implicating him.

I thought of the night I'd stood in the garage, heart hammering, telling myself I was protecting everything I had built. I wouldn't become a deck in a takedown, my career in tatters because of the choices he'd made, while I stood beside him in public and paid the price for his silence.

It felt like the ultimate betrayal, not trusting me with his secrets. Letting me believe a lie.

And if he hadn't brought me here, then who had? And why?

What did they really want from me?

Chapter 53

Then

Luis

I'd shown up, like Silas suggested. After that, I kept going.

Silas asked me to meet him one afternoon. By then, I was still couch-surfing, but starting to get sick of it. Silas mentioned a job he thought I'd be a good fit for.

I'd been coming to the Institute long enough by then that the front desk didn't ask for my name anymore. The place was beginning to feel like home.

Silas didn't waste time with pleasantries. He never did. 'You hungry?' he said. I nodded.

'Come on,' he said. 'We're going for a drive.'

We drove out to a diner just off the highway, vinyl booths cracked with age, the smell of burnt coffee clinging to everything. It was nothing like the Institute. It was louder. More exposed. I wondered if that was the point.

We slid into a booth near the window. He ordered for both of us without asking what I wanted. I didn't care. A burger was a burger, and I wasn't paying.

'Your parents still not talking to you?' he asked, like he was talking about the weather.

'No,' I said, watching the counter for our food, my stomach grumbling.

He nodded once, unsurprised. 'They will.'

I let out a short laugh. 'You don't know them like I do. They're stubborn.'

Silas smiled, faint and knowing. 'I know enough.'

The waitress dropped off our plates, doing another trip for a round of milkshakes. Grease soaked through the paper liner. I ate like I hadn't eaten in days, because I barely had.

Silas picked at a couple of fries, waiting until I slowed down.

'How would you feel about staying at the Institute?' he asked casually.

I froze, burger halfway to my mouth for another bite, then set it back down.

'I already have a place,' I said. 'Kip's couch isn't glamorous, but it's—'

'Temporary,' Silas finished. 'And you're tired of being temporary.'

I hated that he was right. Like he'd pulled the thought straight out of my head.

'Come on, it's gotta be a step up from Kip's couch,' he said, biting into his burger.

He was right. When he first found me, I'd stayed for days. Slept better than I had in months with a full belly. No drinking. No noise. No pretending I was fine.

'Unless you want to go back to your parents' house, try your luck there?' he said, knowing I wouldn't.

The army had changed me in a way my parents didn't understand, and unless I was willing to do what they said and try things their way, there was no going back. They'd made that clear.

I sighed.

'Your mother loves you,' he said quietly. 'Trust me.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Well, she's done a damned good job keeping you safe.'

I looked down at my hands, unsure what to do with them. The diner felt too bright. Too open. Like I was sitting under a spotlight. I picked up a handful of fries.

'What about the job?' I asked, needing something solid to focus on. Practical.

Silas smiled again, this time warmer. Proud. 'You help us,' he said. 'You learn. You grow. You stop fighting yourself.'

'And in return?' I asked.

He leaned back in the booth. 'In return, you get a room, a job. An opportunity.'

I told myself I was just considering it.

That I wasn't ready to say yes.

But Silas didn't rush me. He didn't need to. He already knew.

I picked up my burger again and bit into it.

'Why are you helping me?' I asked. 'You barely know me.'

His expression flickered.

'I know you well enough,' he said. Then, after a beat, 'And I knew your mother.'

My half-eaten burger slipped from my hand.

'You know my mother,' I repeated. 'How?'

He shrugged. 'I used to. A long time ago. She was brilliant back then. Fierce. She had a way of seeing through people without making them feel small.'

I swallowed. 'She never mentioned you.'

A small smile touched his mouth. 'Well, she wouldn't have,' he said, as if remembering. 'You remind me of her,' he added. 'I bet you're nothing like your dad.'

He was right. We had never seen eye to eye.

But how did he know?

Chapter 54

Then

I don't remember deciding to do it.

I remember the fury, the frustration at trying to confront him, and underneath it, the grief. The kind that eviscerated me in the space of a breath. The moment I understood that my husband wasn't just lying to me, he was living a life that didn't include me in any meaningful way. He had left me on the sidelines, cheering for a race I wasn't part of.

I'd believed we had something rare. Built on honesty. On choosing each other over everything else. And then I realized he'd made choices that placed me exactly where I'd never agreed to stand. Exposed, unprotected, expected to stay loyal without ever being asked.

He hadn't just kept secrets. He'd decided for both of us. I would be the one left behind when it all collapsed. My career would suffer, because you can't have a criminal for a spouse and still be a credible criminal lawyer. I would lose my practice. My credibility. My purpose. The wife who knew nothing. The woman who would be asked why she hadn't seen it coming. Why she'd stood beside him while he burned everything down.

I wasn't afraid of losing him as much as I was afraid of losing myself: of realizing too late that he'd already made that bargain on my behalf.

I remember standing in the kitchen across from him, the document folded in my bag like a live grenade, and asking him carefully and calmly if there was something he needed to tell me about, some trouble he was in at work.

He smiled like I was being dramatic.

Said I was overthinking it, that I'd misunderstood. He said it was *handled*.

That word. *Handled*. That's exactly what he was trying to do with me. As if my life were a side issue. As if the law cared about intention once it started counting proximity. I was implicated.

'Luis, this won't just blow over. There's talk of embezzlement.'

He stopped then to look at me. Finally taking it seriously.

'I swear, you have nothing to worry about,' he said. 'I wasn't part of it.'

'I saw the file at work. I know Elizabeth was building a case,' I said. 'I need the truth, not fucking reassurance.'

My anger bubbled. I pressed him then. Harder. Told him this wasn't nothing. That whatever he was involved in would catch up with him, and when it did, it wouldn't stop with him.

He didn't deny it, but he dismissed it. 'This will blow over. Trust me.'

He had chosen the wrong words. I *had* trusted him. But not now.

'Will the illegal takeover blow over too? Because from what I read, they're going to fight,' I said.

He sighed. He wasn't looking for trust. He wanted silence.

When I first saw the document at work, before I asked Elizabeth about it, something inside me fractured completely. Because I knew then that it wasn't just Luis lying to me. It was already being covered up and contained. Right under my nose.

And now, he still wouldn't listen. Wouldn't step back. Wouldn't change course.

He looked at me like I was suddenly the obstacle. Like I was the only variable he hadn't planned for.

That night, standing in the garage, I understood something with terrifying clarity. He wasn't going to stop. And when it all came crashing down – and it would – it wouldn't be him standing in front of a disciplinary board or a judge explaining why he'd made the choices he had. It would be me. The wife who should have known but pretended not to. The lawyer who should have seen it clearly. The woman whose silence would be interpreted as complicity.

I don't remember deciding to do it. I remember realizing he'd already decided for me.

I couldn't just leave now. It would look worse; it could bring even more of it out into the open. If I didn't act, my life as I knew it would disappear.

*

Luis's car sat there, still warm from the drive home. I could feel the heat radiating off it as I stood too close, my arms folded tight against my ribs like I was holding myself together.

I told myself I wasn't doing anything drastic. Just . . . intervening. If he was out of the picture, whatever his colleagues did was their choice, and Luis wasn't responsible.

The document I wasn't supposed to see kept replaying in my head. Luis's name buried in it. I had to get him out of the equation, just for a little while. Long enough to figure out how to fix it.

I knelt, more to steady myself than anything else. My heart was pounding so hard I was afraid the sound might echo. I kept glancing at the door, half expecting Luis to appear and ask what I was doing.

In that moment, I wouldn't have known what to say.

My hands moved as though of their own accord. I remember hesitating. Pausing. Telling myself to stop. Then telling myself I couldn't afford to.

I didn't touch anything obvious. That was important – *nothing crude, nothing violent*. Just something small. Something that could pass as wear. A chance occurrence. One of those things mechanics shrugged at and blamed on bad luck.

I remember thinking, *cars fail all the time*.

I wiped my hands on my jeans afterwards, cleansing them of what I'd just done. I had trusted him completely. No questions asked. I thought that was what a relationship was supposed to be built on. Faith, loyalty, choosing each other even when things were difficult. But it doesn't work when only one person is truly in it. Luis was only thinking about his life, his career. He wasn't considering how it could impact me.

When I stood, my knees were weak. I leaned against the workbench and closed my eyes, breathing through the surge of nausea that followed. It was stronger than my guilt.

Grief. For what we'd lost. For something I'd thought we had but maybe never really did.

*

The morning after, I had awoken to a quiet room and the memory of what I'd done sitting heavy in my chest. I reached out automatically, fumbling through the covers beside me, my body searching for Luis before my mind could catch up. Wanting to feel him there with me. Solid. Warm. Real.

The bed was empty.

Panic flickered, quick and sharp. I told myself it was early enough that he was just out for a run, but his car wasn't in the driveway.

It was too late to fix it.

Regret hit me hard then. Sudden. Devastating. An avalanche rolling down a mountain, crushing me under its weight.

I had been reactive. I would never have approached a case that way. I would have given myself time to calm down. To think, and devise a plan.

But I loved Luis, and that love stopped me from being rational in the moment.

I padded out to the garage, the first waves of panic moving with me.

Please let his car be there. Please don't let it be too late to undo what I've done. I would find another way to fix the mess he'd created.

But as I opened the garage door, I knew it was too late. His car was already gone.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the empty space, my mind racing through possibilities I didn't want to name.

I called his phone. It rang out. I tried again while I was on my way to the office. Straight to voicemail.

By the time I reached my desk, my hands were shaking so badly that I had to grip the edge of it to steady myself. I reminded myself to breathe. To think like a lawyer. To think rationally.

If something had happened, if there had been an accident, someone would have called. The police. The hospital. Someone.

I checked my phone again. Nothing.

I didn't know then whether the tightness in my chest was fear that I'd gone too far, or the dawning realization that I might have already lost him. And that whatever came next, there would be no way to explain it without destroying us both.

I called again, and this time he answered.

'Hey, you miss me already?' he asked.

For a few seconds, relief flooded through me like a drug, stopping me from speaking. Then I got a grip.

'Yeah, actually,' I said, leaning into the corniness of it. 'I did.'

'What's up?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I love you. Just wanted to see if you wanna go out tonight. My shout.'

'Sure. Text me where and what time and I'll be there.'

Chapter 55

Now

‘Luis,’ I said carefully. ‘Why are you really here? What is this place?’

His mouth curved, just slightly. ‘I’m *becoming*,’ he said.

And in his eyes, I saw it clearly for the first time. Something unsettling. He wasn’t surprised to see me, after all. He’d expected me to come looking for him. This wasn’t a rescue. It was a reckoning.

Luis’s phone buzzed. ‘Just give me a second,’ he said. ‘If I don’t answer this, they’ll come down here, and I want some time with you.’

I didn’t answer, not trusting myself enough to speak.

While he told someone on the phone to cancel his appointments, I checked my own phone and found a missed call followed up with a message from Carl.

Full results for the crash are in. DNA from the car accident shows a first-degree familial match to Luis Tyndale. Due to fire damage, it could be Luis’s DNA, but maybe not.

My breath caught.

A first-degree familial match? So, if it wasn’t Luis, it was someone close. A parent, maybe?

Luis ended his call and looked at me. ‘I didn’t plan for things to turn out like this,’ he said. That didn’t make it hurt any less. He could have chosen to do things differently.

‘I think I should leave,’ I said. I’d come here to find out what I needed to, and now I knew. Mostly. As I turned toward the door, I noticed his wedding ring was gone. A textured circle with a diamond head replaced it.

His gaze followed mine and he lifted his hand. ‘It didn’t feel right to keep wearing it. I always hoped there would come a day when we could be together again.’

But that day wasn’t now. I was here because someone was messing with me. Maybe Luis. Maybe someone else, who had wanted me to see that Luis didn’t want me here.

I slid my own ring off, the metal catching against my skin. ‘Here,’ I said, tossing it toward him. ‘Have mine.’

‘Mackenzie, wait—’ His voice cracked for the first time, the calm veneer fracturing. ‘Don’t go.’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold band. His wedding ring.

‘I took it off, but I kept it close,’ he said, his voice breaking.

For a heartbeat, all I could do was stare. Was this real, or just another tactic to manipulate me? Had he planned this, knowing exactly what would break me?

I didn’t plan on staying to find out.

‘I’ll tell you everything. Then you can decide what you want to do.’

I had no reason to think that anything he said would be the truth – but some desperate part of me needed to hear it in order to get him out of my system once and for all.

So instead of leaving, I turned back. I didn’t sit down. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘You’ve got five minutes.’

Luis smiled faintly, relief softening his features. He crossed to the desk, sighing quietly. He pulled open a drawer and took out a folder. ‘Here,’ he said, tossing it onto the table between us. I hesitated, but curiosity clawed at me. A flash of my law firm’s letterhead peeked out from the top of the manila folder. I reached for it and flipped it open.

Lists of names. Old case notes. Most of them clients of mine.

My breath caught. ‘Where did you get these?’

Luis leaned back, calm as ever. ‘You’ve been a part of this from the beginning, even though you didn’t know it, Mackenzie. You’ve protected us for years.’

I stared at him, words failing me. ‘Protected you?’ I said. ‘How . . . That’s not possible. I didn’t know—’

He smiled. What used to look like support, like pride, now seemed patronizing. ‘No, you didn’t. That’s what made you perfect. That’s the truth,’ he said.

I’d asked for the truth, but now I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear it.

My pulse roared in my ears. ‘You used me.’

‘We gave you cases, you took them. It’s no different from any other firm. You did your job beautifully.’

‘You manipulated me.’

‘We guided you,’ he said softly. ‘We showed you how to see beyond the surface. And you profited from it. We paid you well.’

I struggled for words.

‘Your partnership, your firm’s expansion, you earned those things. We just opened doors for you. You’ve always belonged to something larger,

Mackenzie. You just never realized.'

The words hit like a physical blow. My entire career – everything I'd built – reduced to *their* plan.

He must have seen the horror on my face because his voice softened. 'It wasn't my intention to trick you. I just wanted you to become who you were meant to be.'

I shook my head. 'No. You don't get to rewrite my life like that.'

He said nothing.

A numbness crept over me, but I held it together. Barely. The hours I'd spent on my career, my sacrifices, the nights I'd stayed in the office chasing justice for people who didn't deserve it. 'I worked for it, Luis. *I earned it.*'

He almost looked sad. 'Elizabeth did us a favor because she believed in you too.'

'Elizabeth is part of this,' I said with dawning comprehension.

Luis hesitated. That half-second pause was enough. He didn't need to confirm it. The betrayal was like acid in my chest.

'You son of a bitch.'

'I'm sorry. You wanted the truth.' And he did look sorry – as sorry as I was to hear it.

He slid his wedding ring back on. The gesture was small, but it felt like a declaration.

'The people I defended. They knew? They're a part of this . . . *cult*?'

'I wouldn't call it a cult, but some of them were members of the Institute, yes.'

My blood ran cold. 'How far does this reach?' How many people did they have watching at all times, keeping things running?

'We have people all over.'

'Did you ever love me?' I asked, hating myself for wanting to know how much of that had been a lie. He seemed surprised by the question.

'Yes. Of course. I loved you. It's why I wanted the best for you,' he said. 'I still love you. That's why you need to listen to me when I tell you you'll be given two choices.'

I swallowed hard. He was starting to scare me now. I'd finally found him, but I was beginning to think Evan was right. This wasn't the man I'd known. 'You can run, and they will find you, or you can keep your life exactly how it is, and we can do this together. Properly this time. No secrets.'

Luis looked at me like it was showtime. Like he was confident I'd make the choice he expected. He assumed that was why I'd come here. To be with him at any cost. I wasn't sure what I'd do, but Dr. Avery was moving closer, as if he was about to interrupt our conversation.

Keith followed, watching Dr. Avery like a hawk.

'You accept me for who I am, and I accept what you did,' Luis said, his eyes capturing mine, holding me to the spot.

What I did.

Before I could say anything else, we were interrupted by the door opening.

Chapter 56

Now

‘Rebecca?’ I said, shocked, when she stepped into the room.

You’ll be late for your meeting. Her words from just before I left came back to me.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked. ‘Weren’t you being transferred?’

‘Welcome to the Coterie Institute, Mackenzie,’ she said, ignoring my question. Her voice was calm, pleasant. Like this was a formality she’d been looking forward to.

The room felt smaller with her in it. Charged. Like the air itself had changed.

I looked at Luis. He’d stepped subtly in front of me, not blocking me exactly, but close enough that I could feel the heat of his body at my back. Protective. Possessive.

‘She’s not ready,’ he told Rebecca.

‘Ready? No one ever is,’ she replied. She smiled at him. Not kindly. My stomach dropped.

‘We should leave,’ Keith interjected, gesturing for me to walk toward the door.

Luis’s eyes found Keith.

The reaction was instant. His jaw tightened. His shoulders went rigid.

Whatever he was about to say died on his lips as Rebecca took a step forward, filling the space between them.

‘You really don’t see it, do you?’ she asked, speaking to Luis.

‘There’s another way. I’ve told her—’ started Luis, stealing a look back at Keith.

‘It’s already decided. I proved myself with Brad, now it’s your turn.’

Brad.

‘What is she talking about?’ Keith asked. But looking at him, I wondered if he already knew.

‘Proved yourself?’ I asked.

Rebecca didn’t respond, but I was pretty sure I knew what she meant. She had proven herself by killing him.

Dr. Avery folded his hands. ‘Every stage of renewal requires sacrifice,’ he said. ‘But here, you can have everything you ever wanted. They show

you how. They introduce you to the right people. They *build* you to be exactly how you were supposed to be.'

'You intercepted the transfer vehicle? That's how Rebecca got here?' I asked.

Dr. Avery smiled, like a kid proudly showing off their favorite toy. 'We didn't need to.'

It took me a second to catch up, but then it came to me. 'The driver was one of you?'

'A *member*,' corrected Dr. Avery. 'The final stage, *Rubedo*, demands proof.'

'Proof of what?' I asked.

Rebecca's eyes never left mine. 'Of acceptance,' she said. 'Of willingness.'

The room spun slightly. I thought of the circle on the invitation. The twisted snakes.

'You don't want me here to become a part of this,' I said slowly. 'You want me here as a sacrifice. You want Luis to prove himself by letting me go.'

I wasn't the reward for his devotion. I was the collateral damage.

Rebecca's smile widened, just a fraction. 'You make it sound so dramatic.'

I laughed once. It came out broken. 'You want him to kill me.'

'No,' Luis snapped. 'That's not—'

He stopped instantly when Rebecca raised a hand.

I looked between them. This place had shaped Luis, but was he brainwashed enough to go through with what Rebecca wanted? The Luis I knew would never have agreed to this.

My phone buzzed. I slid it out of my pocket, aware that they were watching me, waiting to see what I'd do.

There was another message from Carl. I read it.

The Coterie Institute is definitely a cult. They get you in ways you wouldn't imagine. They know exactly what they're doing. Be careful. They have recruited hundreds, maybe thousands of people. They're better at it than you think.

Carl knew I would go to them.

Rebecca's voice snapped me back into the moment.

'He wouldn't be killing you,' she said softly. 'He'd be choosing to make all his dreams come true.'

I looked over at Luis. His jaw was clenched. His hands flexed at his sides. He looked like a man being torn in two.

‘They take something,’ he said hoarsely. ‘From everyone. I didn’t want it to be this.’

Didn’t want it to be *me*, he meant.

‘You *don’t* have a choice in this, then?’ Keith asked him, clearly calling bullshit.

I felt cold all over.

Luis met my eyes. There was love there. Real love. Painful in its sincerity.

‘This is why I didn’t bring you here,’ he said. ‘You had every right to be mad at me, but I wanted to keep you safe until I could come to some kind of agreement with the Institute.’

Keith moved then. Just a step – but Luis’s head snapped toward him.

‘Keith,’ I said in quiet warning.

‘Keith?’ laughed Luis. ‘Is that who you told her you were?’

The air in the room had changed, thick with something I couldn’t name. My chest tightened, the hairs on my arms prickling as if the atmosphere knew a storm was coming.

Luis took a slow step forward, toward Keith, disbelief flickering across his face. ‘You’re just a ghost,’ he said softly.

I turned to Keith, searching his face for an explanation. ‘Keith? What’s he talking about?’

Luis’s voice dropped to something cold and dangerous. ‘Ask him what his real name is,’ he said. ‘Because it isn’t Keith.’

Chapter 57

Then

Luis

I met him just before dusk, in a park with chain-link fences and bleachers that had been painted and repainted until the original color no longer mattered. He sat on the lowest bench, hands folded over his knees.

‘Should’ve brought a baseball glove,’ he joked, clapping me on the back.

I laughed, wondering how things might’ve turned out if I’d grown up knowing Silas was my dad. When he first told me, I hadn’t believed it. It was my mom’s reaction when I confronted her that told me it was true.

‘No, really,’ he said, gesturing for me to sit next to him. ‘I missed out on taking you to games, eating hot dogs.’

‘I could go for a hot dog,’ I said, smiling. The man I had thought was my father, Branston Tyndale, wasn’t the type of dad who took his son to baseball games. He never had the time, nor the inclination.

Silas laughed, the sound rough and surprised, like he was out of practice. ‘Yeah? Thought you were watching what you eat.’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘I’m watching myself starve.’

He shook his head, reached into his pocket, and stood. ‘Sit tight. I know a great stand.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Want me to come with—’

His eyes softened, regret flickering there again. ‘Let me do this,’ he said. ‘I missed a lot. I can manage a hot dog.’

‘Can you?’ I joked. He’d told me about some condition he had that had caused him to lose both his top and bottom sets of teeth. He had a full set of dentures. Unfortunately, it was genetic. Fortunately, I hadn’t inherited it.

He smiled wryly. ‘A bun and some soft meat? I think I can handle it,’ he said.

I tossed him my car keys, knowing he probably walked here. ‘Take my car,’ I said.

He caught the keys and gave a nod.

My phone buzzed – another message, another reminder that time was running out. The deals were messy. Too aggressive. We’d moved too fast, squeezed too hard. Bought out competitors who hadn’t wanted to sell. On

paper, everything looked legitimate. Behind the scenes, it was a different story. Bribes had changed hands. Contracts had been forged. Records had been altered to hide where the money was really going.

People were asking questions. And at home, things were unraveling. Mackenzie had been watching me lately. Not accusing. Just quiet. Assessing. Like she was building a case in her head that she hadn't decided whether to file yet.

I should've known she'd figure it out. She was sharp. It's one of the first things I noticed about her. That first day I saw her in the courthouse, I couldn't keep walking. So, I said the only thing I could think of, an excuse to break her stride.

She had been on a mission. About to defend a man most people had already decided was guilty – the kind of case no one wanted their name attached to.

One of ours.

She didn't know that. What she knew was that the state was reaching. That the narrative didn't hold up. That the man standing beside her didn't look like someone who'd snapped – he looked like someone who'd been cornered.

She walked like the clock was chasing her, coffee in one hand, notes in the other, already rehearsing arguments in her head. Focused. Precise. Beautiful.

I watched her dismantle the prosecution, holding the entire room captive. Not theatrically, but methodically, one argument at a time. She didn't charm the judge, though she easily could have. She cornered him with his own precedents. She used his history against him. Made it easier for the jury to rule in her favor than to fight her; but she wasn't aggressive. She showed him she understood his methods, his way of thinking about the law. When it was over, she didn't look relieved. She looked satisfied.

That's when I knew. Not just that she was good – but that she was dangerous in the right hands. She was brilliant. She believed in the system just enough to bend it. And she hadn't once glanced at the man she was saving to ask whether he deserved it.

I couldn't let her walk out of there without saying something.

When she turned, irritation flashing briefly across her face before she masked it, I felt it all lock into place. This wasn't a chance meeting. This

was the beginning of something I hadn't known I was looking for, and once I saw her, I wasn't going to let her pass me by.

The question now was how much did she know, and how much was she guessing?

I looked at my phone. Twenty minutes had passed and Silas hadn't returned. I didn't message him in case he had unexpected business that came up. It was an unspoken rule at the Coterie Institute. Minimize your trail.

I walked to the edge of the field, and saw it in the distance. Smoke. Sirens. Someone holding a blanket.

I didn't need to get closer to know.

I already knew.

The car – my car – was burning. Firefighters were trying to control the blaze, but the fire had hit the gas tank, and the car was already shelled out.

And they would look at the registration in my wallet, which was still in the glove compartment. They would see my name.

They would assume it was me inside the car.

I stood there, the weight of it settling slowly, inevitably.

A death no one would question too hard. A body no one would look at closely. A life that could be mistaken for mine.

I thought of the meetings. The contracts. The eyes on my back, waiting for the right moment to strike. I thought of Mackenzie's silence. The way it had felt heavier than shouting.

She'd made her choice before I made mine.

*

I did what I'd always done best: I adapted.

I let the story form around me. I stepped back.

And when the moment came, I let the world believe I was gone.

Not because I was innocent, but because disappearing was cleaner than a defense. And because sometimes, when someone shows you they're willing to destroy you, you make sure they never get the chance to try again.

I turned and walked in the opposite direction, not toward home, but toward the Institute.

Chapter 58

Now

Keith's jaw tensed. 'Don't do this, man.'

'Do what?' Luis shot back, moving closer, almost in Keith's face. 'Tell Mackenzie who you are,' he ordered. 'If you don't, I will.'

A pulse of dread slid through me. I looked at Keith – or rather, *the man I had thought was Keith* – and saw the hesitation in his eyes. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but here.

'OK,' he began, looking at me with an apology in his expression. 'My name's not Keith.'

I let out a humorless laugh. 'Yeah, I caught that.'

'It's not what you think, though,' he said quickly. His voice softened, almost pleading. 'My name is Thomas. I couldn't tell you because I couldn't risk it getting back to Luis. Not before I had a chance to see this place for myself.'

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Thomas. The name hit me like a physical blow.

'What the hell are you talking about?' I demanded, heart hammering. 'You're Thomas?'

'Yeah. I'm the guy Luis left behind. The soldier he said died on that mission.'

'But . . . Sofia gave me your number. She said your name was Keith.'

He nodded. 'Sofia and I made a pact a long time ago. When we realized something was going on with Luis. He was heading down a dark path. We just didn't know where it would take him.'

Luis's expression darkened. 'Sofia?'

But Thomas ignored him. He took a step toward me, and for the first time I noticed there were two men stationed outside the door. Guarding it. Had they been there before, following us through the building? 'I'm sorry I couldn't tell you, Mackenzie. But Luis has been part of this for a long time. I thought it was some hippie shit at first, but when you came to me and said you'd seen him alive when he was supposed to be dead, I realized it was more. I couldn't just let you walk into it alone, but I had no idea it was a cult.'

I turned on Luis, a familiar rage bubbling underneath the fear. 'Is that true? You wanted to be a part of this . . . cult? You've been a part of it since

we met?’

‘I told you I’d tell you everything, and I will,’ he said. ‘Silas found me, and tried to give me some structure when I needed it. I owe him my life.’

‘Silas?’

He shook his head, a flood of sadness in his eyes, so I left it. Instead I turned to Keith – Thomas, whatever his name was.

‘Why did you let Luis think you were dead?’ I asked. ‘It broke him.’

‘He was already broken,’ said Thomas, looking right at Luis. ‘He did leave me there to die. He didn’t like what everyone was telling him. That this group had a hold on him. He didn’t realize how deep he was in already. It was like they’d found some way to get inside his head.’

The room felt smaller by the second. The walls pressing closer.

‘So, Sofia knew?’ I said quietly.

Thomas nodded. ‘I met her because I went looking for Luis. Their house was the last known address I had for him, but by the time I got there, Luis had already moved out. Sofia was worried about him. Said he wasn’t the same after he got back from the army. She couldn’t help him. Between us, we agreed to keep an eye out for him. When you showed up at her place asking questions, she knew something was wrong about this, so she called me.’

I paced, unsure how to proceed. For once, there wasn’t a clean line between problem and solution. Every truth bled into another lie. I glanced over at Rebecca.

While we talked, she watched. Calculating.

‘One more thing,’ said Luis, ‘Rebecca is an alias. Her real name is Elena. She’s part of the Institute too.’

‘The red-headed woman, Aimee, who knocked on our door when we moved in. Was that her, too?’ I said.

‘Yes. She’d dyed her hair,’ said Luis.

I looked at her. ‘I saw you at Luis’s grave. You were crying,’ I said. ‘Your hair was blonde and you were wearing dark glasses. I still couldn’t see your face.’

She smiled thinly. ‘In my line of work, you learn how to disappear inside someone else,’ she said, her voice descending an octave. ‘You can be anyone you want.’

‘And what is your *line of work*?’ I asked her.

‘Reconnaissance work mostly.’

So, she was a spy.

‘So you were crying at Luis’s grave, even though you knew he was alive.’

‘I wasn’t crying for Luis,’ she said. ‘I was crying for Silas.’

The look she gave me was murderous.

‘OK, so who is Silas?’

‘He took me in, made me a part of the Institute,’ said Rebecca. ‘He was behind the wheel of the car you thought Luis would be driving.’

‘He was my father,’ said Luis. ‘My mother had an affair.’

I opened my mouth, trying to process, to fit the pieces together.

So, this was why Rebecca–Elena–Aimee wanted Luis to sacrifice me. I wasn’t just collateral damage. It was personal. An eye for an eye. But I still didn’t understand. Not fully.

The DNA match is a first-degree familial match.

Chapter 59

Now

I knew Luis's parents pretty well. I'd always thought he looked like his mother, Lillian. Her hair was smoky gray now, complementing her blue eyes, but in old photographs, it was the same shade as Luis's. He didn't resemble Branston Tyndale, the man he'd thought was his dad, at all.

'Does Branston know?' I asked Luis.

'No,' said Luis. 'She started dating Branston early on in the pregnancy. He thought I was his. They got married . . . social pressure, I guess. But my mom wasn't ready to become a wife, and I don't think she would've chosen Branston Tyndale if her family hadn't pushed it.'

Lillian Tyndale had always had an independent streak I admired. I couldn't see her being forced into marriage, but it was a different time then, when even the strongest of women were forced to make difficult choices for the sake of those around them.

'Silas founded the Institute,' Luis went on. 'Long before anyone outside the community knew his name. He wanted to change the world. To help others.'

I noticed Thomas and Rebecca listening. My eyes lingered on Thomas. I didn't know if I'd get used to thinking of him as someone other than Keith. But he wasn't Keith. He'd borrowed that name.

Another person who'd lied to me.

Like Rebecca, or Elena, or whatever she was calling herself.

'Who was the real Keith?' I asked Thomas.

'A guy from our squad,' said Thomas. 'He died in combat.'

My eyes drifted to photographs on the wall that I hadn't noticed before. Glossy and recent. Luis shaking hands with a politician I recognized for their policies on education. Philanthropists. But one photo caught me off guard, the color muted and aged.

Luis as a baby, in the arms of a man I didn't recognize.

'Is that Silas?' I asked.

Luis followed my gaze. 'Yes. That's him.'

Silas. The man I had killed in place of Luis.

Another photo showed the same man, older, sitting across from Luis at a long wooden table. They looked happy. I could see the resemblance. They had the same dimple when they smiled.

Luis glanced at the picture, then back to me. 'That was the beginning,' he said simply. 'Silas was the vessel, and now that the vessel is gone, we need someone to take his place.'

'Do you know how completely insane you sound?' asked Thomas, unable to keep his mouth shut.

Luis looked at Thomas, regarding him. 'Insanity and enlightenment share many similarities.'

'Did you kill Silas?' asked Thomas.

Luis looked at me, just for a moment. 'No,' he said.

I knew when my husband was lying. I'd seen him lie to my face enough times to spot it. He wasn't lying now, but he wasn't telling the whole truth either.

I could see he wouldn't side with Rebecca now, though. He was playing a part. Trying to get me out of her line of fire. He didn't want to kill me, after all. Not even after what I'd tried to do to him.

'Let me guess,' said Thomas, 'who better to take Silas's place in the cult, sorry, *the Institute*, than his son?' The sarcasm was thick.

'That's up to the members to vote on,' said Luis, ignoring Thomas's framing.

I noticed the look on Rebecca's face. At a guess, she was hoping the vote would go her way, that she'd be the next 'vessel'. Silas's true successor.

'We embrace who we are without moral judgment to become whole,' said Dr. Avery. Rebecca nodded, as if she agreed with the sentiment.

'Really?' I said. It was a statement more than a real question.

Luis watched with curiosity. He must have known I wasn't just going to accept whatever garbage they came up with.

'Jung believed in integrating the shadow self with the persona to create a whole person,' said Dr. Avery. 'The darker aspects of who we are, meeting the face we show the world. Quite often who we pretend to be.'

'So, you basically twisted some psychology and called it a philosophy? Why would anyone buy that bullshit?' asked Thomas, beating me to it.

Dr. Avery didn't react. 'We encourage people here to innovate. To live their lives as they were truly meant to be. We invest in our people. We help them become very successful.'

I looked at Rebecca, who had been, until a few moments ago, about to be placed on trial for murder. I felt sick that she was here because of me,

because of my request to transfer her to another facility.

She looked at me with a snide smile, like she knew what I was thinking.

‘We’ve found people are not driven by happiness or other social codes,’ Dr. Avery said, pacing the room. ‘They’re driven by the purpose and meaning they assign themselves.’

His words faded as I watched Rebecca.

She wasn’t listening anymore either. She was watching me, waiting for the right moment to do . . . what?

Whatever she was planning, I knew I had better be ready for it.

‘Luis,’ she said softly, her eyes still trained on me. ‘I think she’s ready.’

Chapter 60

Now

Luis took my hand in his, his fingers closing around mine, anchoring me in place. I didn't know whether I wanted to let go or hold on tight.

'Silas used to say that blood carries purpose,' he said. 'That what's inside of us can't be escaped, only transformed.'

'Fuck that,' Thomas said, folding his arms across his chest.

I barely noticed, because Luis was looking right at me, and I couldn't read his expression. He was looking at me like he needed me to not just listen, but to really hear what he was saying.

'Have you ever wondered why you enjoy your job so much? You like winning. You enjoy the fight. It's in your blood.'

A flicker of anger cut through the unease.

'Don't,' I said.

He didn't stop.

'You don't do it for justice,' he continued. 'You do it because you love the thrill of winning.'

I looked away. I'd wondered that many times, why I chose to become a defense attorney and not a prosecutor. Finally, I'd settled on an answer I was comfortable with. *Because I don't believe innocent people should lose their freedom, even if that means a guilty person goes free.*

But I wasn't so sure anymore. About any of it. Did I really believe what I'd told myself, or was Luis right? Maybe my purpose was to win and that was all I really cared about, just like he said. My parents had been so critical of me while I was growing up that I'd felt like I didn't have room to breathe. My almost perfect grades were not perfect. My wavy hair was unruly, a far cry from the smoothed-out life they wanted to curate.

So, I did what teenagers do, and rebelled. Everything I'd pushed down to make them happy, I let go of. Compliance turned into contempt. I stayed out late. I let my grades slip. I stopped trying to tame my hair.

And then my mom got sick, and somehow that was my fault, too, because of the added stress I'd caused her by allowing myself to live a little. My life was her death, and my father never forgave me. He never said that out loud, but he didn't have to. He stopped asking how I was doing and withdrew into his own world.

‘We give people a second chance here, too, just on a different scale,’ said Luis, clearly proud of the Institute and their work. ‘We give them purpose.’

I laughed, ironically. Not because he was right, but because he thought he understood me.

‘This isn’t purpose,’ I said. ‘It’s control.’

Something shifted behind his eyes. I’d hit something deeper. He stopped, and I could see the doubts he’d had too.

Good. Let him see it.

‘You don’t think I know what you’re doing?’ I said, stepping closer. ‘You take the worst parts of people, things they’re ashamed of, and you dress them up and use them as bait.’

Silence fell. Even Thomas stopped moving.

‘You don’t give people purpose,’ I said. ‘You give them permission.’

That landed. Not with Luis. But I saw Rebecca’s expression change. They weren’t saving her, they were manipulating her into doing their ‘reconnaissance’ work. Risking her life by sending her into dangerous situations, instead of doing it themselves.

Luis’s grip tightened slightly around my hand. Not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me he was still there.

Still in control.

‘Do you know why she didn’t run when Brad died?’ he asked.

I let out a short, humorless laugh. ‘Because she’s exactly where she wants to be.’

His eyes held mine. ‘Because she knew we wouldn’t leave her,’ he said. ‘That she’d be taken care of.’

‘That’s not loyalty,’ I said. ‘That’s conditioning.’

‘Is it?’ he asked.

They were all watching us now. Waiting for him to make the call.

‘I want to tell you something else,’ he said, stepping closer, the moment intimate despite the others in the room.

I didn’t flinch.

‘You knew,’ I said. ‘The car. The accident—’

He didn’t look away. He stood closer, lacing our fingers together. ‘I should have trusted you with my secrets,’ he said. ‘I didn’t want to implicate you. I thought I was doing the right thing, keeping you safe.’

My pulse spiked. ‘You let me think I killed you.’

‘I protected you,’ he whispered.

I held his gaze. ‘You didn’t protect me,’ I said. ‘You screwed up, then when things got tough, you ran. I needed some time to figure out the extent of it, to see how much of a mess you’d gotten us into. So I pulled something loose in your car. I thought you’d be going to work and straight home, not driving on the freeway.’

‘You reacted,’ he said, like he didn’t believe I ever really wanted to hurt him.

‘By the time I changed my mind, it was already too late,’ I said. ‘I needed to know how much you’d figured out about what I did because it seemed like the only reasonable explanation for making me think you were dead.’

But then I dug deeper into what his business was mixed up in. It went beyond embezzlement and fraud. Sometimes, along with large sums of cash, people went missing too.

‘You weren’t responsible for the crash, not entirely,’ said Luis. ‘I handed Silas the keys.’

Rebecca’s eyes lit up with sudden interest. Like she’d just been given confirmation. ‘You knew he might crash,’ she said, almost to herself. ‘You knew Mackenzie had done something to the car, but you let him drive it.’

I didn’t give Luis a chance to respond.

‘But why disappear?’ I asked. ‘Why not come back? You could’ve faced it.’

Luis smiled. ‘My wife tried to kill me, but I didn’t know why at the time,’ he said. ‘And if there’s one thing I’ve learned about you, Mackenzie Morgan . . .’ his thumb brushed lightly against my hand ‘. . . it’s that once you decide to do something . . .’ he leaned close enough to kiss me, our lips almost touching ‘. . . you finish it.’

A flicker of fear cut through me, sharp and unwelcome.

Because he wasn’t wrong.

‘That’s why you stayed away?’ I said. ‘You thought I’d try again?’

He held my gaze. ‘I knew you would,’ he said, looking at me like he used to, like he couldn’t wait to get me alone. ‘But it doesn’t have to end that way.’

How did he think this was going to end?

‘You could stay,’ he said.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Rebecca, pushing forward.

Chapter 61

Now

‘Luis—’ Rebecca began.

‘I think our guests are probably worn out,’ Luis said smoothly, cutting her off. He turned to Avery. ‘And I’d like the opportunity to discuss the plan with Elena.’

Rebecca’s – Elena’s – mouth tightened in annoyance.

I knew we had to get out of there, give her time to calm down. I started moving, then stopped abruptly.

‘Rebecca,’ I said. ‘Or whatever your name is. What do you think is going to happen when they realize you didn’t arrive at the psychiatric hospital?’

I didn’t tell her they were already looking for her. That Jessica knew she hadn’t arrived.

She shrugged. ‘They’ll look for Rebecca. But I won’t be Rebecca anymore. I’ll be . . . I don’t know, maybe Toni . . . or Rachel.’ She tried the names on like dresses, changing the lilt of her tone. It was creepy. She could throw on a new persona like it was nothing.

She was good. I guess that’s why she was useful.

‘Some prosthetics, some makeup, and no one will guess a thing,’ she said. It made my skin crawl to think of her coming to our door as ‘Aimee’, pretending to be our neighbor. And standing at Luis’s grave, mourning the man who was really buried there. Silas.

‘Dr. Avery,’ Luis said, guiding me away, ‘if you could take Thomas to a guest suite, I’ll be back in a moment.’

I resisted. All I had to do was give the police a reason to revisit the grave, and they’d do it. I had a pretty compelling reason standing right beside me, his hand warm in mine.

And yet, I didn’t move.

Because the questions wouldn’t stop with Luis. They’d want to know how much I had known about his business activity. Whether I was helping.

‘Just trust me,’ Luis said quietly, his voice threaded with desperation. ‘Please.’

I searched his face. Trust him? After he’d let me think he was dead?

But there was something in his eyes. Hope. Like maybe we could rebuild what we had, but this time with everything out in the open.

And the truth was, I didn't have any better options right now.

I looked back at Rebecca and it was enough to convince me of what I should do. I could see the hunger in her eyes, the way she watched us like she was already planning the ending. I knew which danger I might survive.

I walked with Luis, hand in hand, right out of there.

Chapter 62

Now

He took me to his cabin, tucked away from the main building, where it was quieter. Designed to feel like a refuge from the rest of the chaotic world.

‘This should buy us some time,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about Elena. She’ll come around.’ He knew her better than me, but if her expression back there was anything to go by, we didn’t have as much time as he thought.

A sitting area opened onto tall windows framed with sheer curtains, the afternoon light diffused into something calm and flattering. There were fresh flowers on the table and a carafe of water with citrus floating on the surface.

On the coffee table sat a framed picture of me and Luis. It felt warm. Welcoming. As if I had finally come home.

Before Luis had time to shut the door, Tess came barreling toward me, nails skidding on the floor.

‘Tess,’ I breathed, dropping to my knees. She leapt into my arms, tail wagging so hard it smacked against my ribs. Luis watched us, something loosening in his expression.

‘I had her brought here,’ he said, as I buried my face in her ears. ‘You called her Tess? I thought for sure you’d go with Legally Beagle.’

A small, unwilling laugh slipped out before I could stop it. ‘No. Just Tess.’

‘Right,’ Luis said. ‘Like justice – *Just Tess*.’

He smiled then. Really smiled. The way he used to, back when everything between us felt effortless. When one look was enough to undo me.

For a second, it pulled me apart.

Then I remembered – that version of him didn’t exist anymore.

He wasn’t reaching for me, he was trying to bring me to him.

‘Just Tess,’ he said softly, scratching her ear. ‘That fits you.’

The air shifted as Tess went to find a toy she’d been given, leaving Luis and I there together.

We stood too close. Goosebumps crept up my arms. We were almost touching – my body remembering how easily we fit, how dangerous that

had always been. It could overtake my senses and leave me blind.

I took a step back.

‘You know how fucked up this is, right?’ I said. ‘You let me bury you. You lied.’

He stepped closer. ‘You lied to me, too, remember?’

My breath caught.

‘But I know you weren’t trying to kill me,’ he went on. ‘Not in the way Elena thinks, at least. You were trying to stop me.’

‘When did you know, about the car?’ I asked.

‘I woke up, and you weren’t there. I got out of bed and I saw you go out to the garage. I watched you loosen something and go back to fix it just a little.’

‘So . . . you disappeared to punish me?’

‘To show you what you really wanted.’ He took my face in his hands, forehead resting against mine. ‘Elena will kill you if you stay,’ he said urgently. ‘She thinks sacrifice is devotion. I need time to talk her down. But after that . . .’

No. I wouldn’t consider it. I couldn’t.

A tap at the door interrupted us.

Luis hesitated.

The door opened.

Thomas stood there.

‘They took my phone,’ he said. His eyes flicked to Luis and then to me. ‘They’re not going to let us leave.’

Chapter 63

Now

Luis turned sharply. ‘Thomas—’

Thomas cut him off. ‘You left me to die once. Don’t ask me to trust you now.’ He turned to me. ‘Mackenzie, I don’t think Elena’s bluffing. She wants you dead.’

He was right. She needed someone to blame for Silas’s death.

‘So, we have to go,’ Thomas said. ‘Now.’

I looked at Luis, the man I loved – the man I almost destroyed – and wondered if we’d survive the night. Then, before I could change my mind, I kissed him.

‘Just in case,’ I said, because despite everything, I still loved him.

Thomas rolled his eyes. ‘We have to get out of here,’ he persisted, his voice lower this time. He was listening to something. Footsteps getting closer.

He crossed over to the window and peeked out, pulling back sharply just as a knock came at the door.

‘Calm down.’ Luis looked genuinely baffled at how we were acting. ‘It’s just a security measure.’

‘Seriously?’ I said. ‘You really believe—’

‘Mackenzie,’ a woman’s voice called hesitantly, cutting me off. ‘Mackenzie.’

Thomas motioned at me to keep quiet, just as the door opened and someone stepped inside.

I turned, feeling a rush in my ears when I saw her.

Chapter 64

Now

My best friend walked right in, like she was at home here.

‘Jess . . .’ Relief replaced confusion, surging so fast it made my knees weak. She had found me. She must have come for Rebecca, to take her to the psychiatric hospital. But doubt was already creeping up my spine.

‘Jess?’ I said. ‘What are you doing here?’

She didn’t smile, didn’t answer me. Instead, her eyes flicked to Luis, and stayed there.

‘Hi, Luis,’ she said, like she’d just popped over to our house.

This wasn’t about Rebecca. It was about me. A wave of realization crashed over me.

Jess had known all along that Luis was alive.

My best friend. The person who knew me better than anyone. I could feel my legs folding beneath me. I waited for her to look at me, to face me. And when she did, she had the calm control of someone who is using everything they’ve got to keep it together.

‘Mackenzie, I’m sorry,’ she said, and then her voice caught. ‘I really am . . .’

I could see the conflicted look in her eyes, hear the nerves in her voice as she continued.

‘Before you thought he died, Luis called me. He said he was worried about you. He was looking into your law firm and said some of the people you were representing weren’t what they seemed. He said he needed to protect himself.’

Anger was erupting in me. Red hot and blazing. I fought to keep it in check. She’d spent hours watching me grieve, and said nothing.

‘He wanted to leave,’ she went on. ‘He thought the only way to do that was to disappear. He told me not to tell you—said it was better for you if you believed he was gone . . . dead.’

Jess betrayed me.

‘I’m sorry. I hated lying to you, but you were acting so . . . erratic. And then when you saw him, I thought it’d be best for everyone if you just let it go.’

‘I did say I’d tell you everything, Mackenzie,’ Luis interjected, but I couldn’t look at him. He had manipulated her. I focused on Jess, finally

opening my mouth to speak.

‘Luis was just covering his ass,’ I told her. ‘The law firm is part of it. I didn’t know until I found him, but he’s been pulling strings the whole time. And Elizabeth—’

‘Yeah. He told me you’d say that.’ Jess swallowed hard.

‘Because it’s true,’ I said. ‘Who do you think died in that crash? Who do you think we buried?’

She shook her head, looking suddenly small. ‘I don’t know. I thought maybe he staged it.’

‘No. The DNA matched because it was his father’s. His *real* father.’

The color drained from her face. ‘He said you might come here. I think he knew you’d figure it out eventually,’ she whispered.

‘You knew Rebecca’s transportation was going to be intercepted?’ I asked Jess.

She nodded shamefully. For her part in this, or for keeping it from me?

‘That phone call, warning me. *They know who you are*. That was you?’

She’d tried to throw me off. Masking her voice so I didn’t recognize her.

Luis had infiltrated every piece of my life. Planting seeds. And if he could get to Jess, nothing was off limits.

Who else couldn’t I trust? The thought numbed me.

Jess stood there, hands clenched at her sides like she was bracing for impact. For years, she’d been my constant. The person who knew where I kept my spare keys, who’d slept on my couch after bad breakups, who’d brought me soup when I worked myself into a migraine or forgot how to stop and take a moment. She was the one who’d sat with me on the kitchen floor the night I found out Luis was dead. The one who’d held my face between her hands and said, *You don’t have to be strong right now. I’ve got you*.

‘You watched me fall apart,’ I said quietly. ‘And you did nothing. Said nothing.’

Jess flinched. ‘You wouldn’t let anyone help you, not really.’

‘You lied to me,’ I snapped.

She walked slowly toward me, glancing at the others in the room.

‘Luis thought you were going to hurt him,’ she whispered when she was inches from my face.

I let out a bitter laugh. ‘And you believed him? He’s a pretty good liar, Jess, if you hadn’t noticed. I think he even convinced himself he’s telling the truth.’

Jess shook her head. ‘It was more than that, Kenz. Back before he left, you seemed so angry about something. But when I asked about it, you brushed me off.’

My chest tightened. That would have been around the time I realized he was hiding things from me. I thought I’d kept my feelings under wraps. Of course Jess would detect the anger. She was trained for it. That didn’t excuse what she’d done, though.

Jess seemed a little less certain now. ‘Luis framed it like he was protecting you,’ she continued. ‘Like disappearing was an act of love. He said you’d be safer believing he was dead than knowing the truth.’

‘And you didn’t think to ask me?’ I said. ‘Not once?’

Her voice broke. ‘I didn’t know how to tell you. There was a car, a body. A funeral. I didn’t know if you’d believe it, and then when you thought you saw him, I figured – I hoped – you really were grieving.’

Luis shifted beside me, like he might speak, but I held up a hand.

‘You were my witness,’ I said softly. ‘To my life. My marriage. You were the one person I never thought he could touch.’

‘I didn’t do it for him. I did it for you.’

Footsteps outside again.

Jess reached for me, hesitated, then let her hand fall. ‘If you leave,’ she said, ‘they’ll come for you.’

‘And if I stay?’ I said. ‘What will they do to me then?’

She had no answer to that. My brain buzzed like a million radio signals were clashing.

All I knew was that we had to get out of this place. Now.

Chapter 65

Now

I moved. Fast. Shoving past Jess, I grabbed for Thomas's arm.

'Run,' I urged – and he needed no encouragement.

'Mackenzie—' Luis moved to stop us, but I was fueled by something hotter than fear. Rage. I pivoted with his momentum, slammed him back into the wall, and brought the heel of my palm up toward his nose with a sharp, sickening crack.

His head snapped back. He hadn't expected me to fight back. For the first time since I'd walked into this place, he looked worried.

'You think you can control me?' I hissed.

He lifted his hands slowly, palms out, blood already pouring from his face. Displaying that he wasn't going to fight back.

'See?' I whispered. 'This is what happens when you push people too far.' I stepped closer, my voice low and deadly, something inside me unraveling.

His chest rose and fell hard, eyes flaring, but I didn't retreat. I leaned in until my mouth was near his ear.

'You underestimated me, Luis,' I said. 'You underestimated what I am and what I'll do.'

He swallowed. Looked up at me like he was recalibrating.

I let out a slow, controlled breath. 'You shouldn't play with things you don't understand.' The part of me Luis had warned me about, the part I hadn't realized was there, was loose now. Awake. Watching.

'No . . . ' Luis staggered forward, his hand outstretched to me, his nose pouring with blood.

'I wouldn't do that, buddy,' Thomas said beside me. 'She might kick your ass again.'

'You caused this, Luis,' I said. 'If you have ever loved me, tell me how to get out of here without Elena noticing.'

At first, he didn't move. Then, reluctantly, he reached into his pocket and tossed me a set of keys.

'The blue Aston Martin,' he said quietly. 'Underground parking. Stick close to the building. I'll try to hold her off.'

I caught the keys without looking at him.

'Mackenzie, please—' he pleaded.

‘Goodbye, Luis,’ I said, turning away.

Chapter 66

Now

Elena

I used to believe in rules.

If you told the truth, if you were patient, if you waited your turn, the world would eventually right itself. My sister believed that, too.

Hannah was the kind of person who said hello to strangers, believing that the rules, the laws that were in place, kept the world safe enough to trust in.

When Hannah disappeared, I still believed. When they found her three weeks later – dumped, degraded, treated like she was disposable – I believed harder. I thought if I held that belief long enough, someone would figure out who did this and put them away.

The police had a suspect within days.

He was charming. Educated. The kind of man who looked like you could trust him.

The kind of man Hannah would have said hello to on the street without a second thought. He had unexplained scratches on his arms, a story that didn't quite add up and a lawyer who looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine.

Mackenzie Morgan.

I didn't know her name then. I just remember watching her stand when it was her turn, smooth as glass, calm. As if this were an intellectual exercise instead of the dissection of my family. She didn't look at Hannah's photos for long. Didn't linger on the crime scene images. She focused on *process*. On what couldn't be proven. On what might have been mishandled.

She didn't say he was innocent.

She didn't have to.

She suggested it.

She took the worst thing that had ever happened to my family and broke it down into a questionable series of events, while my mother tried to cry quietly enough that no one would stare. When I walked into the courtroom, she only glanced over for a minute. But she was kind. She smiled. She seemed empathetic. That was the cruelest part. Then, she picked apart

Hannah's anxiety. Her medication. Her tendency toward recklessness when she wasn't well. She made it sound clinical. Concerned. As if she were helping me understand my own sister better. By the end, I wasn't sure anyone believed Hannah was a victim of this man, as much as she was a lost soul inviting trouble.

The verdict came quickly.

Not guilty.

I remember the sound I made. Something animal. Something that surprised even me.

The man who killed my sister hugged his family. Smiled. Walked out into the daylight and stretched his arms behind his head, like he was just waking up.

Mackenzie packed her bag neatly. Didn't look back.

Somehow, I was supposed to believe that was justice.

They told me the system worked the way it was supposed to, that Hannah would want me to move on.

That's when something inside me split.

At first, it was just anger. Directionless and loud. I drank. I didn't sleep. I replayed the trial in my head until the words lost their meaning.

Then came the clarity.

If the system could be *used* like that, then morality wasn't real. Only leverage was.

That's when I stopped asking why and started asking how. I ran away, and found the Institute soon after. Or maybe it found me. I don't remember which. They're good at making inevitability feel like a choice. They took me in and gave me a new name. Made me one of their own. They didn't know who I used to be. They said it didn't matter.

I was starving when I arrived on the doorstep of the Institute. Luis walked right up to me and invited me to eat dinner with them. I went in to figure out why Hannah had to die, what she'd done to deserve it.

I didn't understand that Hannah was the price my mother paid for failing to choose.

I stayed with them and learned what I could, but I never spoke about her. They didn't tell me to let go of my anger. They told me to listen to it. They said the Shadow wasn't something to be cured – it was something to be *honored*. That the part of me capable of destruction was the same part capable of truth. They taught me that I didn't have to accept her death.

And I believed them, because the alternative was believing my sister died for nothing.

The institute was where I met Brad. In the beginning, he was kind. Funny. Charming.

But then the monster started to creep in. When he raised his voice. When he got upset or angry. When he lost his temper with me.

That last time, he was drunk. Staggering home. 'Look at you,' he'd said, tugging at my mousy brown hair and laughing. I left it natural at home. The only place I could be myself, or what was left of it. I liked the earthiness of my skin when I wasn't wearing makeup. The natural spray of freckles across my nose. Subtle, but a mark unique to me. Something I didn't need to erase.

Rebecca was a name I borrowed from my sister. Hannah Rebecca Lyon. I hadn't used my own name in a long time. It felt like that name belonged to someone else, a version of me that had been swallowed by the world a long time ago, like a shoe I'd outgrown. At the Institute, I went by the name they gave me. Elena.

Now I knew. Brad reminded me of the man in the courtroom. The man who got away with murdering Hannah.

So when he'd lain down to sleep that night, I'd encircled him in flames. There was no escape. He was too drunk to even get up, and when he did stir, he was already burning.

I'd strapped the tiny vial of blood to my arm as I left. Luis Tyndale's blood. When I moved, it moved with me, leaking just enough that he might've opened up an old wound, or nicked his arm on something. Planting a seed.

Why Luis? Because Mackenzie Morgan owed her name on a plaque at her law office to him. Because she loved him, even though he didn't deserve to be loved.

He was just as guilty as she was.

I requested Mackenzie to represent me because I knew if she could help Silas get away with what he'd done, maybe she could help me too. They were all so wrapped up in themselves that they didn't notice the persona I wore. They didn't realize I'd stopped being the Elena they wanted me to be.

Mackenzie hadn't even recognized me as the girl sitting at the back of the courtroom, quietly waiting to find out what would happen to her sister's killer. I had been just a girl then.

The man in the car had to die for what he'd done to my sister.

I had watched her defend him.

Hannah didn't get a chance to tell her side, and I never forgave Mackenzie, or Silas, for keeping her voice silent.

I had waited long enough to make amends.

I wouldn't wait any longer.

Chapter 67

Now

I burst through the door with Thomas.

What followed was chaos. Voices. Movement. Someone – Luis – shouting behind us. We didn't stop to find out what he was saying, hearts pounding as we ran down the sterile corridor, half blind with urgency.

So we didn't hear the sharp footsteps coming towards us, not until the double doors in front of us burst open and she stepped right into our path.

I shivered at the familiar way she stood, the way she carried herself, her features pulled back by her tight ponytail. Her expression hard, gritty.

Elena.

She didn't rush. She walked slowly, daring someone to challenge her.

She stopped halfway down the corridor and looked around, taking us all in, like she'd been waiting for this moment to arrive. Behind her, Dr. Avery was already moving to regain control.

But the power had shifted.

Elena lifted a finger.

'Don't,' she told us mildly. 'You'll only make it worse.'

My grip tightened around the keys to the Aston Martin.

'You're not leaving,' she said. 'Not until this is over.'

Over?

This wasn't about stopping me. This was about *ending* me.

Thomas shifted beside me, every muscle tight.

'Tell me. Does the name Hannah Lyon mean anything to you?' Elena asked icily.

'Hannah . . .' I faltered.

'She was killed. And you helped the man who killed her get away with it. The police said it was the best outcome we could realistically expect.'

Hannah. The name settled into me slowly, like something sinking through layers of sediment. I didn't even remember her face. I remembered the case. The timeline. The procedural knots I'd untangled one by one. I remembered telling myself it wasn't my job to decide what was true – only what could be proven. I was relieved when the case wrapped up, neat and contained, closed without leaving a mess behind. Another win.

I remembered believing that was enough.

My stomach twisted as the quiet horror of it sunk in: the realization that this was the other side of the case. The side I didn't see. The grief. Maybe that was what I was shielding myself from. I'd told myself justice was a system. Impersonal. Clean.

Elena's eyes now told me otherwise.

She hadn't come here for revenge on a stranger. This was nothing to do with Luis. She'd come here carrying a body the law had set down and walked away from.

And I had been part of that.

Elena's mask had finally fallen. Of course she wasn't Elena.

She was Hannah's sister. Rebecca, and Aimee, and every version of her I'd met, had been a costume she slipped into like a new skin.

She hadn't been mourning Luis or Silas at the graveyard. She had been crying for her sister.

'This,' she said coldly, 'is the part where you get to prove yourself.' Her hand fidgeted with something tucked into her waistband. Metal. A gun?

'Elena, this isn't—' Dr. Avery was behind us now, with Luis.

She turned towards Avery, inching the gun from her waistband. Its handle gleamed in her hand.

'We can figure this out,' Avery said slowly, edging closer.

'Shut up and stay where you are,' she ordered, her finger ready on the trigger. 'I mean it.'

'Elena,' I said, hands up to show her I wasn't a threat.

She slowly turned and trained the gun on me, her eyes narrowing in hatred.

'I'm so sorry about Hannah,' I said, my hands still in front of me. 'What happened to her, it wasn't fair.'

Another flash of the crime scene photos passed through my memory. Photos I'd thought were horrific, but not proof that the man accused of the crime had done it.

'I'd like to revisit her case, and help you try and find out who killed her.'

'I know who killed her,' she said icily. 'It was the man they let go. The man who used to talk to Hannah outside the school gates. A man I got to know here, at the Institute.'

'Stop.' Dr. Avery stepped forward, spooked. 'Just—'

Elena whipped around and shot him. The sound cut the air. Sharp. Final.

Avery dropped where he stood, the back of his head striking the floor with a dull, hollow crack that echoed through the room.

For a split second, no one moved. Shocked. Then everything happened at once.

Thomas lunged but Elena, gripping the gun with both hands, fired again, the bullet hurtling past Thomas and straight towards me—

Luis shoved me hard, throwing his body between us. I watched numbly as a red arc exploded from his side.

He grunted, staggering, but didn't fall. His hands went instinctively to my shoulders, pushing me back.

'Run,' he said through clenched teeth. 'Now.'

Another shot rang out. This time the bullet went straight through the glass in the corridor window and Thomas seized his chance. He slammed into Elena, knocking her off balance. The gun went flying out of her grip, skidding across the floor and clattering to a stop near the wall.

Elena screamed with rage, pulling herself back to her feet.

'You chose wrong,' she snarled at Luis, scrambling towards him. 'You were supposed to kill her.'

Again, Thomas intercepted her, slamming her back into the wall with a force that knocked the air from her lungs. She fought like an animal – biting, scratching, spitting – but this time, she was outmatched.

Luis collapsed to one knee. Blood soaked through his shirt.

This is what he was trying to save me from when he disappeared. He was already in too deep. But if he loved me enough to take a bullet for me, maybe he loved me enough to let me go.

I dropped beside him without thinking and pressed against the wound, hands slick, panic roaring in my ears. I caught sight of Jess in my peripheral vision, checking Dr. Avery for a pulse. The look on her face told me she hadn't found one.

'Mackenzie,' Luis said, breath shallow as I tore off my shirt and pressed it against his side, trying to stop the bleeding, afraid that if exerted too much pressure I could do more damage. 'I tried to stop her.'

'I know,' I said. 'Just sit tight and hold on.'

He held my free hand against his face, and I wondered if he could still feel it. That spark that had been ignited the first time we touched. Still burning.

'Hold on,' said Jess in a small voice. 'I've called an ambulance.'

I barely heard her. All I could hear was Luis's breath, growing more ragged. He didn't have much time.

Elena stopped struggling in Thomas's grip, going completely still.

And then, she laughed.

Security flooded the room seconds later. Too late for Dr. Avery, and too late for the Institute to pretend what was happening here was anything other than what it was.

Elena continued laughing as they restrained her. A broken, unhinged sound.

'She'll never be clean again,' she called to me. 'Not after what she did.'

I met her gaze, looking at what I'd helped create. I thought about what Luis had said, about my motivation.

Is this what winning felt like?

'I truly am sorry about your sister,' I whispered after her.

The words felt inadequate the moment they left my mouth, but they were the only honest ones I had.

Chapter 68

Now

Jess's voice was practical, calm. 'I'll call emergency services again, check they're on their way,' she said. I looked down at Luis, pale and shaking, his blood soaked into my hands, and willed the paramedics to get here faster.

Finally, the sirens arrived. I took Luis's hand, pressing hard against the wound with the other, as the paramedics rushed in, voices overlapping, their hands replacing mine.

He had stopped trying to talk, closing his eyes.

'Stay with me,' I said fiercely. 'You don't get to disappear again.'

His lips twitched, the ghost of a smile. 'Still giving orders.'

'I'm good at it,' I said, tears finally breaking free. 'It used to be one of the things you loved about me.'

His fingers tightened weakly around mine. 'It still is.'

I watched as they lifted him onto the stretcher, my hands red, trying not to think about how much blood he'd lost, or what might have happened if Elena had shot a quarter of an inch to the left.

*

The hospital room smelled like antiseptic and stale coffee. The kind of place where time slowed into something thick and unreal.

Luis lay propped up against white pillows, his skin too pale against the sharp blue of the sheets. Tubes ran from his arm, a monitor ticking softly beside him, each beep a reminder that he was still here. Still breathing.

I sat in the chair beside his bed, my coat folded on my lap. It had taken me a while to even touch him. I didn't know if I was allowed to. Now, my muscles were stiff from leaning over the chair to hold his hand while he slept.

The headlines were clean.

WELLNESS INSTITUTE UNDER INVESTIGATION
PROMINENT FIGURES LINKED TO EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM
SHOOTING LEAVES ONE DEAD, ONE INJURED

Dr. Avery was named.

Rebecca – Elena – had been charged with murder.

The Coterie Institute was described as a 'coercive psychological environment', its methods under scrutiny, its funding frozen.

Luis was listed as a victim.
I wasn't mentioned at all.

*

When Luis woke up, he smiled, watching me quietly for a long time.
I didn't want to break the moment. Once one of us spoke, I knew it would be over.

'Are you still mad at me?' he asked.
'Yeah.'

Silence fell between us, filled only by the slow rhythm of the machines.
Outside the window, a new day was bleeding into the sky.

'I need you to hear this from me,' he said finally. 'You won't find it in a police report, or in some business records.'

My jaw tightened.

He swallowed. Winced slightly as he shifted. 'I didn't fake my death to protect you,' he said. 'Or to save you. I need you to know that.'

Something cold settled in my chest.

'I did it because I needed to know who you really were. How far you'd go to win.'

I laughed once, sharp and humorless. 'That's rich.'

'I know,' he said. 'But it's the truth.'

He turned his head toward the window, as if it were easier not to look at me. 'You were getting closer. Asking the wrong questions. And I knew what they'd do to you if you found out before you were ready to join.'

My pulse thudded in my ears.

'You mean when I confronted you,' I said. 'When I asked you why your name kept showing up in Elizabeth's sealed files. When you told me it was nothing.'

'It wasn't nothing,' he said quietly. 'And you knew it. You were never going to let it go, but it was bigger than that.'

I stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. 'You don't get to rewrite this. You lied to me. You stonewalled me. You made me feel like I was losing my fucking mind, while you had everyone dancing around me.'

He flinched at that just slightly, nowhere near as uncomfortable as he should be about what he'd done.

'I didn't think you'd risk my life,' he said.

The room went very still.

‘I didn’t plan it,’ I said, the words coming out flat. ‘I didn’t wake up that morning thinking, *today I’m going to kill my husband*. I just—’ My voice broke despite myself. ‘I couldn’t let you take me down with you.’

He smiled. ‘And you’re not going to let them do it either.’

‘Luis, do they have contacts in the media?’ I asked.

‘Sure. Why?’

I found the article I was reading earlier. No mention of me.

I turned it to show Luis. ‘This isn’t over. They’re writing me out of what happened so they can kill me.’

‘You exposed them,’ he said.

‘They exposed themselves,’ I corrected.

‘Let me help you,’ he says, but I’ve already got my keys and coat in hand.

I stood by his bedside. ‘I don’t forgive you,’ I said. ‘And I don’t absolve myself either.’

He nodded, as if he’d expected that.

‘But,’ I added, my voice low, steady, ‘you stepped in front of a gun for me and that meant something, so thank you for that.’

His hand shifted on the bed, stopping just short of mine.

I didn’t take it. But I didn’t pull away either.

‘I kept thinking this was something you pulled me into,’ I said quietly. ‘But that’s not true. Because you’re right, I do love to win. That’s why I didn’t walk away.’

Silence filled the space between us. Heavier than before.

‘Do you think that makes you like us?’ he asked.

I held his gaze.

‘No,’ I said.

I leaned over and kissed him one last time.

Because I understood now, why I’d held on.

It was finally time to let go.

Chapter 69

Six months later

The plaque outside my old firm had come down. The brass letters had left pale shadows on the stone, like something once carved there had been erased too quickly. Elizabeth's name disappeared. No announcement. No explanation. She was just gone.

Like the rest of the Institute.

By the time reporters started asking questions, it had already emptied itself out. Websites offline. Phones disconnected. No leadership left to answer for it.

The police were looking for Elizabeth, to ask about some transactions she'd approved, but I had a feeling they wouldn't find her.

*

Jess found me outside the courthouse.

Of course she did. She always knew where to find me when things were falling apart.

She stood there for a moment, watching me gather my files into my bag, like she was waiting for permission to exist in my space again.

'Mackenzie,' she said softly. 'Can we talk?'

I didn't look up. 'I'm late,' I said, even though I wasn't.

She stepped closer anyway. 'I didn't want to hurt you.'

I closed the bag and turned to face her. Really face her. My best friend. The woman who'd known me better than anyone else.

'You didn't want to hurt me,' I said. 'You just decided I didn't deserve the truth.'

Her mouth opened. Closed. Her eyes filled. 'I was trying to protect you. I didn't think you'd survive knowing,' she whispered. The irony almost made me laugh.

'I survived thinking the man I loved was dead,' I said. 'I survived realizing I almost killed him. I survived finding out my law firm was protecting people I never would have knowingly defended. What I can't survive is knowing my best friend sold me out.' I stepped past her. 'Goodbye, Jessica.'

She didn't follow me.

It was the kindest thing she could've done.

*

Thomas was waiting in my office when I got back.

He leaned against the window, coffee in hand, city humming below. No suit. No badge. Just quiet competence and eyes that actually looked at the world instead of through it.

‘Another article,’ he said, turning his phone around so I could see.

I’d been busy making sure the Coterie Institute, and every member I’d managed to find dirt on, got as much publicity as they could handle. A kind of safety measure.

If anything happened to me, that would be the first place the police would look.

‘Yup, now, we have things to do,’ I said with a grin.

‘You sure you want to do this?’ he asked. ‘Once you switch sides, there’s no going back.’

‘I’m not switching sides,’ I said, setting my files on the desk. ‘I’m changing the rules.’

He smiled faintly. ‘Well, I’m happy to help you celebrate.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘That’s why I called you.’

Tess sat at his feet, waiting for him to lean in and pet her.

Carl gestured for me to go over, so I left Thomas with Tess and met Carl at his new desk.

‘He’s cute,’ Carl said in a whisper. ‘In that rugged, survivalist kind of way.’

I laughed. ‘Is he? I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Very.’

‘Well, you might see him around a little more,’ I said.

Carl held a hand over his mouth. ‘Are you two—’

I stopped him before he could finish that sentence. ‘God no.’

‘What?’ said Carl, too loudly. ‘You could do worse. A *lot* worse.’

My cheeks burned as Thomas walked over. ‘That’s what I told her,’ he said with a grin.

‘You know,’ I said, steering the conversation, ‘prosecutors use investigators, and I need a good one. You know any?’

Thomas raised an eyebrow. ‘You trust me?’

I thought about the Institute; Thomas’s instincts. The way he had been willing to hear me out before he really knew me.

‘I do. I’ve seen your skill with Ground-Penetrating Radar too. I think I’d like to see what else you can do.’

‘I’m licensed,’ he said, as if this were an interview. I let him speak, not telling him he already had the job. ‘Been working civil and criminal consults for a while . . .’

He gave me a rundown of his experience before I stopped him, a smile playing at the corners of my mouth. ‘The job’s yours if you want it.’

He considered that, then said, ‘How long were you gonna let me keep talking?’

I scrunched my nose, thinking.

Thomas nodded. ‘That’s what I thought.’ He extended his hand.

There was no drama to it. It was a business deal.

‘Well, now it’s official,’ I said with a grin.

Epilogue

Daisy

The guard stopped outside the room and checked her clipboard.

‘Daisy,’ she said, glancing up at me. ‘You ready?’

I rose smoothly from my chair.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

The guard gestured toward the door. ‘Transfer intake. New facility.’

I smiled faintly as I stepped forward, wrists already extended.

Cold metal circled my skin. For some reason, the cuffs were always like ice, as if they’d cooled them, just to make them as uncomfortable as possible.

‘Can you please confirm your full name?’

‘Daisy Clarissa Lyon,’ I said. She asked for my date of birth, and I gave it.

I had worn many names before.

Rebecca.

Elena.

Aimee.

Et cetera.

Each one chosen carefully. Each one shaped to fit the story I needed to tell.

I would wear many more.

But this one: this one had always been mine.

‘They shut it down, you know,’ the guard told me. ‘That place. The Institute.’

I didn’t respond. Everybody knew about it now. It was all over the news.

‘Big investigation. Funding pulled. People scattered.’

A pause.

‘They say some lawyer brought it all down.’

Mackenzie.

It had to be her. She had done exactly what I expected.

Burned it. Exposed it. She’d made it small enough to understand.

That was her strength.

We reached the exit. Light spilled in. For a moment, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to feel it.

Did Mackenzie really think she'd ended the Institute?
People like her always needed closure. Something to measure.

*

The doors to the transport vehicle opened.
The world was exactly as it had always been.
They guided me inside, and I got in willingly.
I sat and waited. I listened.

'Not long now,' one of the guards called from the front. 'New place, new start.'

A new start. I almost laughed. Like a location changed anything.

You couldn't contain a movement, an idea. They wouldn't contain the Institute by shutting the doors. They needed to punish each and every person who was a part of it for their crimes.

The vehicle doors opened again. Another brief splash of sunlight as they walked me inside. At least it was nicer than the correctional facility.

I walked in with the guard. A woman with over-waxed eyebrows and a cheap home dye job greeted us. I smiled politely as she led us to a room with a table.

'The doctor will be with you shortly,' she said, leaving us there.

We waited in silence until a woman I recognized, wearing a tailored suit, opened the door. She blanched when she saw me, but pulled it together quickly.

She officially introduced herself as Jessica Stetson, but I wasn't listening. I was politely waiting for my turn to talk.

'I would like to speak with Mackenzie Morgan,' I said. 'And I think you can make that happen.'

'I don't think—'

'Just ask her,' I said. I'd left Mackenzie enough information to get her case started. I was sure she'd want more. 'Let her decide. I can help with the case she's working on.'

There was still a lot to do if she wanted to stop the Institute.

Jessica thought about it.

This time, I wouldn't have to find Mackenzie.

She'd come to me.

And we would bury the Institute together.

If you lost sleep staying up reading *The Husband I Buried*, make sure you don't miss out on Maryann Webb's next addictive, devilishly twisty

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I hope this story kept you guessing until the very last page.

A Note from the Author

Like so many of my books, this story began with a question.

How much of what we see is shaped by what we've lived through?

Two people can experience the same moment and walk away with entirely different truths. Memory, grief, fear, love, trauma – they all leave fingerprints on the way we interpret the world around us. Sometimes they protect us. Sometimes they distort things. And sometimes they make us question whether we can trust our own minds at all.

That idea became the heartbeat of this novel.

I've always been fascinated by perception: the things we convince ourselves of, the things we overlook, and the lengths the human mind will go to in order to survive painful experiences. While this story is fictional, many of the emotional themes within it were inspired by real discussions surrounding memory, trauma, identity, and the complicated relationship between truth and belief.

More than anything, though, this book became a story about trust. Trust in the people we love, trust in ourselves, and what happens when those two things begin to fracture.

Mackenzie's journey was an emotional one for me to write. Beneath the suspense, twists, and secrets is someone desperately trying to hold on to her sense of self in a world determined to reshape it.

Thank you for spending your time with these characters and this story.

—Maryann Webb

About the Author

Maryann Webb is the author of psychological and domestic thrillers including *My Husband's Lies* and *The Girl in the Cellar*.

Her breakout psychological thriller became an Amazon bestseller across multiple categories, reaching the Top 25 in Mystery, Thriller & Suspense, while *The Girl in the Cellar* won the Zebralution Audio Award at the Independent Publishing Awards (IPG).

Known for writing emotionally charged suspense with morally complex characters, her novels explore themes of trust, trauma, obsession, and the dark secrets hidden inside seemingly ordinary relationships.

Maryann's books are perfect for readers who enjoy twisty, addictive suspense.

The Husband I Buried is a stand-alone psychological thriller, and her fifth release.

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Embla Books is a digital-first publisher of standout commercial adult fiction. Passionate about storytelling, the team at Embla believe our lives are built on stories – and publish books that will make you ‘laugh, love, look over your shoulder and lose sleep’. Launched by Bonnier Books UK in 2021, the imprint is named after the first woman from the creation myth in Norse mythology. Embla was carved by the gods from a tree trunk found on the seashore; an image of the kind of creative work and crafting that writers do, and a symbol of how stories shape our lives.

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