

THE BREAKING POINT SERIES

SHARON A. MITCHELL

# ALONE



Winter isn't the only thing closing in

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# ALONE

Breaking Point  
Book 1

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SHARON A. MITCHELL

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BOOKS

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## Chapter One

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The closer she got to home, the more her foot eased up on the gas pedal. Home. That sanctuary they had built together, their cozy, secure piece of this earth, now a desolate shell of what it had once been.

It had been bearable in the grocery store; keep your head down, but maintain your pace as if you had somewhere to be in a hurry. It was all in the posture. No shuffling, no making eye contact, nothing to invite conversation, even though she knew they were all talking about her.

Sympathy she could not bear. Even worse was pity. She'd had enough of both in her lifetime.

Driving home those first four miles from town were fine, her mind drifting to the almost imperceptible changes in the landscape the seasons brought. Only someone as familiar with this road would notice. But she did. What else did she have to do these days?

Irma squinted through the windshield, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. The Buick rattled and creaked over familiar potholes, each jolt shooting pain through her arthritic hips. Darn. They had gotten worse. Probably all this sitting didn't help.



Skeletal trees lined the road, their leaves a riot of red and gold. A gust sent a flurry spiraling across her path, the windshield wipers smearing them into a yellow-brown mess. She leaned forward, peering into the damp gloom.

Three miles to go. Three miles of empty fields and dying corn stalks, stripped bare by the harvest. No neighbors, no lights. Just her, alone on this godforsaken stretch of road.

A deer carcass, bloated and stinking, lay in the ditch. Been there a week now. She ought to call someone about that, before the coyotes got bold. Hubert never liked them thinking they could come too near the house.

The sun dipped below the treeline, shadows creeping across the pavement. Irma fumbled for her headlights. Darn if she was gonna end up in a ditch like that deer, waiting days for someone to find her.

As much as she tried to control where her thoughts led, she only had so much authority over those synapses. She'd never had the sort of brain that allowed her to fool herself. No, reality was always there, fat and gloating right in her way.

Irma eased the Buick onto the gravel driveway, tires crunching over fallen leaves. The porch light flickered on automatically, casting weak yellow light across the weathered farmhouse. She pulled up in her usual spot, put the car in park, but her hand hovered over the keys.

The Buick's engine rumbled, a comforting vibration through the seat. Outside, wind whispered through bare branches. Inside the car, the radio murmured softly, some ad for insurance she wasn't really hearing.

Her eyes drifted to the darkened windows of the house. Their house. Her house now. Not bad, with just the early evidence of the neglect that was sure to come. Hubert hadn't been keeping up with things this past year.

No warm glow from the living room where Hubert used to watch his evening shows. No rattle of pots from the kitchen as he prepared his infamous chili, the one dish he had perfected. Just... emptiness.

Irma's fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Five minutes. She'd give herself five more minutes of noise, of life, before facing that silence. Before walking into rooms that echoed with memories and what-ifs.

A coyote's yip carried on the wind. Irma startled, suddenly aware of how dark it had gotten. She took a deep breath, steeling herself. Time to go in. After all, what choice did she have?

Bringing in the groceries used to be a challenge - could she carry them all in one trip? Today she had just one bag in each hand, neither of them quite full, but enough to see her through the next week. Funny. Hubert must have eaten a lot because her need to buy meat, fruit, vegetables, and staples was now down to maybe a third of what it once was.

Putting things away took only minutes. Now what?

The muffled tick of the grandfather clock was the only sound puncturing the thick silence of the living room. Irma sat motionless in the wooden rocking chair, her fingers wrapped around a lukewarm mug of chamomile. Her eyes, unfocused, fixed on the empty recliner across from her. Hubert's recliner.

The leather was still molded to the shape of his body, its silent reminder of his absence mocking her with its permanence. Outside, the darkness pressed against the windows, transforming them into black mirrors. The weight of the night bore down on her, but she didn't dare look away from the recliner.

Her tea had long since gone cold, but she lifted the mug to her lips anyway. The bitter liquid slid down her throat, and she suppressed a shudder. She moved the knitted throw higher up on her lap. Was it just her imagination, or had the house grown colder since she sat down?

How could it not? It was late fall and there was no heat in this place.

That took her mind to places she didn't want to go. Always a practical woman, the steps needed to maintain herself, to maintain this place were now beyond her.

Prioritize, she told herself. She used to be good at that. Heat. No one could survive these winters without heat.

Hubert used to take care of such things.

In the center of the basement stood an ancient furnace, its performance governed by the amount of coal shoveled into it. That only lasted for their first winter in this place before Hubert converted it to fuel oil. Every fall he spent time fiddling with it in the basement, doing who knows what. She hardly ever went down there since minuscule cracks in the foundation let in mice. No matter how many traps Hubert set, there were always more rodents.



Which reminded her - were there carcasses rotting in traps right now? She pulled her mind away from that thought, refusing to let the images take root. She had enough on her plate.

Long before each winter approached, Hubert made a call to someone somewhere, and a lumbering truck would appear, then pump fuel into the basement. Had Hubert done that already? How would she figure that out? She knew where the tank was, and doubted a glance at its exterior would give her answers. Still, she should check, but that meant going down into the basement.

She really should light the fireplace. Again, that was Hubert's job.

She'd tried a few nights ago when the damp settled into her bones, making it hard to get out of her chair. Smug that she'd managed to swing the axe well enough to split some logs from the meager pile by the porch, she'd carried on until the axe got stuck in a log, taking up permanent residence. She could always buy another axe. Still, she'd split enough for one fire.

Using all the old newspapers stored beside the fireplace, then some paper towels, and most of the box of matches, she'd got the fire going. Sitting back on her heels, she allowed a small smile, pleased with her accomplishment. Holding out her hands, the growing flames warmed her palms.

This called for a celebratory cup of fresh black tea. Maybe she'd even add a teaspoon of rum like Hubert liked to do. She shuffled to the kitchen.

Coming back into the room with a mug in hand, the flames were now hardly visible. Instead, smoke filled the room. No, the fire had not escaped its stone box, and no embers sizzled on the wool carpet. But smoke poured into the room rather than up the chimney. Had Hubert had the chimney cleaned this year?

The wall of smoke thickened. Irma threw her tea toward the base of the flames. Hurrying as fast as her arthritic hips allowed, she returned with a kettle full of water, then pot after pot, tossing them all onto the fire. Anything to put it out before she asphyxiated herself.

Now, a day later, a sodden clump of ash sat in the fireplace, spilling out past the hearth onto the intricate designs of the wool rug. She really should try again, get some warmth into these old bones. Hot tea was not enough.

At least she knew now what she'd done wrong. The flue. She'd forgotten all about it. It took two hands to push the lever the next day, but

she'd heard the grating sound when she succeeded in inching it over just a bit. Now she remembered. Hubert kept the flue closed when they weren't using the fireplace. Even when fully lit, he'd said open fireplaces were a win/lose effort. Yes, you'd gain some heat into the immediate vicinity, but the fireplace sucked just as much warmth up the chimney.

For now, though, it was all she had.

She rocked, the only sound breaking the stillness, the tattoo of the rockers hitting the hardwood in their backward motion, their front swing muted by the carpet. A half-smile played on her lips. Hubert would hate this; the sound of the rockers meeting wood interrupted the peace of his TV watching. He'd insist she pull her chair far enough forward that the rockers only met the rug's pile. But then the chair would stick too far into the center of the room, causing him to stub his toe when he'd walk by. He'd grumble either way.

Right now what she wouldn't give to hear him grouse. Just once, even once, would be enough to make her feel she wasn't so alone, that the minutiae of their lives hadn't dissolved into nothingness.

She kept rocking; at least that was a noise, something to break the utter stillness. There was another sound though, one that over the years blended into the creaks and groans of an old house, until it faded from consciousness. The grandfather clock, the one they'd found at a flea market all those years ago, brought home and Hubert restored both its guts and the outside. Now it ticked on like a heartbeat, despite her lack of effort, her lack of desire.

If Hubert was here, the television would play endlessly on. As much as that infernal noise irritated her, at least it would be some voices, some glimpse of the world, of people who weren't all alone. But the remote control was a mishmash of buttons. Gone were the days of twisting a knob to turn the television on and selecting one of the three available channels.

Would she ever get used to this silence?

She rocked. The wind outside the black windows picked up its pace. She dozed.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked, then the toilet flushed.

## Chapter Two

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“Did you hear?” Hilary spoke into the phone.

“Yes. Of course, we’d never hear through the usual channels, just as you predicted.”

“It’s time?”

“I’m on it. Already started.”

“Good. Game on.”

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## Chapter Three

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“I saw her today.”

Ken didn’t need to ask his wife who she meant.

“Did you talk to Irma? How is she?”

Lydia shook her head. “Everything about her posture said, ‘stay back’, so I did.” Her eyes met Ken’s. “Yeah, I know. Maybe I was chicken, but she really didn’t look like she wanted to speak to anyone. If she could have been invisible, she would.”

“Hard to imagine what it would be like to go into town and everywhere you go someone stops you to offer condolences. Even if they’re trying to be kind, it would be hard to face.”

“She deserves her privacy.” She slipped her arms around her husband, laying her head on his chest. “I can’t imagine my life without you.”

Ken rested his chin on the top of her head. “There are no guarantees in life, but we’re both healthy and active. We should be together for a long, long time.”

“I know, but, it scares me, just the thought. Things can change so quickly, spinning your life in another direction.” She tightened her hug. “I’m not the clingy type, but imagining myself in Irma’s position scares the crap out of me.” She knew this next bit didn’t show her at her best, but this

was Ken; she could tell him anything. “It almost makes me want to avoid her, like her sorrow could rub off on me.”

“Yeah, I feel it too. Or maybe it’s that I don’t know what to say to her.”

“You’re lucky. You don’t have to say much; you can do things for her.”

“I can try to be useful.” He took a step back. “That reminds me. I should check on that plumbing job I did for her last week. I think that should have fixed the running toilet, but I should make sure.”

“It’s not like she asks for help readily. Yes, you should go see.”

“Will you come with me?”

Irma sat in her rocking chair, as usual. Holding the saucer in one hand, she raised the china cup to her lips, taking a sip of the too-hot tea. She slurped, taking in some air to cool the liquid. Hubert hated slurping.

She set the cup in the saucer, placing both on the end table, making a satisfying rattle. One side of her mouth curved up, just a little. Hubert hated the sound of china pieces clattering against one another, so much so that she’d switched to drinking from mugs to keep the peace. The thicker rim of mugs didn’t do it for her when she fancied a cup of tea. Coffee, yes - a heavy mug seemed fitting, but tea required something delicate, something pretty.

She’d now resurrected all the graceful china she’d tucked into the back of a cupboard. There was no one anymore to complain about the gentle clinking, that almost musical note with the soothing quality that spoke of the comfort of a decent cup of tea. She’d drink whatever she wanted, whenever, and however she felt like it.

“The dishwasher ruins china,” Hubert had said. “We should preserve it.”

For what? No one wanted fine china these days. Besides, there was no one to leave it to.

But marriage was about compromise, and she’d given in on this point. Now she ate and drank from whatever pleased her.

Pleased her. As if anything did these days. She chided herself. Thinking like that never helped anyone. It was the little things that mattered; they added up to creating a life.

She still had a life such as it was. It was up to her and no one else to make what she could of it. Since adulthood, maybe even before that, she’d been a practical person, facing reality head on, and doing what had to be

done. No, she'd never shied away from that before, so now was not the time to change.

Make a plan, she told herself. One step at a time. Prioritize.

She'd always thought better while being busy. Idle hands were the devil's work. In a plastic bag beside her chair sat her current knitting project, along with remnants of past efforts.

Her knitting needles clicked. If Hubert was here, he'd have shot her that look, reached for his remote and turned the volume on the television still higher.

"Must you?" he'd complain.

She'd have clicked harder, a little game they played on long winter nights.

"Ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation." Those words from the Lebanese-American poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran echoed in her mind, something from one of her undergrad philosophy classes. Such musing was wasted on the young. Only now did she understand the depth of his words.

Winter. That was a pressing problem. While not here yet, its foreboding presence was in the wind. How would she keep herself warm during the cold season? For now, double layers of sweaters, a shawl, and fingerless gloves kept her snug enough. At night, she had ample quilts to pile on her bed.

When their old furnace would rumble and hiccup, Hubert would trek down to the basement, muttering about not letting the pipes freeze. She was uncertain what would happen if they did, but Hubert avoided that at all costs. Now, he'd left her to deal with it alone.

Click, click, click. Her eyes took in the blackened stone of the fireplace, with its ash and soot spilling onto the hearth. How many times had she made socks just like this? Far too many to keep track of. Unconsciously, her mind counted stitches, her fingers wielding the needles with precision, dipping in and out of the wool.

Why was she even doing this? Her Hubert suffered from cold feet; the only thing keeping him comfortable were wool socks. Not just any socks.

No, he couldn't stand the store-bought ones. He'd only feel all right in the ones Irma knit for him, made precisely to fit his feet.

Gray, always gray. Hubert hated dust or anything noticeable on his socks. He refused to wear any of the slippers she bought him, insisting that a man shouldn't be afraid of picking up dirt on his socks in his own house. It had been one thing to keep the floors clean when it was just the two of them, but then Percy came into their lives.

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## Chapter Four

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As if hearing her thoughts, Percy lifted his head, stretching first his left paw, then his right. Getting up, he circled, then settled back into his spot on Hubert's recliner, a place he now claimed as his own. Once he'd spent his evenings snoozing on Hubert's lap; now he had the recliner to himself, his back always to Irma.

On a normal evening, Percy's motor would run, his purr audible on the other side of the room. But not now. The cat stopped purring the evening Hubert passed and had not uttered his usual sound of contentment since.

Certainly not for her. He'd squawk if she was late in filling his food bowl, or if he didn't think there was ample water set out for him. But that was it; not even a thank you purr when Irma did his bidding.

There was no love/hate relationship between Irma and the gray Persian cat. No, it was more hate/hate on both their parts. But Hubert adored the creature, so it stayed, shedding gray hairs all over the place.

Hence the gray socks she knit, ones when any housekeeping misses would not be so readily noticeable. Again, she thought, it's the little things. They add up to make a life.

It was tempting to get rid of the cat. After all, it was all she could do now to keep herself functioning, let alone care for another being, especially one who couldn't stand her. She could stop feeding him. Not let him back

into the house, especially with the frigid temperatures coming. But Hubert would be disappointed in her and his presence was still real enough that she couldn't eliminate the only living thing sharing her sorrow over the loss. So, they tolerated each other's presence.

Percy lifted his head and peered toward the front of the house. Settling back down, he was instantly asleep. Guarding was not his responsibility.

Now Irma's ears caught the sound of an approaching vehicle. She sighed. No one just happened to drive down this road. Hers was the last house with the road ending in her driveway. Three miles away lived the Lamonts, a nice enough couple, friendly, helpful, but not intrusive. They were good neighbors, ready to lend a hand, but respectful of privacy. She and Hubert had been the same to the Lamonts.

The truck drew nearer, the distinctive sound of a Dodge Ram's Diesel engine identifying the vehicle as likely belonging to Ken Lamont. He'd last been here over a week ago, fixing the toilet that wouldn't stop running. Their well produced a limited amount of water, so Hubert had been careful about things like that.

The truck came to a stop in the driveway. She really did not feel up to visitors, making nice with anyone. What if she didn't answer the door? Her car sat in plain sight, so Ken would know she was here. Maybe Lydia was with him; he'd said she'd come next time. If she didn't respond to their knock, would they use the key Hubert had given them to come in any way to do a wellness check?

Yep, probably. They were that kind of people.

Slipping a marker onto the knitting needle, she set her work on the table, careful not to slosh the remnants of her tea onto the wool. While knitting was good for keeping the arthritis at bay, putting her palms on the arm of the chair to push herself up was still tough. This time, it took two tries before she made it to her feet. She paused there for a second while she found her balance. She'd fallen once since she'd lived alone and didn't want to repeat that shameful episode of crawling along the floor until she reached something stable enough to use to pull herself upright.

Don't shuffle, she reminded herself. Pick up your feet. She made it to the door just as her visitor knocked.

One deep breath in, then two. Smooth down any fly away bits of hair, check that there were no stains on her apron. Twisting the deadbolt, she

then pushed down on the lever to open the door.

Sure enough, there stood a smiling Lydia and Ken.

“We brought you some muffins,” Lydia said, holding out a plate covered with a thin, but ironed tea towel. Holding the plate aloft, the aroma drifted into the house, something warm, nutty, and comforting.

“Thank you.” Irma forced her facial features into the expected welcoming smile. “That’s so kind of you.”

“I was making a batch for us, so it was no trouble to make an extra dozen for you. They freeze well.”

A reminder that they’d stale quickly with only one mouth to consume them.

“May I make you some tea?” Not because she especially wanted their company, but good manners required she make the offer.

“I’d love some tea,” Lydia said, also onboard with what courtesy required. “But you sit down; I’ll make it.”

Irma tamped down that prick of irritation at another woman making free with her kitchen. It was done out of kindness, she knew, so she gave the small smile she knew people expected of recent widows. “Thank you. I made some earlier, but it’s grown cold.”

Lydia hustled past Irma to where she knew the older woman always sat. “I’ll give this cup a rinse, then make you some fresh in a jiffy.” She patted Irma’s arm as she walked by.

At least she respected personal space and didn’t try any of that gratuitous hugging business.

Ken entered the room, shutting the door behind him. His eye caught the weather-stripping pulling away from the door’s casing. “That’ll let in the drift come winter. If you’d like, I can replace it for you. Won’t take but a few minutes and I have a roll in the garage.”

“Thank you.” She was always saying that to these people.

“I stopped by to check on that plumbing job I did last week. Did that fix things?”

“Yes. It no longer runs and runs.” They both stood near the doorway, awkwardly remembering their encounter in the tiny upstairs bathroom, personal space at a premium as they both peered at the exposed inner workings of the toilet tank.

Ken had spotted the problem immediately. “See here?” He stuck his hand into the tank’s cold water, index finger pointing down. “This is the

flapper that seals the tank. It's not sitting flush because it has a chain lodged under it." He fished out the chain with his finger, and almost immediately, the sound of running water ceased. "This chain attaches to the handle so you can flush it."

She'd noticed that the last time she used the commode, it wouldn't flush. Thankfully, the lid was down so no one could see the desecrating mess inside the toilet bowl.

"It can stretch with time or the hook it latches into can corrode. I'll show you what to do if it happens again."

No! Inside her head, Irma howled. If I wanted to learn how to do it myself, I would. What I want is for someone to do this for me, preferably Hubert. But she schooled her features into the appropriate response, appearing interested.

Irma brought her thoughts back to the present. "The toilet's been fine ever since, thank you. You fixed the problem."

Ken patted her arm, just as his wife had. "Glad to be of assistance. Anything you need, just ask."

The rattle of teacups signaled Lydia entering the living room with a tray holding a teapot, three cups and saucers, and a platter of sliced and buttered warm banana muffins.

Irma asked what had been on her mind since the night before. "Although the toilet no longer runs and flushes okay now, something else happened. It flushed on its own last night. I was down here knitting when I heard a floorboard creak, then the toilet flushing." Ken and Lydia kept silent but traded glances. Irma hated those glances, the ones shared by people who had spent most of their lives together, the ones that spoke volumes without a word being said. Once, she and Hubert had had that. Gone. That part of her life was now gone forever.

No point crying over spilled milk. The toilet was what mattered right now. Irma added, "Just once. It only flushed itself that one time."

## Chapter Five

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“Excuse me, ladies. I’ll just check upstairs.” Ken left the room.

With a glance over her shoulder toward the stairwell where her husband disappeared, Lydia pointed at the living room chairs. “Let’s have our tea while Ken does his thing.”

“I guess I don’t need to go with him. He knows where the bathroom is.”

“Irma,” started hesitantly, “is anyone else here with you?”

“Other than Percy there, I’m quite alone in this world, as you know.”

Both women studied the snoozing cat.

“Was Percy here with you when you heard the toilet flush? Maybe he was playing with something in the bathroom and knocked something into the toilet handle, causing it to flush.”

“No, he was here in the room with me. I think we’d both nodded off.”

“Ah. Maybe you dreamed it.”

Irma straightened. “Lydia, I’ll have you know I heard what I heard. I am not a fanciful old woman resurrecting ghosts out of ashes. I know my house and what I heard was a floorboard, then the flush.”

“These old houses make lots of noises, especially in the wind. Gosh, that was some wind last night, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Irma regarded her guest levelly, then consciously lowered her shoulders, pasting a smile onto her face. Wouldn’t do to antagonize this

woman. You never knew when you might need help from a neighbor. Let her think she was losing it; they might feel sorry for her and be more willing to help out. "I appreciate your concern, dear, and all you and Ken have done for me." She lowered her eyes. "These are trying times for an old woman like me. I never thought I'd end up like this."

Lydia stretched to lay her hand over Irma's. "Oh, anything you need, we're here for you. We miss Hubert too and know he'd want us to look out for you."

Ken clumped down the stairs. He didn't walk easily like Hubert had, but put all of his weight on his heels, making far more noise than necessary. You'd think the man weighed closer to 250, than barely breaking the 200-pound mark.

"All clear," he said, his eyes meeting his wife's. "I can't see anything amiss with your toilet, and no reason for it to flush on its own." He ignored the slight shake of his wife's head. "You might have fallen asleep and dreamed you heard the flush."

Lydia rolled her eyes.

Irma knew when to back down. "Yes, that's probably it. I've not been sleeping well."

"While I'm here, I might as well check the basement. Do you mind?"

"No, I'd appreciate it. I haven't been down there since...". She let the statement hang in the air.

"You poor dear." Lydia was sincere. Again, that hand-patting thing.

Irma gritted her teeth while trying to smile.

"I know it's a cliché, but it will get easier. That's what they say, and I'm sure it's true. These are early days, and you have a lot to adjust to. Just take your time, and know that you're not alone. We're here for you, as are many other people in town, if you need them."

Over her dead body.

Ken stomped back up the stairs. "All clear down there, but for a couple furry trespassers who won't see the light of day again. I emptied the traps and threw the mice out the cellar door." He paused. "You keep that door locked, don't you?"

Did she? Hubert kept it locked. At least she thought he did. "I haven't been in the basement." She looked at her lap. "I hate going down there. Hubert attended to all that."

“Basements are not the most pleasant places, especially in these old houses. If you want, I’ll come by periodically to check the traps, if that’s okay. I’ve locked the door from the inside.”

“Thank you.” What else was there to say?

Lydia gathered up the tea tray. “I’ll take this into the kitchen for you and do a quick washing up.”

“No, you don’t need to do that. Please leave it; it gives me something to do.”

There it was, that pitying look on Lydia’s face. The woman meant well, but it grated on the nerves.

Gone. They meant well, and Ken was a help, but there was a certain blessing to solitude. Yeah, being alone sucked and the ever-present silence pressed down on the soul, but if aloneness was the future, she’d better get used to it.

The silence, though, she could maybe do something about. They used to have a radio in the kitchen, but it got knocked off the counter and smashed. They never got around to replacing it amid all the minutiae of maintaining their everyday lives. It hardly rated as a priority; she only used it during the day when Hubert was away and she was baking or canning.

Next time she went to town, she’d check the hardware store to see if they still carried things like radios. Lydia had showed her how she carried all her tunes on her cell phone, but Irma’s old flip phone didn’t have internet access and the whole thing seemed too complicated to be bothered.

Hubert was a guy who switched on the television as soon as he entered the house, even if he left the room as soon as he had the thing blaring. But at least it was noise.

She’d already fiddled with the remote control, pleased when she figured out how to turn on the set. But a message came up about being unable to connect to the internet. Although she’d never paid attention, she thought Hubert would groan when that happened, and go over to the little black box on the side hutch and do something. Right now, that seemed beyond her.

But the radio she could do something about.

Pleased with herself, she grunted (just a little) as she rose from her rocking chair, toddling on stiffened feet toward the kitchen. Removing the To Do pad of paper held to the fridge by a magnet, she carefully wrote down:



1. Buy radio.

Yep, taking action was the way to go. Her swollen feet and ankles prodded her about another task she needed to figure out. Heat. This infernal cold was hard on her joints. Pulling out the phone book from its place in the kitchen drawer, she forced her fingers to comb through the yellow pages trying to find someone who might come look at her fireplace. If she could get that going, at least she could keep her bones warm for the next while.

2. Find a chimney sweep.

The rest she'd figure out later.

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## Chapter Six

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“Lady, can you jiggle the flue?” The faint voice of Chad from Chad’s Chimney Service echoed down the chimney. Chad was almost Irma’s age, but if he thought he was fit enough to clamber around atop her roof, let him at it.

It took time to push herself to her feet, time Chad didn’t understand.

“Hey, lady, you there?”

Bending to stick her face up the black chasm of the chimney, Irma yelled back. “I wasn’t nearby.” A lie, but how would he know? “I’m trying, but it’s stuck.” Even using both hands, she only nudged the lever a quarter of an inch.

Heavily booted feet stomped across the roof, then clanged down the metal extension ladder. One token knock on the door, and then Chad was in the living room, a can of WD-40 oil in hand. “Those things seize up easily. All that soot and ash and creosote, ya know? I know how to fix that.” Dropping to his knees in a way that made Irma flinch, his head and lower arms disappeared into the chimney’s void. A sound of aerosol spray filtered down, along with a greasy odor.

Backing out, Chad tried the flue lever, pleased with its ease of movement. “There. Now you try it.”

Reluctant to touch the metal Chad's blackened hands had just been on, Irma sucked it up. It still took two hands, but she could now slide it back and forth. Not wanting to look stupid, but needing to know, she asked, "Which way is open?"

"To the right is closed, and the left is open." Rummaging in his tool belt, he brought out a white grease marking pen. "You're not the first person to ask that, and won't be the last. That's why I carry this." He held up the marker. With the lever shoved to the far right, he wrote a capital C on the far left of the metal housing the lever. Reversing the flue handle's position, he wrote an O. "There. Now you'll never have to wonder."

"Thanks." And thanks for not making me feel like an idiot. But she didn't say that aloud. Instead, she asked, "How much longer will you be?"

"Maybe another hour, hour and a half, depending on how much of a mess I find." He noticed Irma watching as he spread out a drop sheet that might once have been white. "Gotta protect this carpet of yours. It's a nice one, although I see you might have had a problem." He glanced at the ground-in soot in front of the hearth. "I have some stuff I can leave you. It takes gunk like that right out of rugs."

Again, this guy was being nice. Was that just his way, or was there something behind it? "Thank you. I shouldn't have tried lighting the fireplace on my own without my husband." Did that make it sound like Hubert had just been out of the house, rather than permanently gone?

"Fires are tricky things, great things, mind you, as long as they stay in their proper places, but that's the catch." He stood awkwardly for a minute. "Look, I'm not trying to upsell you or anything, but an open fireplace like this can lose as much heat as it creates, especially when it's really cold out."

"Hubert always says that, too."

"What you need is an insert. It fits right into this space, but blocks cold air from coming down the chimney and into this room. An inset might require logs just a little shorter than you and your husband are used to using, but it's more efficient and you'd save on heat."

"How much would that cost?" Although the ideal appealed, and Hubert had mentioned such a thing, she needed to watch her spending.

"Let me take some measurements and I'll get back to you with a quote. Do you have an email address I can send it to?"

Hubert did, and he'd made one for her years ago, but she'd forgotten how to access it. "Would you mind sending it through the mail? We like to

look at things before deciding.”

“Sure.”

Did he look at her oddly? She couldn't be the only person who believed in supporting the postal service.

“If you want to go on about your business, I'll carry on here and let you know when your chimney's as sparkling new as a baby's bottom.”

Half an hour later, Chad climbed down his metal ladder, maybe not quite as spryly as before. Hands on his hips, he surveyed Irma as she set another cut up log on end on the stump and prepared to bring down the axe.

She knew she'd get a better swing at it if she could raise her arms above her head, but those shoulders of hers resisted such extensions. They needed some of Chad's WD-40.

The axe came down with a satisfying whomp, then stuck in the log. Jiggling, twisting and trying to raise the entire thing didn't dislodge it.

Chad took in the other log with an axe head lodged in it. Striding forward, he said, “Let me. My Missus has the same problem. So do I, if the truth be known, but men have more upper body strength than women, so can wrestle these things better.” He freed the axe and finished chopping the logs.

Irma stood back, resentful and grateful.

Chad noticed the pitifully small pile of blocks she's successfully chopped. “You know what you need?”

Irma refrained from rolling her eyes. What else did he have up his sleeve that was going to cost her money?

“A log splitter. My Missus can split wood to beat the band with one. No more swinging this axe.”

“A log splitter?”

“Yeah. Get an electric one, but a good one, at least a 5-ton press. You'll split five logs into whatever size you want in the same time as you'd struggle to get one done with an axe.”

“I don't suppose you happen to have one in your van for sale?”

“No, ma'am. I don't handle them, but any hardware store would. Where do you shop?”

She names the shops in the two closest towns.

“I know them both. Tell them Chad sent you, and you might get a good deal.”

“Thanks!” This guy was actually helpful. Between a log splitter, a clean chimney, and a working flue, her heat problem might be solved, at least until the real cold came.

One more thing off her list. She was getting a handle on this being single business. A little voice in the back of her mind said, *yeah, until the next thing crops up.*

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## Chapter Seven

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At least Abe at the hardware store wasn't one of the town busybodies. He attended to the task at hand without asking Irma nosey questions. Yes, he carried log splitters. Without making her feel like an idiot, Abe helped her decide on the best size for her needs, one that handled up to 20-inch logs, with a splitting force of six tons. He demonstrated its use on a display model behind the store, then stowed it in the trunk of her car for her. Small towns were like that.

As soon as she got behind the wheel of the old Buick and started down the street, Irma could tell the car handled differently with the front end higher and all that weight in the trunk. Even turning corners seemed to take more effort, the vehicle sluggish to respond. Hopefully, the springs or shocks or whatever could handle the load going over the ruts on the drive home.

While in town, she slowly drove by the post office. No home delivery in these parts; you had to pick up your mail yourself from a locked box in the post office. From the lack of cars parked outside, it was safe to go in. She hated running into people; they always expected a chat. It would be not so bad if they wanted a brief, regular conversation, but no. Their opening

gambit was always something like, “How are you, dear?” First, she wasn’t their dear. Second, it was none of their business, and third, how did they expect her to be feeling? But she played nice and stifling those resentments.

With the coast clear, Irma hustled up the steps to the post office, unlocked her box and grabbed the envelopes inside. Safely back in her car, she checked today’s offerings. Thank the lord, the condolence cards had petered out. What was a person supposed to do with those, anyway? Did people actually expect a reply? Did they think a card would make everything all right, that life would return to normal?

Among the usual junk mail and bills, there was an envelope from Ed’s Chimney Service. She used her fingernail to carefully slit open the side of the envelope. She had no idea why, but she always opened letters that way.

\$850.00! *That’s* how much it cost to clean a chimney these days? The man was only here for less than two hours. A chimney sweep earned \$400 an hour? Why would anyone bother going to college when you could make that kind of money with no education?

All right, the guy had been helpful, but sheesh. Did he perceive her as a pitiful widow and take advantage? Nope, *that* was not happening again.

Whack! Once again, the Buick bottomed out on a pothole. She’d taken it slowly and things hadn’t been too bad until she hit that final three-mile stretch of road that was hers alone. The county was supposed to maintain the roads, but their priority was the major arteries and the school bus routes. Neither applied to Irma and Hubert Willoughby’s lane.

When the road was dry, it usually wasn’t too bad. When the ruts filled with rainwater or snow runoff, she and Hubert would stay home until things dried up. Or, if they really had to get to town, Hubert would fire up the ancient Ford F-Series pickup truck. New and cherry-red in 1952, it had been through countless owners and was an indeterminate rust color now. Chuffed when he found it at an auction, Hubert was even more pleased to have brought it home. He’d used it to haul home heavy items, and when he went into the forest to chop down trees for fireplace wood.

That truck was useless to Irma. She’d never learned to drive a standard, and even if she had, this one was tricky. Over the years, the gearshift lever had become loosey-goosey, swinging all over the place so you never knew which gear it was in. At least *she* didn’t. Hubert did when he drove it by



remembering which gear he'd last shoved it into. On top of that, her arthritic feet would never handle the double clutching that beast required.

So the Buick was it, her only mode of transportation.

Pulling onto her front lawn, Irma carefully backed the car as close to the porch as she could, near where both the logs sat and there was an electric outlet.

Lawn. Hubert would have a fit. At least it wasn't early summer, where the grass seemed to grow an inch a day. But it must have been over a month since anyone attacked the greenery with a lawn mower. Hadn't Ken noticed what shape it was in when he and Lydia were over the other day? *He'd* been the last person to cut the grass.

Trying not to grunt, Irma hoisted herself out of the car. Opening the trunk was not a problem; shutting it was another matter. The blasted thing never wanted to close.

Returning from the house with her kitchen scissors, she cut the plastic ties holding the box together. Hacking at the cardboard with those scissors, she gradually exposed the guts inside. Abe told her the splitter came in parts, but was easy to put together. Just follow the instructions in the manual, then plug it in.

The parts thing was good as she'd never be able to lift the entire thing on her own, doing this on her own she would. Three pieces. That wasn't so bad, and it even came with a wrench-like thingy to tighten the bolts.

Perspiration running down her back, her armpits and her face, Irma blew errant strands of hair out of the eyes. She'd do this or die trying. Morbid, she thought to herself. Her lips twitched into a grin or a grimace.

She'd never tell anyone how long it took, but eventually a shiny blue log splitter sat on one end of her porch. Plugging it in, it gave a satisfying whine. Pulling the lever, a flat hunk of metal plating surged forward along the base, ready to hammer a log into the other pointy end, splitting the wood in two. Or so she hoped.

But that was tomorrow's task. She'd done enough for now.

For months now, sleep eluded her. This night, though, she nodded off almost right away, thanks to the help of a sleeping pill.

In a deep sleep, a rare occurrence this last month, Irma felt covers twitch and the other side of the bed dip. Ah, the 11 o'clock news must be

over, and Hubert was coming to bed. He always thought he was being so stealthy so as not to wake her, but she heard him every time, and felt him.

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## Chapter Eight

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Irma's eyelids fluttered open, squinting against the harsh sunlight that flooded the bedroom. For a blessed moment, everything felt right in her world. The warmth beside her, the lingering scent of Hubert's aftershave. It was like he'd never left.

But as consciousness crept in, reality followed. The warmth was just a sunbeam, not her husband's body. That familiar scent? Nothing but a trace clinging to his pillow, fading a little more each day.

She rolled over, her arthritic hip protesting the movement, and stared at the empty space where Hubert should've been. The mattress felt wrong, too firm, too flat. No indent from his sturdy frame, no rumpled sheets from his restless legs.

"Darn," she muttered, her voice scratchy with sleep and unshed tears. That dream had felt so real, so vivid. Hubert climbing into bed, the covers rustling, his contented sigh as he settled in. It was like a cruel joke her mind was playing on her.

Irma pushed herself up, bones creaking like the old farmhouse around her. She stumbled a little, resting a hand on the bed for balance. Sometimes she wondered if her blood pressure pills were too strong.

Her head felt fuzzy, probably from that blasted sleeping pill. She'd sworn she wouldn't take another from the bottle the doctor prescribed for Hubert but the silence of the house at night was sometimes too much to bear, and how was she supposed to think, to reason her way through this new life forced upon her, if she was too exhausted to use what brain cells she had left?

She squinted at the alarm clock. 8:17 AM. She'd slept in. Hubert would've been up hours ago, puttering around in the kitchen, the smell of coffee wafting up the stairs. But now? Nothing but the sound of wind whistling through the eaves and the distant moo of a cow in the neighbor's field. Ken Lamont might make a decent neighbor, but he couldn't keep his fences mended to save his soul. That cow sounded closer than the three miles away it should have been.

Irma sighed, steeling herself for another day alone in this big, empty house. Another day of talking to herself, of catching glimpses of Hubert's ghost in every corner. Not a real ghost, mind you, just memories so strong they seemed to take on a life of their own. Nope, ghosts were not for people like Irma, people who owned up to reality for what it was and got on with the job.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, toes curling against the cold hardwood floor. It was time to face another day, whether or not she wanted to. But lord, how she wished she could just close her eyes and slip back into that dream, back into a world where Hubert was still by her side, where he took care of things she was not supposed to have to think about.

First things first.... Steadier on her feet now, Irma shuffled down the short hallway, her slippered feet dragging across the worn carpet runner. She eyed the toilet from the bathroom door, that traitorous porcelain thing. It *had* flushed all on its own the other night, no matter if Ken and Lydia thought she was going batty. She had not dreamed it up.

After taking care of business in the bathroom—lord, even that felt lonelier without Hubert's random humming through the door—she made her way back to the bedroom to get dressed.

That's when she saw it. The pillow on Hubert's side had a dent in it, like a head had rested there. And the covers... they weren't ruler-straight like they should've been. They were slightly rumpled, pulled back just a tad, as if someone had slipped out of bed that morning, then carelessly thrown the covers back in place.

Irma's heart did a funny little skip. Maybe she needed to talk to the doctor about her pills.

She blinked hard, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. Hubert used to tease her something fierce about how she slept like a corpse, hardly moving an inch all night. "You trying to practice for the grave, old girl?" he'd say with that mischievous glint in his eye. Meanwhile, his side of the bed always looked like a whirling dervish slept there.

But now? Now she only slept on her side, leaving Hubert's untouched, pristine. Or at least, it should've been, as it had every night since she'd slept alone.

"Get a grip, you old fool," Irma muttered to herself, shaking her head so hard her silver curls bounced. She was just seeing things, that's all. Had to be that darn sleeping pill messing with her mind.

Determined to push these unsettling thoughts away, Irma yanked open her dresser drawer with more force than necessary. She pulled on her new norm of an outfit—a comfortable pair of slacks and a soft, worn sweater that still smelled faintly of Hubert's pipe smoke. After all, he wasn't here to gripe about her wearing his things. And it just felt right to put on something that had been close to his skin.

As she made her way downstairs, each step creaking under her weight, Irma forced herself to focus on the day ahead. There were chores to do, after all. Dishes in the sink, laundry piling up, and maybe she'd finally get around to dusting those end tables. Anything to keep her mind off that bed upstairs and the ghost of a warm body that wasn't really there.

The kitchen greeted her with its now familiar, empty silence. No Hubert at the table with his crossword puzzle, no smell of burnt toast (the man could never get the setting right). Just her, the ticking clock, and another long day stretching out before her. Irma sighed, reaching for the coffee pot. One day at a time, that's all she could do. One long, lonely day at a time.

No point in feeling sorry for herself. There was stuff to get done, a life to figure out how to lead.

She sat in her usual chair, the one facing the kitchen window. Staring at Hubert's empty chair, she couldn't get the image of that pillow with a dent in it out of her mind.

## Chapter Nine

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Enough of this daydreaming and moping. Never get anything done this way.

Using the heels of her hands, Irma pushed away from the kitchen table, brushing toast crumbs onto her plate. Carrying her coffee cup and plate to the counter, she set them in the sink, along with last night's tea cup. Hesitating, she wondered if she should clean up in here right now.

When Hubert was alive, she never went to bed with dirty dishes in the sink; Hubert hated that. He liked to start the day from a fresh slate, starting the coffee and knowing he could grab anything from any cupboard, clean things always at the ready.

She'd become slovenly these last few weeks. What did it matter? Although Hubert cared, there was no need to please him now. A part of her realized that this was a way to thumb her nose at her husband, something she'd never have contemplated in their lives together. It seemed a small thing to go along with his peculiarities. After all, stuff had to be cleaned up at some point, so why not now?

With a snort, she ignored the mess in the sink and started back up the stairs. It was Monday, wash day.

She had a plan. It was not easy to erase nearly 50 years of a life; it was so long ago that she was a “me” rather than a “we”. Sure, Hubert had his faults, as did she, but they’d made it work together. With the pivot point of her life ripped out from under her, she clung to what she could. Maybe things hadn’t been perfect, but she missed the old goat. He was *her* old goat.

And yes, she had complained about that goatish smell about him when he’d been out working hard. But it was part of him. There was a time when the particular aroma that was Hubert permeated the house. At the time, she thought nothing of it, somehow assumed it’d be around forever.

Now she clung to those smells.

Time was erasing them, little by little. She needed them most during the long, long nights, when even if she couldn’t feel her husband, she could still smell him, sniff and remember that he’d been right here with her.

A body could only go so long without washing the bed sheets. But the laundry detergent would obliterate Hubert’s scent forever. Pleased with herself, Irma came up with a solution.

Now, standing on her side of the bed, she pulled from under the covers a single, solitary sheet. Folded double, it served as both top and bottom sheet on her side of the bed. Never a restless sleeper, it mostly stayed in place, tucked in at the bottom of the bed, stabilized by her pillow at the top.

This sheet, plus her pillowcase, joined her other soiled clothes in the laundry hamper.

Until to today, she’d ignored the other side of the bed. Nope, that wasn’t like her. Squaring her shoulders, she walked around to where Hubert always lay, the side closest to the door. In case an intruder got in, he’d be able to defend her, he always said.

Well, an intruder had come into their lives, a lethal one, and no matter how hard Hubert fought, he was no match for the invader. Was there shame in defeat? Yeah, when it ended the way it did for him.

Enough. While Hubert might have made a mess of the bed each night, he liked it to look tidy during the day, and wanted crisp sheets to fall into each night. The daily chore of making the bed somehow fell on Irma’s shoulders, but she didn’t mind, not really. Habits of a lifetime didn’t shuck off easily.

Forcing her gaze onto Hubert’s pillow, she allowed what she saw to register. There was a definite dent in the center of that pillow; it now didn’t

match the one on the other side of the bed, the one she'd just finished fluffing and putting back in place.

Maybe this once she had not slept without moving. Maybe in her sleep and desperate for contact, she'd snuck onto Hubert's side of the bed, laying her head on his pillow, yearning to breathe in his scent.

Giving herself a shake, she picked up his pillow to give it a good shake. First, though, she brought it to her face, inhaling deeply. It smelled of him, yes, but there was something else, something she couldn't name.

Had Percy crept onto their bed in the night? That was one place the cat was not allowed. Both she and Hubert agreed on that. Cats carried fleas, and ticks, and who knew what else. Who wanted *that* in the place where they laid their head?

Inspecting the pillow, she saw no gray hairs of the right length for a Persian cat. But there was a darker hair, one almost black, like the color of Hubert's locks before the sun and age bleached out the hue from the hair shafts, slowly at first, one by one, then at a faster rate. Could a dark hair have remained imbedded in the pillowcase all these years?

She'd think about that later. For now, Irma bounced and rounded the pillow into the perfect shape, centering it just so on the bed.



## Chapter Ten

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Abe was right. This log splitter beat the heck out of using an axe. Noisy, and it left a mess of shavings on the porch floor, but they were easily swept off into a box.

Percy was a particular cat, needing things just so for his personal use. It had taken Hubert three tries before he found the type of cat litter meeting with Percy's approval. Of course, it was the most expensive brand. Now, being on a tight budget, that couldn't continue, especially with winter coming when Percy resisted going outside to do his business. Mixing the pricey litter with wood shavings should help reduce costs.

Things were different now. One of Hubert's pensions was now cut in half, the other stopped the first month after his death. How did they expect a body to live on these piddling amounts? Good thing they had *some* savings, but they wouldn't go far.

Especially if she had to buy things to keep herself going. Like this log splitter. The axe problem solved, a new issue cropped up.

Hubert had cut up a stack of logs the length needed for the fireplace. He'd bought cords of eight-foot logs early last winter, cutting them into roughly 20-inch pieces with his chainsaw. He liked his Husqvarna, or so he said. It was hard to tell the way he cussed at it, endlessly fiddling with one part of it or another, spending hours sharpening each tooth on the chain.

The chainsaw hung from its special hook in the shed, with pieces of cardboard underneath it. No matter what Hubert did, the thing still dripped oil. Every once in a while he'd swap out the stained, sodden cardboard for a new piece, but obviously not often enough, Irma thought, as she looked at it.

Pulling the saw away from the wall, she almost dropped it. Hubert never said how heavy it was. She jiggled it on the ground beside her, listening for sloshing. Nothing.

Was it out of gas? A half-full plastic gas can sat nearby. Should she use that? Wasn't there something special about gas for a chainsaw? Didn't it need something else mixed in with it? Irma surveyed the greasy tins and bottles stacked on the shelf above the workbench. Gear oil, brake fluid, penetrating oil, cleaners. What on earth had he used?

Slowly, the memory returned. Although Ken tried to show Hubert how to use the Notes feature on his cell phone, her husband was old school, and stuck to paper and pencil, his wallet stuffed with scraps of paper. Yep, she remembered now. Every time he brought out this chainsaw, he fished a paper out of his wallet, checking for quantities and proportions.

Useless, all useless to her now. Even if she could decipher his scrawls, it was too late.

Every time Hubert went to sit in his recliner, he'd barely get his scrawny butt in place when he'd rise on one side, fishing his wallet out of his left hip pocket, tossing it onto the end table beside his chair.

After he died, that tattered wallet sat on the table mocking her. Like the recliner, its leather had molded to Hubert's shape, the corners curled, almost in a snarl, defying her to touch it.

One evening she'd grabbed it, ready to throw it into the flames of the fireplace. Ever a practical woman, she'd first removed all the cash. The credit cards, driver's license and other miscellany from his life mattered not. He'd never use them again. A health card? Medicare card? Useless. They had helped him little when he was alive and even less now.

Into the fire they went, wallet and all, the leather writhing and stinking as the flames consumed it.

There was always the chance there was enough fuel left in the chainsaw to cut up just a few more logs. What did she have to lose?

A functioning spine and muscles, that's what. Even placing the toe of her shoe into the chainsaw's handle to hold it still as she yanked on the pull

cord, the stupid thing would not fire up. Hubert did lots of muttering when he went through these antics, but eventually, the thing would start for him with a satisfying revving. Not today, not for her. Figures.

Okay, Plan B. Wrapping the filthy chainsaw in a gunny sack, Irma placed it on top of cardboard in the trunk of her car. Maybe Abe at the hardware store could tell her what she was doing wrong.

“Thanks for your advice on the log splitter. You were right. Don’t know why we didn’t get one years ago.”

“Hubert might have enjoyed splitting wood by hand. Some people find it therapeutic.” Abe’s voice suggested he had no idea why anyone would.

“I have another question for you today. I’ve pretty much split all the wood Hubert had cut to length. What’s left is in eight-foot pieces. I tried getting his chainsaw going, but had no luck. I wondered if there was something I needed to buy to make it run.”

Abe’s skeptical look said it all. “It’s a Huskie 550, isn’t it? I think I sold him that a few years back.”

“That sounds like the number on its side. It’s in the trunk of my car if you need to see it.”

“Look, Mrs. Willoughby, I’ll be straight with you. I could work on it and get it going for you, but even if I started it, I doubt you could on your own.” At the look on Irma’s face, he held up his hands. “Nothing against you; I’m sure you’re a capable woman. It’s just that a chainsaw of that size is heavy for a man. And even if they’ll tell you otherwise, there’s barely a man alive who doesn’t wrestle with getting a chainsaw going. Mind you, it’ll do a fine job once it’s running, but it’s heavy and tiring.”

“So you’re saying I can’t handle it? How am I supposed to get my logs cut into chunks?”

“A few things come to mind. You could hire someone to do it for you. Or, you could ignore the pile and have someone deliver you cords of pre-cut wood. Then you’d just have to split it.”

“How much would that cost?”

“It doesn’t come cheap.” He looked off to the side for a second. “There’s one other possibility. Come with me.” He took off down an aisle.

When Irma caught up to him, Abe had a small, red chainsaw in his hand, and was sliding a black box onto it.

“This is a Milwaukee battery-powered chainsaw. This is how you start it. Stand back, now.” He pushed a button, the chain roared to life. He released his finger and pointed the tool into a space between aisle displays. “Here, you try it.”

Grasping it firmly the way Abe had, Irma tentatively pressed in the button, almost dropping the machine as it came to life in her hands. Abe was ready to snatch it, but Irma kept it in her grip herself. “Do you think this thing’s powerful enough to cut logs?”

“Oh, yeah, and feet and legs, and anything else in its way if you’re not careful.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Now, not so fast, Mrs. Willoughby. I can’t sell you something like this without knowing it’s the right tool for you.”

“But...”

“Let’s go out back. There’s a few logs there you can practice on to see if you’re comfortable handling it.”

After bucking up three logs, Irma removed her finger from the trigger and straightened. “I’ll take it.”

“Hold on. There’s more you should know. These things don’t come cheap and there’s stuff you need with it.”

“Like what?”

“Here, I’ll show you.” Squeezing two red buttons between his thumb and forefinger, Abe slid the black thing away from the end of the chainsaw. “This is the battery pack. It’s rechargeable, so you need a charger with it.”

“How long does it run for?”

“You can probably cut for a good three or four hours on one charge.”

“What’s the catch? Does it take days to recharge?”

“More like an hour or so.”

“Like I said, I’ll take it. This is something I can run. I always thought cursing was part of using a chainsaw, but I see it’s not necessary with this. Should have got one for Hubert years ago and spared my ears.”

“As I said, this is a pricey unit, will run you up \$500 with the charger, battery and case. I’ll throw in a jug of bar oil for free.”

“Bar oil? Is that the stuff Hubert used to have to measure to mix with gas?”

Abe shook his head. “No gas required, just this battery. But you still need to keep the chain lubricated. My advice is that every time you use it,

fill it with bar oil through this hole. It doesn't take much." He twisted off the cap, and they both peered inside.

"Will that be all?" Abe asked.

"For now. I might be back when I need more advice, or when I'm itching to fork over more of my hard-earned cash."

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## Chapter Eleven

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“How’s it going?” Hilary asked her brother.

“Not easy to tell with that one, but I think I’m making progress.”

“I’ll be heading up in a while.”

“Good. See ya there.”

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## Chapter Twelve

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Irma didn't stop for lunch. Her new chainsaw fed right into her independent streak. Hah! If only Hubert could see her now. The stack of cut and split wood grew as the afternoon wore on. Hubert used to say that wood warmed you up twice, once while you chopped it, and then when you burned it. He had that right.

Autumn was coming, Irma could feel it in the air. Using the sleeve of one of Hubert's old jackets, she brushed the sweat from her forehead.

She straightened, her back protesting as she surveyed her handiwork. The freshly stacked woodpile loomed beside her, promising warmth for the frosty nights ahead. She wiped her brow with a shaky hand, her cardigan damp with sweat.

A gust of wind swept across the yard, carrying with it the bite of approaching winter. The carpet of leaves blanketing her lawn rustled, releasing a musty sweetness mingled with the earthier scent of damp soil beneath. Here and there, windfall apples dotted the grass, their overripe flesh bruised and fragrant. No good for anything now; she'd missed picking them at their prime.

Near the old oak, where Hubert had hung a tire swing decades ago, the air held a hint of something darker, wet bark and decay. A large branch had come down in last week's storm, and she hadn't the heart to call anyone to

remove it. But maybe, just maybe, she could do the job herself, now that she'd bought her new chainsaw. Make this saw earn its keep.

Irma inhaled deeply, letting the familiar scents of her land wash over her. For a moment, the smells transported her, conjuring memories of seasons past and bonfires shared. Then reality settled back in. With a sigh, she turned towards the house, the promise of hot tea pulling her forward.

This was enough work for one old lady for today. Tea time. With one last glance at the satisfying pile of wood ready for the fireplace, she turned her back on the yard.

The screen door creaked as she opened it, echoing across the silent expanse behind her, ushering her into the even more silent house that no longer felt like a home.

As her sweat dried, Irma shivered, just a little, reaching for the afghan resting on the back of her rocker. She could see what Hubert meant when he said fireplaces both made the place cold and warm. There was a distinct draft coming down the chimney and into the room, bringing with it the damp.

Wait, why should she bundle up? There was plenty of wood to make a fire, and she had several fresh boxes of matches. At the post office, she'd gathered up all the discarded flyers. What a waste. Didn't people know these made excellent fire starters? Well, one man's trash is another treasure or something like that.

She was getting better at this. Using enough newspaper was the trick, along with wood shavings, and she sure had plenty of them, especially after this afternoon's efforts. In no time, the fire was blazing. Reluctant to make the effort of getting to her feet too soon before she was sure the blaze would continue going, Irma remained kneeling in front of the fire.

Tilting her head, she sniffed. Was that a faint aroma of pipe tobacco? Ah, how Hubert loved his pipe. Sometimes she thought he got as much enjoyment out of clean and filling and tamping the thing, fiddling with it in general, as he did puffing away at it.

But there'd been no pipe lit in this room in almost two months. Toward the end, even breathing was a struggle, and Hubert seemed to forget all about his beloved pipe. Would that aroma linger all this time? Maybe some pipe tobacco had fallen out of his pocket while he mused with the logs one day, and she'd inadvertently carried bits of tobacco in with the wood, and the fire brought out the fragrance. That must be it.



Irma lowered herself back into her rocking chair, groaning softly as her joints protested. The living room had been dim and lifeless, but now it pulsed with a warm, flickering glow. Shadows danced across the faded wallpaper.

Shadows. She was becoming a daft old woman. Sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, it seemed like a shadow moved, something that shouldn't. Ghosts, she scoffed. Those were for the addle-minded. Even so, every once in a while, there were sounds, sounds that shouldn't be there.

It was an old house. Old houses creaked, especially in the wind and with the season changes. Besides, when Hubert had the television blaring, who could hear what the house was doing? Only now in the silence could she catalog the noises.

The fire crackled and popped, its sound filling the silence that had become all too familiar since Hubert's passing. She breathed in deeply, savoring the scent of wood smoke, sharp and comforting, providing warmth and security. It mingled with the musty smell of old upholstery and the lingering aroma of her chamomile tea, a cocoon of familiar scents. Ones she needed to get used to.

Heat radiated from the hearth, chasing away the damp chill that had settled into the corners of the room. Irma felt it on her face, warming her cheeks and drying the last traces of sweat from her brow and back. She extended her hands towards the flames, relishing the way the warmth seeped into her aching, arthritic fingers.

The orange glow softened the room's edges, lending a hazy, dream-like quality to the space. For a moment, it almost felt like the house was alive again, filled with the energy it had known when Hubert was still there.

Irma sank deeper into her chair, letting the fire's warmth envelop her. The heat, the light, the comforting scent. They all worked together, momentarily pushing back the loneliness that had become her constant companion. Here, in this bubble of warmth and light, she could almost forget the encroaching darkness outside and the long, quiet night ahead. She dozed.

The banging, then scrape of metal on metal woke her, sounds she could not place. Heavy boots thudded on the porch outside.

Why had they never installed a peephole in the door? They'd talked about it so often, but never gotten around to it.

Rising unsteadily from her chair, Irma shuffled to the door, checking to make sure it was locked. It wasn't. Her fingers stiff from holding the chainsaw, she had to force them to turn the deadbolt. She really needed to remember to lock the door every time she came in the house.

The noises outside increased, and a motor revved higher. She hoped whoever was outside didn't notice the curtain twitch as she pulled away a corner to see what was going on.

Only part of the tanker truck was in view, but enough for her to read the end of the sign on its side. Oil and Gas. She'd seen that truck before, many times over the years. These were the people Hubert called to fill their furnace's tank with heating oil.

Hubert had been gone almost six weeks now. Had he called before he died and they were only just coming now? That was certainly not service. What if it had been the dead of winter? She could have frozen to death, her bones solidified into one solid chunk by the time anyone came looking for her.

Now she was ticked.

Irma twisted open the lock, flinging open the door. As fast as an old lady could hobble, she was across the porch and down the steps.

With his back to her, a man fiddled with knobs and levers on his truck, sending oil down the four-inch hose and into her basement.

"What do you think you're doing?" she shouted over the running truck and pump.

The middle-aged man turned around, scowling at her tone of voice. "I'm filling your furnace with fuel."

"I can see that. What took you so long?"

"Long? You called yesterday right before closing. There wasn't enough time to load up and drive all the way out here. I had a full roster scheduled today, but we tried to squeeze you in. Can't have elderly people without heat when you never know how soon winter will hit us."

It took a minute to process his words. "Yesterday?"

The guy nodded, impatient to get this job done and be on his way to his wife and the pot roast she'd have waiting.

"But I didn't call you."

"Your husband did."

"He's dead."

That stopped the guy. “Geez, lady, I’m sorry. I just spoke to him yesterday.” He took off his hat, shaggy hair falling over his forehead. “My condolences on your loss. Yesterday. You must still be in shock.” Awkwardly looking at his feet, he asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“Yes, you can fill my tank with heating oil like you are.” Was it her or him who had a screw loose? “My husband didn’t call you yesterday. He passed away almost a month and a half ago.”

“Well, some guy called us yesterday, ordering this fuel.”

“Ken?”

“You mean Ken Lamont, your neighbor? Nah. I know his voice. We’ve been duck hunting together.”

“Then who ordered this fuel?”

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## Chapter Thirteen

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Percy shat in the corner. Not on the wooden floor where it'd be easy to clean up, but on the corner of the wool rug, the one she and Hubert had saved up for and carefully selected from that Persian carpet store in Bloomington.

He hadn't done this since he'd been a kitten. Well, that wasn't quite true; he hadn't done it since Hubert settled on the kitty litter of Percy's choice.

Obviously, Percy rebelled against the idea of wood chips in his litter box. They smelled good, and she'd only added them an hour ago. What was the creature's problem?

Well, it would just have to wait. Irma had more important things to think about right now. Like who phoned in the order for heating fuel?

The warmth of the fireplace and the scent of burning wood didn't mask the odor coming from the corner of the room, Percy's afternoon offering. Should she grab the cat and rub its nose in the mess? Isn't that what they did to train pups and kittens? It had been so long since they'd had either; she didn't remember. Or maybe Hubert took care of that.

The rocking of her chair usually brought comfort, but today it did little to banish the smell of Percy's accident. Accident. Hah, she'd bet he did it on purpose. She'd have to do something about it; there was no one else here who was going to. Just one other thing to get used to when living alone.

Each knee giving a resounding pop, she crouched to gather up the carpet. Good thing they'd only been able to afford a small runner. Careful to keep her fingers away from the pungent, icky goo, Irma folded the soiled corner toward the center of the rug, wincing as the mess smeared across the beautiful pattern. She rose with the carpet held away from her body, and went toward the front door.

Just as she decided that there was no way to turn the handle without setting down the rug, the sound of the truck's pump cut off and seconds later, there was a knock at her door. "Come in," she called.

She stood back just in time to avoid the soiled carpet jamming into her body as the truck driver opened the door.

"Here." He held out a bill of lading to her. Eager to be away from this house of sorrow, he blundered on. "Here's your delivery receipt. The bill will be in the mail." Only then did he notice what was in her hands, the smell and the visible corner telling the tale. "Oh, ma'am. Critters have their place, but they do create some work, don't they?" He held out his hands. "Let me take that outside for you." He looked around. "Okay if I set it on this tree stump out here?"

Without waiting for her approval, he shook the excrement into a dip by the trees, then draping the carpet over a stump. Grabbing a shovel by the porch, he buried the evidence of the cat's treachery. Good deed done, he tipped his hat at the woman in the doorway, anxious to be on his way.

Watching his truck lumber down the lane, Irma slowed her breathing. Didn't help to get too het up. Stuff happened, and you had to deal with it.

She went back inside the house, locking the door behind her. Whether or not it was her imagination, the peculiar odor of cat poop lingered in her nostrils. She needed to do something about that or she'd never rest this evening.

From underneath the kitchen sink, Irma pulled out plastic gloves, the kind that came up almost to her elbows. Many women wore such things every time they did dishes, but Irma scoffed at babying soft skin. Hands were meant to be used.

But not to touch poo. With a roll of paper towels under one arm, a plastic bag and a bottle of spray cleanser in her hand, she attacked the spot of Percy's misdeed. Soon, lemony bleach scents replaced Percy's gift, or at least masked the stench. Knotting the plastic bag after throwing in the plastic gloves and soiled paper towels, she carried the bag out to the dumpster at the end of the driveway. No way was *that* staying in the house.

She'd like to say the same for Percy, but to evict him, she'd have to first catch him. Since he'd never let her touch him, that would be a trick.

With a fresh cup of tea, mint this time, she settled back into the creaking rocking chair, the back-and-forth motion soothing her. She shifted her bony buttocks, trying to push the seat cushion into just the right position. Something crunched. Rising with a groan, she spied the mostly empty plastic pouch of pipe tobacco. Now how had that gotten there? She looked to where Percy lay sleeping in Hubert's recliner. Mystery solved. The miscreant had deposited it on her chair while she was outside taking care of his sins.

Now back to the question of who ordered that fuel?

## Chapter Fourteen

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It hurt to go into the shed. Didn't physically hurt, but it pained her heart to enter the building that had been just Hubert's. It was a stinky, messy place that she'd never bothered cleaning or organizing. Funny how he kept the place, given how picky he was about cleanliness in their house.

But this place felt so foreign to her, like it didn't want her here. Well, she didn't want to enter its doors either. But she needed a place to store her new chainsaw, safe from the elements. There had to be a better solution than using Hubert's shed.

There was. She headed that way.

Near the back of the property was another building, little more than a shed, but with a window and a tight-fitting door. At one time, it was going to be a she-shed, a getaway place for her, but Hubert used it more than she did, putting his touches on it. In the end, while it might have appealed to Hubert, its barren interior didn't invite her to spend time there. She suspected that had been his intention all along. A cot, a table and one lone wooden chair were pretty much it, apart from a divided scrap lumber crate turned on its side as a shelving unit.

Although her husband assured her the structure was rodent proof, Irma had her doubts. Approaching with tentative steps, she noted the long grass worn in a path to the entrance.

Ah, she knew what that was about.

Turning the knob, she opened the door just enough to peek inside. The cot was still there with its sleeping bag and pillow, but it was mussed. Figured. Hubert never made the bed.

During the latter stages of his illness, he hadn't wanted Irma to see how played out he was, denying whenever he nodded off during the day. Opening the door wider, this building explained a lot. Here was the place Hubert sneaked off to when fatigue overcame him, but he didn't want to let on. Here, out of her sight, he could snooze or try to will away the pain.

Atop the overturned crate beside the bed was an orange peel.

Shouldn't it be more withered if it had sat there for almost two months?

It felt wrong to use this place as a storage place for things like a chainsaw, especially when Hubert had enjoyed his time here. She'd need to think of something else.

Backing out, another idea struck. Percy. Hubert had insulated and wired the building. It even had a space heater, she noticed. Going back in, she turned the heater's knob to see if the thing still worked. Before touching it, her hand stilled. It was warm. Was it on a timer, set to turn on at certain times? That was a waste of electricity she could no longer afford. She yanked the plug out of the wall.

She'd have to think about this, see if she could turn it to the lowest setting during winter. After all, she wanted that blasted cat out of her house, especially if it was going to ignore using its litter box. She wanted it gone from her sight, but didn't quite have the heart to freeze Hubert's pet to death. At least not yet.

Back in the house, Irma remained by the door and sniffed. Nope, no offensive cat odor. The danged cat had behaved itself for now. Maybe that accident was a one-off.

From his place on Hubert's recliner, Percy opened one eye to regard Irma with disdain. Deeming her not worth his effort, he gave a puff and returned to sleep.

At least it was another breathing creature in the house. Maybe she'd keep him.



She'd been putting it off, but it couldn't wait forever. Couldn't they leave a body alone in a time of mourning?

No, obviously not. Government, banks, titles office, utility companies, you name it. They all wanted a piece of her flesh, striking her when she felt least up to battling with any of them.

The pile of mail on the edge of the kitchen counter threatened to topple to the floor. Once upon a time she'd handled all of their bills, dealing with each one the day it arrived. Paperwork was a pain, and letting it pile up even more so. But now, the effort it took to even slice open an envelope was took much most days, knowing they demanded her attention, her money, her explanation, proof that she had the right to be here.

Why now when she just needed to be left alone, to cocoon in peace, to lick her wounds in private? Was that too much to ask? How could it be?

Last week she'd braved the stack, picking the two largest envelopes. The first contained a copy of their marriage certificate. It brought a watery smile to her face, remembering that day, a young, nervous Hubert with his hair all slicked down, and damp armpits. Her, thinking she looked her best in a cream, shin-length shift with mutton sleeves and her hair in stiff ringlets. They thought they were quite the stylish couple that day.

The day after the hellish night, when the ambulance took Hubert's body to the funeral home, Irma drove there to meet with the funeral director. Although he was trying to be kind, his somber platitudes irked her. But the man had some advice born of years of guiding people through this process. He asked if she had a copy of their marriage certificate.

Who kept such things? No one had ever demanded proof they were married. It was obvious, wasn't it?

But the man explained that some institutions might ask for proof that she was the lawful spouse. Sure, there had been a certificate at some time. There must have been. But over the years, and that last, hurried move, it had gone missing, a detail too trivial to bother replacing.

The funeral guy insisted she might need it and he had the forms right there to help her apply for it. He did all the work, only asking that she sign on the bottom. No fool, Irma read over the document before penning her name.

All these weeks later, it had arrived.

She'd opened the second large, brown envelope. It contained only one sheet of paper. Hubert's death certificate. It fluttered to the floor where it

remained for days. No, she'd done enough for today, although she could not recall how she'd spent the hours. The mail could wait.

This was a tea-and-toast-for-supper kind of day.

Her knitting on her lap, hands loose at her sides, Irma slept in her rocking chair, the warmth of the fireplace lulling her into relaxation. Let her mind drift and forget for just a little while.

The sound of metal on metal jarred her awake. What was that? Almost like a key twisting in the deadbolt. No one had a key but her and Hubert and she'd burned his when she cremated his wallet.

The windows were solid black glass, reflecting the dark night outside. Ken and Lydia had a spare key to her place, but why would they be here this late at night? And why wouldn't they knock like usual?

The grating of the key stopped, and the knob slowly turned.

Irma stood to face whatever came at her.

A young woman entered the room. "Hello, Mother."

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## Chapter Fifteen

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Never show fear. Never show fear. That credo had worked so far in her life, guiding Irma through the toughest things the world could hurl at a body. It had better not fail her now.

Turning away from the door, she schooled her expression to be neutral, feigning more trouble than usual rising from her chair. Better to let this girl think there was no threat to be found in an old lady.

“Hillary.” She left the name rest in the air a few seconds. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to help my dear mother in her time of need.”

“Need? I don’t need the likes of you.” Never had and never will. Ungrateful brat.

“Oh contraire. Bereavement is supposed to be the time when families come together, or so I’ve heard. Not that I know anything about that growing up in *this* household.”

Hillary took a few steps into the cramped, over-crowded living room where nothing was ever thrown away. *Things* were kept; not people. Her eyes darted from familiar object to familiar object until settling on Percy. “Perc, you beautiful boy.” Bending over the recliner, she scooped him into her arms, the cat’s bones melting into the embrace of the person he’d loved so long ago. His purring started, and he nestled his chin into Hillary’s neck.

Stupid cat. Disgusting. Making up to that girl. Where was Hillary when it came time to feed the creature? To wash out his bowls and give him the freshwater he demanded? To clean that despicable mess off the carpet and the floor?

Did the girl think she could simply walk in here and take over like she owns the place? She certainly doesn't. Her name was nowhere near the title or anything else connected to this house.

Yes, that was it. Hillary thought there was something she could capitalize on from Hubert's death. She'd certainly set the kid straight on that one. "What are you doing here?" Irma asked again.

"Why, I'm here to help you, of course," Hilary's eyes wide and innocent. "There are things to do when there's a death."

Oh, there certainly was, but Irma'd handled it all herself, just like she'd taken care of everything else in their lives, pleasant or not. One thing she was good at was doing what must be done.

Irma studied the girl in front of her, the young woman's face mostly hidden behind Percy's purring body, but her eyes watched her mother intently.

Those eyes. No longer the cowed, timid gaze of her youth. Now those eyes mocked her mother.

Did the kid think she was a match for the woman who had raised her? Never in a million years would Hilary find the strength to do what Irma had had to do. What would have happened to this family if Irma had not taken charge?

Obviously, Hilary had no plans to come clean about why she suddenly showed up. No amount of asking would pry those answers from this girl. She'd always had that nasty stubborn streak.

A different tactic was needed.

"Let's start again, Hilary, dear. You startled me, and we got off on the wrong foot." Irma checked to see how this was going over. "Come in, come in, and have a seat. I'll make us some tea and you can catch me up on what's going on in your life." There. That sounded motherly, didn't it?

Hilary's eyes narrowed, but she kept her expression detached as she settled into her father's recliner with Percy nestled in her arms. The blasted cat increased its purring.

Not trying to stifle a groan, and maybe exaggerating it just a bit, Irma lowered herself back into her rocking chair. "Like I said, dear, you startled

me. My hearing is not what it used to be, and I didn't hear a vehicle drive up." Her brow furrowed. "How *did* you get here?"

"I drove. I have an electric car, so that's probably why you didn't hear anything."

Electric. Bah! How Hubert would laugh at such a thing. Stupid, impractical, save-the-planet shenanigans. Totally impractical for this part of the world. It'd never make it through the first snowfall with the kind of ground clearance those things had. Or don't have, is more like it. "Electric, you say?"

"Yes. It's a Nissan Leaf. Less than a year old. I bought a demo model."

"Hmm. You must be doing pretty well for yourself to afford a thing like that." Was she expecting money from *her* to help pay for it? Or some type of inheritance? She'd better not hold her breath waiting, because any money there was was needed to live on and keep up this place.

"I'm doing okay." No thanks to you. The implication hung in the air.

Don't get your back up, Irma told herself. You need to keep in fact-finding mode until you have a better picture of this kid's intentions.

"Good, good. Your father would have been pleased."

"I wouldn't know about that."

So she was going to play it that way, was she? Poor child. Didn't she realize she was no match for her mother? "I'll get that tea going for us." This time she pushed out the groan as she rose to her feet, exaggerating her shuffle as she trod into the kitchen. "Just stay where you are. You must be tired after your long drive." There was no way she wanted the girl snooping around the house while she prepared the tea.

Slipping into well-ingrained patterns of old, mother and daughter pretended they were like any other family, exchanging pointless small talk and gossip about neighbors and changes to their little town. But it was wearying, especially for someone recently adjusting to a house of silence.

Upstairs, the toilet flushed.

Hilary lowered her head, letting her long hair cover her face, but not before Irma caught the smirk.

Brat. Did she find her mother's plumbing problems funny? "That toilet. It's been giving problems. Ken Lamont was over here looking at it the other day, but obviously he didn't fix it. I'll have to talk to him." She stifled a yawn with her hand, but made no attempt to hide the second one.

Standing, Hilary placed Percy on the recliner. “I’d better go bring in my suitcases.”

Suitcases plural? How long was the girl planning on staying?

“Take them into your old room. It’s dusty, but just as you left it. If I’d known you were coming, I’d have aired it out for you.”

“If it’s too dusty, I can use the other room until I get mine cleaned.”

“No!” Did she say that too hastily? “We’ve been using the other room for storage. It’s full. *Don’t* go in there.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

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The morning sun struggled to pierce through the heavy clouds, casting a gloomy pall over the farmhouse. Irma stood at the kitchen window, clutching her coffee mug like a lifeline as she watched Hilary trudge across the yard towards the woodpile. The girl moved with a familiar determination that sent a chill down Irma's spine, so like her father.

"Might as well make herself useful," Irma muttered, ignoring the twinge of guilt that followed. She'd done the right thing, raising the child to see what needed doing and to do it. There was no free lunch. Still, it felt odd to have someone touching her things, items she'd only recently bought in her bid to create an independent life for herself.

But it all came with a toll. She'd barely slept a wink, too aware of another presence in the house, straining to catch any sound from Hilary's room.

Outside, Hilary hefted the chainsaw with practiced ease, a memory not forgotten from spending all those hours with her dad. The sudden roar of the machine made Irma flinch, spilling hot coffee on her hand. She hissed, grabbing a dishrag to mop up the mess.

"Clumsy old fool," she chided herself, glancing at the clock. Only 9:30. The day stretched before her like an endless, desolate road.

By the time Hilary came back in, cheeks flushed from exertion and the cold, Irma had herself under control, a skill she'd honed over the years. She'd had to. Now she stood at the stove, stirring a pot of soup she didn't really want.

"There's coffee if you'd like it," Irma said, not turning around.

"Thanks." Hilary's neutral voice gave nothing away. The scrape of a chair, the clink of a spoon against ceramic. Silence bloomed between them, thick and suffocating.

Irma ladled soup into bowls, her movements stiff and awkward. No harm in playing up the arthritic angle, although she really didn't need to exaggerate it this morning. As she set Hilary's portion down, their eyes met for a brief moment. Irma looked away first, unnerved by the intensity in her daughter's gaze. Years ago, the girl would have kept her eyes averted.

They ate in silence, the only sounds the ticking of the old clock and the occasional slurp of soup. Irma studied Hilary's hands, noting the chip in her nail polish, the faint scar across her knuckles from a childhood accident. Yes, she remembered when that had happened. A switch stroke from a willow branch a little harder than intended; a child's hand attempting to cover the back of her legs.

"So," Hilary said suddenly, making Irma start. "What's in the spare room?"

Irma's spoon clattered against the bowl. "Nothing," she said too quickly. "Just some of your father's old things. No need to go poking around in there."

Hilary's eyebrow arched, a gesture so reminiscent of Hubert that Irma had to look away. "Right," Hilary drawled. "Because that's not suspicious at all."

"Don't you take that tone with me, young lady," Irma snapped, her voice sharp. "This is still my house."

A tense silence fell. Hilary pushed her half-empty bowl away and stood. "I'm going to split some more wood," she announced, heading for the door.

"Hilary," Irma called, surprising herself. Her daughter paused, hand on the doorknob. "I... thank you. For helping."

Something flashed in Hilary's eyes. Regret? Anger? It was gone too quick for Irma to decipher. "Sure, Mom," Hilary said, her tone ambiguous, and then she was gone.



Alone again, Irma sagged in her chair. She glanced at the ceiling toward the spare room. The contents up there weighed on her like a physical thing. How long could she keep Hilary away? How long before the truth came out? Would it be interpreted as a weakness that could be used against her? Or worse?

The afternoon dragged on, mother and daughter orbiting each other like wary planets. Hilary busied herself with outdoor chores, while Irma puttered around the house, dusting shelves untouched since Hubert passed, rearranging knick-knacks that had stood in the same spots for years.

As evening approached, Irma found herself in front of Hubert's old roll-top desk. She ran her fingers over the worn wood, remembering how he'd sit here for hours, poring over seed catalogs or scribbling in his journal. On impulse, she tugged at one of the small drawers.

Locked.

Frowning, Irma tried another, then another. All locked. In all their years together, Hubert had never locked this desk; Irma would not have tolerated that. Why was it locked now?

A floorboard creaked behind her. Irma whirled around to find Hilary standing in the doorway, eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing?" Hilary asked, her voice low and suspicious.

Irma's heart raced. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. For a moment, mother and daughter stared at each other, the air between them crackling with unspoken accusations.

"None of your business what I do in my own house."

The moment passed. Hilary's face smoothed into a neutral mask. "I was thinking of making some dinner," she said, as if nothing had happened. "Any requests?"

Irma shook her head, not trusting her voice. Hilary nodded and retreated to the kitchen. Left alone, Irma sank into Hubert's old chair, her mind whirling. What was in those drawers that she didn't know about? It wasn't locked the last time she opened it, but that was a long time ago.

And why did Hilary look at her like that?

As the smell of frying onions wafted from the kitchen, Irma made a decision. Tonight, after Hilary went to bed, she'd find the key to that desk. Whatever secrets were hidden there, it was time they came to light.

As she sat there, lost in thought, upstairs in the spare room, something stirred in the darkness.

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## Chapter Seventeen

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The next few days passed in a haze of forced politeness and simmering tension. Irma found herself jumping at small noises, her nerves frayed by Hilary's constant presence and the weight of unspoken words between them.

One afternoon, as Irma stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes, she caught a glimpse of Hilary through the window. Her daughter was on her phone, pacing near the old willow tree at the edge of the property. Hilary's face was fiery, her free hand gesticulating wildly as she spoke.

Irma frowned. Who could Hilary be talking to with such intensity? She hadn't mentioned any friends or a significant other. As if sensing her mother's gaze, Hilary suddenly looked up at the house. Their eyes met through the glass, and Hilary's face instantly smoothed into a neutral mask. She waved, a brittle smile on her lips, before turning away and continuing her conversation, now guarded.

Later that evening, as they sat in the living room, Irma knitting yet another pair of gray socks, Hilary scrolling through her phone, Irma couldn't shake her unease.

"Hilary," she began, her voice hesitant. "How... how did you find out about your father?"

Hilary's fingers stilled on her phone screen. She looked up, her eyes unreadable. "Certainly not from you." There was no hiding the bitterness of

her mother's chronic 'never explain, never complain' policy. Her mother still waited for an answer. "Does it matter?"

Irma's hands tightened on her knitting needles. "I suppose not. I just... I didn't expect you to show up like this."

"You mean you didn't want us to know," Hilary said, her voice flat.

The accusation hung in the air between them. Irma opened her mouth to protest, but the words died on her tongue. How could she explain the complexity of her feelings, the exhaustion that had seeped into her bones during Hubert's final months?

"I set up Google alerts," Hilary finally said, breaking the tense silence. "For both you and Dad. I saw the funeral home notice."

Irma winced. She'd argued against that notice, but the funeral director had insisted it was standard procedure. "I see," she murmured.

"Why didn't you call us, Mom?" Hilary's voice cracked slightly, a glimpse of raw hurt beneath her cool exterior. "We had a right to know."

Irma's chest tightened. 'Us'? There was no 'us'. The last time they'd seen Brody, he said Irma and Hubert were dead to him; they had no son. She looked down at her knitting, the familiar pattern suddenly incomprehensible. "I... I didn't want to burden you," she said weakly, knowing how inadequate the excuse sounded.

Hilary scoffed, standing abruptly. "Right. Because that worked out so well last time." She stalked out of the room, leaving Irma alone with her tangled yarn and even more tangled thoughts.

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Later that night, long after Irma had gone to bed, Hilary crept out of the house. She made her way to the old shed, her footsteps crunching softly on the gravel path.

Three sharp raps on the door, followed by two softer ones. A moment later, the door creaked open, revealing Brody's haggard face.

"About time," he grumbled, ushering her inside.

The interior of the shed was dimly lit by a battery-powered lantern. Hilary wrinkled her nose at the musty smell of old magazines and motor oil.

"Sorry," she whispered, settling onto an upturned crate. "I had to wait until I was sure she was asleep."

Brody nodded, running a hand through his unkempt hair. "How's it going in there?"

Hilary sighed. "Slow. She's... she's not what I expected."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. She seems so... fragile. Lost, almost."

Brody's face hardened. "Don't let her fool you. Remember Owen."

The name sent a chill through the small space. Hilary closed her eyes, memories of their older brother flooding back, his crooked smile, the way his whole face lit up when they read to him.

"I know," she said softly. "I haven't forgotten."

"Good," Brody said. He reached into a duffel bag and pulled out a small object. "Because it's time to step things up."

Hilary's eyes widened as she recognized the gray fur. "Is that...?"

Brody nodded grimly. "One of Percy's littermates. Found it on the road by a farm down the road. Looks just like him, doesn't it?"

Hilary swallowed hard. "Brody, I don't know if..."

"We have to push her," Brody interrupted, his voice fierce. "We need to know the truth about Dad. About Owen. No more secrets."

Hilary nodded slowly, trying to ignore the churning in her stomach. "Okay. What's the plan?"

As Brody outlined his idea, neither of them noticed the shadow that passed by the small, grimy window of the shed, a shadow too large to be a cat, too silent to be the wind.

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In the house, Irma tossed and turned in her bed, sleep eluding her. The house creaked and settled around her, each noise magnified in the silence of the night.

She couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Hilary's presence, while ostensibly to help, felt more like an invasion. And those locked drawers in Hubert's desk... what secrets had her husband been keeping?

A brief walk helped, as it always did. Just that few minutes of crisp air, the reminder of the world outside her head.

As she finally drifted off into an uneasy sleep, Irma's last coherent thought was of Owen. His face, contorted in pain, swam before her closed eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered into the darkness. "I'm so sorry."

But in her dreams, Owen's face morphed into Hubert's, then Hilary's, then Brody's. All of them staring at her with accusing eyes, their mouths open, ready to spill secrets.

Outside, the wind picked up, whistling through the eaves of the old farmhouse. And in the shadows of the yard, a figure moved silently towards the back door, a gray bundle cradled in its arms.

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## Chapter Eighteen

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Irma hunched over the kitchen table, her fingers stiff and aching as she gripped the pen. The checkbook before her swam in and out of focus, the numbers refusing to align in her mind. She pulled her cardigan tighter, the chill of the house seeping into her bones despite the layers she wore.

A sudden gust rattled the windows, making Irma flinch. Her pen skittered across the page, leaving an ugly black streak. "Damn it," she muttered, reaching for the bottle of correction fluid.

"It's freezing in here," Hilary's voice cut through the silence, making Irma start again. Her daughter stood in the doorway, arms wrapped around herself, her breath visible in the cold air.

Irma straightened, wincing as her back protested. "The fire's lit in the living room," she said, gesturing vaguely with the pen.

Hilary's eyes narrowed. "Mom, you can't heat the entire house with just the fireplace. What about the furnace?"

The word hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken accusations. Irma looked away, focusing on the smudged numbers in her checkbook. "Your father always handled that," she said softly.

"And you never thought to learn?" Hilary's tone was sharp, cutting. "Cripes, Mom, it's going to be winter soon."

Irma's grip tightened on the pen. "I know that," she snapped. "I just... I haven't been down there in years. There are mice, and—"

"Mice," Hilary repeated flatly. She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Alright, show me. We need to at least look at it."

For a moment, Irma considered refusing. But the chill settling into her joints decided for her. "Fine," she said, pushing herself to her feet.

The basement door creaked ominously as Irma pulled it open. She flicked the light switch, and a single bare bulb flickered to life, casting long shadows down the stairs. The musty smell of damp earth and old cobwebs wafted up, making the nose wrinkle.

As they descended, each step groaning under their weight, memories flooded Irma's mind. Hubert's voice echoing up the stairs as he worked, a constant stream of muttered curses alternating with hoots of triumph. The clang of tools against metal, the smell of oil and coal dust that clung to his clothes.

At the bottom, Irma hesitated, her hand on the railing. The basement stretched out before them, a cavern of shadows and forgotten things. And there, in the center, loomed the furnace.

It was a monstrous thing, all rusted metal and twisting pipes. In the dim light, its vents looked like grasping arms, reaching out into the darkness. Irma shivered, remembering how the thing used to wheeze and groan through the long winter nights, like some slumbering, protesting beast.

Hilary pushed past her, moving closer to examine the furnace.

"Geez," she muttered, running a hand over its pitted surface. "This thing's ancient. How long has it been since it was serviced?"

Irma shook her head, unable to tear her eyes from the furnace. "I don't know. Your father... he always took care of it. Called someone, I think."

"Well, we can't use it like this," Hilary said, her voice echoing in the cavernous space. "It could be dangerous. We need to get a professional in here."

The thought of more expenses made Irma's stomach churn. "I don't know if..."

A thunderous bang from upstairs cut her off. Both women jumped, Irma letting out a small cry of surprise.

"What the hell was that?" Hilary demanded, already moving towards the stairs.



They rushed up, Irma's heart pounding in her chest. In the kitchen, they found the window over the sink blown wide open, the curtains billowing in the wind. On the floor lay the shattered remains of the vase that had held the last of the dried flowers Hubert had collected that fall.

As Hilary moved to close the window and clean up the mess, Irma stood frozen in the doorway. Her eyes flicked to Hubert's desk, its roll-top still firmly closed. For a moment, she could have sworn she saw the shadow of a hand reaching for one of the drawers.

She blinked, and the illusion vanished. What was happening to her brain? But as she watched Hilary sweep up the broken glass, she couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed. The air felt heavier, charged with an energy she couldn't name.

That night, as Irma lay in bed listening to the wind howl outside, every creak and groan of the old house seemed amplified. She pulled the blankets up to her chin, trying to ignore the chill that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Just as she was drifting off, a sound jerked her awake. Footsteps, slow and deliberate, moving down the hall towards her room. Irma's breath caught in her throat, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The footsteps stopped just outside her door. Gathering her courage, Irma threw off the covers and rushed to open it, ready to confront whoever, or whatever, was there.

The hallway was empty, bathed in moonlight from the window at the end. Irma stood there for a long moment, straining her ears for any sound. But there was nothing but the wind and the settling of the old house around her.

As she closed the door and climbed back into bed, Irma felt something was watching her from the shadows. Fanciful, she'd never been. But since becoming a widow, her brain went places she'd never before entertained.

Sleep finally came, filled with uneasy dreams of metal arms reaching out from the walls, trying to pull her into the darkness.

## Chapter Nineteen

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The next morning, Irma stood at the kitchen window, phone pressed to her ear, watching a pair of chickadees squabble over the bird feeder. She nodded absently as the chimney sweep rattled off prices for the firebox insert. “Yes, yes,” she murmured, wincing at the final figure. “I understand. Let me think about it and get back to you.” She’d forgotten that he’d included a quote when he sent the bill for the chimney cleaning, her brain only fixating on the \$400-an-hour the man demanded for his work.

As she hung up, movement caught her eye. Hilary was slipping out the back door, heading towards the old shed with quick, furtive steps. Irma's eyes narrowed. What was her daughter up to now?

She was still staring out the window, lost in thought, when Hilary returned some time later. Her daughter's cheeks were flushed from the cold, her hair tousled by the wind.

“Nice day for a walk,” Irma said, not looking up from where she was now peeling potatoes at the sink.

Hilary paused, then shrugged. “Just needed some air,” careful to maintain the icy politeness between them.

The silence stretched , filled only by the soft scrape of the peeler against potato skin.

Finally, Hilary spoke again. “I was thinking,” she began, her voice trying for casual, “maybe we could go through some of Dad's things today? You know, help you organize a bit.”

Irma's hands stilled. She knew what Hilary was really after – answers, clues, anything to piece together the truth about Hubert's final days, maybe even their days as a family. Part of her wanted to refuse, to guard her secrets close. But another part, a part that ached with the weight of unspoken words, made her nod.

“Alright,” she said softly. “There are some boxes in the spare room we can start with. Let me move things around so we can get at them.”

“No need. I’m sure I can move boxes easier than you can.”

There was nothing for it. Hilary was going to see that room. Maybe if she had days, no weeks, Irma could clean up that old bedroom, organize things, hide things. But in an hour? No way.

It was months since she’d really looked around that room. Mostly, she just opened the door enough to throw in what she wanted to store there. While she attempted to keep the rest of the house semi-presentable, that room contained all the things she couldn’t part with, the things you never knew if you might need one day.

Hoarding, they called it. Irma had enough self-awareness to put a name to it. But what she did was harmless, not like those true hoarders they showed on those television shows Hubert used to laugh at. No way would she ever let her keepsakes spill out into the rest of the house, interfering with their lives. *Her* life, she corrected herself. It had been a few months now, but still her mind slipped into *we* mode, rather than *me*.

This was her house. She could keep it any way she chose. What right did Hilary or anyone else to criticize her? They could keep their opinions to themselves, or get out.

An hour later, she and Hilary sat surrounded by the scraps of Hubert's life. Old fishing lures, faded photographs, birthday cards yellowed with age. Irma found herself lost in memories with each item she touched.

“Oh,” Hilary's voice broke through her reverie. “What are these?”

Irma looked up to see her daughter holding a stack of papers, her eyes widening as she scanned the top sheet. With a jolt of panic, Irma recognized the hospital letterhead.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, snatching the papers from Hilary's hands. “Just old bills.”

But it was too late. Hilary's face hardened, her eyes flashing with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Those weren't just bills, Mom. They were medical records. Dad was a lot sicker than you let on, wasn't he?"

Irma clutched the papers to her chest, feeling as if the room was suddenly airless. "It... it wasn't like that," she stammered. "Your father didn't want—"

"Didn't want what?" Hilary interrupted, her voice rising. "Didn't want us to know? Didn't want medical care? To spend the money? Or was that *your* decision?"

"You don't understand," Irma said, her own anger flaring. "You weren't here. You didn't see what it was like, day after day, watching him suffer..."

"Because you didn't tell us!" Hilary shouted, surging to her feet. "Just like with Owen. You always think you know best that you can handle everything alone. Well, look how that turned out!"

The name hit Irma like a physical blow. She recoiled, the papers slipping from her grasp and scattering across the floor.

"Get out," she whispered, her voice shaking. "Get out of my house."

For a moment, Hilary stood there, chest heaving. Then, without another word, she turned and stormed out, the front door slamming behind her with a force that seemed to shake the entire house.

Irma sank to her knees among the scattered papers, her body wracked with silent sobs, the room cavernous around her, filled with ghosts and accusations and the detritus of decades of life.

Later, as the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the kitchen, Irma stood at the stove, mechanically stirring yet another pot of soup. The house was silent, Hilary having not returned since their confrontation.

A sudden scratching sound made her freeze. It seemed to come from inside the walls, following the path of the old furnace vents. Irma held her breath, listening intently. The sound moved, as if something was crawling through the house's veins.

"Just a mouse," she muttered to herself, trying to ignore the way her hands trembled as she ladled soup into a bowl. "Or the wind. That's all."

But as she ate her solitary meal, she couldn't ignore the feeling of eyes upon her, watching from the shadows.

That night, Irma's dreams were vivid and terrifying. She saw Owen, his face contorted in pain, reaching for her from within the furnace's gaping

maw. His cries echoed through the vents, a horrible, choking sound that seemed to fill the entire house.

She woke with a gasp, her heart pounding so hard she could hear it in her ears. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, a shape at the foot of her bed made her blood run cold. She opened her mouth to scream....

And then she blinked, and it was just Percy's bed, empty and innocent in the moonlight. Irma let out a shaky breath, pressing a hand to her chest. Was she losing it? Had she placed that cat bed on her own bed, or had Percy dragged it there just to irk her?

“Get a hold of yourself, old woman,” she muttered. But as she lay back down, pulling the covers up to her chin, she couldn't free herself from the feeling that something had changed. That in the shadows of the old farmhouse, something was waiting, watching, biding its time.

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## Chapter Twenty

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The aroma of fresh coffee wafted up the stairs, pulling Irma from her fitful sleep. For a moment, she lay still, listening. The house creaked and settled around her, but beneath that familiar symphony, she heard movement in the kitchen below and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted up the stairs.

Hilary was back.

Irma's joints protested as she eased herself out of bed. She pulled on her robe, cinching it tightly against the morning chill. As she descended the stairs, she steeled herself for another confrontation.

But when she entered the kitchen, Hilary merely glanced up from the steaming mug in her hands. "Morning," she said, her tone carefully neutral. "There's coffee if you want some."

Irma nodded, moving to pour herself a cup. The silence stretched between them, taut as a bowstring. Neither mentioned yesterday's fight, as if by mutual, unspoken agreement. That was the way of things in their family.

"I've been looking at that quote from the chimney sweep," Irma said at last, fishing the papers from her robe pocket. She smoothed them on the table, pushing them towards Hilary.

Her daughter's eyes widened as she scanned the breakdown. "Six thousand dollars? Jeezly crow Mom."

The minced oath clawed at Irma's throat and stung her eyes. How many thousands, no millions of times had she heard Hubert utter those words, his version of swearing when the kids were around? Did Hilary say that phrase just to pierce her mother, or had she just internalized that phrase heard often in her childhood?

Hard to read her daughter, this child of her loins, now a stranger. Never let them see they got to you. Clearing her throat, her face impassive, Irma explained, "It's for a wood fireplace insert. Chad left this brochure, too." She slid the glossy pamphlet across the table.

Hilary read aloud, her brow furrowing. "'Studies have shown that as much as 95 percent of the residual heat in a traditional wood fireplace is expelled outside. A wood-burning fireplace insert offers a slower, more efficient burn rate providing up to five hours of uninterrupted heat.'" She looked up. "Well, that sounds better than what we've got now."

Irma nodded, ignoring the "we" part. "Hubert always said an open fireplace loses as much heat as it gives." She stirred her coffee, trying to block out of the memory of him sitting in his recliner, expounding on the pros and cons of their fireplace. "It goes on to say an insert consumes less fuel than an open fireplace like ours, and has heating efficiencies of 80+ percent. Supposedly, we could save money on energy bills."

"That's fine," Hilary said, pushing the brochure away, "but it doesn't solve our main problem. We still need to get the furnace running. This insert would only heat the living room and maybe part of the kitchen."

Irma sighed, her shoulders sagging. "I know. But I don't have the first idea of how to go about fixing the furnace. Your father always handled that sort of thing."

Hilary drummed her fingers on the table, thinking. "What about Abe down at the hardware store? If I remember right, he always seemed to know everything about home repairs, sort of the local guru for home maintenance and repair. Maybe he could point us in the right direction."

An hour later, the bell above the hardware store door jangled as Irma and Hilary entered, the familiar smell of sawdust and metal welcoming them. Abe looked up from behind the counter, his weathered face breaking into a smile.

"Well, if it isn't the Willoughby ladies," he said warmly. "Haven't seen you in ages, Hilary. Glad you're here to help your mother." His grin faded slightly when neither of the woman replied. "What can I do for you today?"

Irma explained their heating situation, showing Abe the quote from Chad. The old shopkeeper nodded thoughtfully, running a hand through his thinning hair.

"I can get you a wood-burning fireplace insert that'll be far more efficient than what you're doing now," he said. "Might even be able to beat Chad's price on the unit itself."

Hilary perked up at this, but Abe held up a hand. "Now, installation's another matter entirely. That's too technical for me, and it has to be done just right by a certified technician. Insurance purposes, you understand."

Irma nodded quickly, not meeting Abe's eyes. She couldn't tell him they had no house insurance; they'd never been able to afford it on Hubert's mechanic salary.

"How much might installation run?" Hilary asked. "And who would you recommend?"

Abe scratched his chin. "Oh, you're looking at a couple grand for installation alone. As for who to use, Chad's Chimneys is the best around. No one knows fireplaces like Chad."

Irma's heart sank. Even buying through Abe would likely cost more than Chad's all-inclusive quote.

"But the fireplace is only part of our problem," Hilary pressed. "We really need to get the main furnace running. Any idea who we could call about that?"

Abe's brow furrowed. "Furnace trouble, eh? That's trickier. Most of the HVAC guys around here are booked solid this time of year. Everybody's scrambling to get their heat going before winter hits full force."

He thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "You know who might be able to help? Old Jim Rawlings. He used to work HVAC before he retired. These days he just tinkers, but he knows those old systems inside and out. Might take a look for you."

Irma frowned. "Jim Rawlings? I don't think I know him." Her eyes met no one's.

"Lives out on County Road 7," Abe said. "Can't miss his place. Got all sorts of old appliances in his front yard. Some folks call it an eyesore, but Jim calls it his 'museum.'" He chuckled. "Tell him I sent you. He might give you a decent rate."

As they left the hardware store, Hilary turned to Irma. "So, what do you think? Should we try this Jim Rawlings character?"



Irma hesitated. The thought of a stranger poking around in the basement made her uneasy. But the alternative, a winter huddled around the fireplace, watching her breath mist in the air, was worse.

“I suppose it couldn't hurt to have him look,” she said slowly. “But let's not make any decisions just yet. I need to be careful with my money.”

Hilary nodded, but Irma could see the questions forming behind her eyes. How bad was their financial situation, really? Hadn't they maintained the furnace all these years?

As they walked back to the car, Irma felt the weight of unspoken truths pressing down on her. Eventually, she knew, the dam would break. All the secrets she'd kept for so long would come spilling out.

But not today, she told herself firmly. Today, they would focus on staying warm. One problem at a time. That was how she'd always managed, and that was how she would continue.

Yet as they drove home, Irma couldn't shake the feeling that time was running out. The old farmhouse loomed on the horizon, its windows dark and accusing. Within its walls, she knew, the past was stirring, ready to rise up and confront her at last.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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Irma stared at the quote in her hand, the numbers swimming before her eyes. Six thousand dollars. The amount seemed to mock her, a constant reminder of how quickly her savings were dwindling. She could hear Abe's voice in her head, explaining how the fireplace insert would save money in the long run, heating efficiently during the shoulder seasons and supplementing the furnace in winter.

But six thousand dollars. It was there in her account, but spending it would leave precious little for emergencies. On the other hand, surviving a winter without proper heating wasn't really an option.

With a deep sigh, Irma reached for the phone. "Hello, Chad? It's Irma Willoughby. I've decided to go ahead with your quote for the fireplace insert. How soon could you install it?"

The following Tuesday, Irma stood at the window, watching Chad's van pull up. Two men climbed out: Chad and a younger man she didn't recognize. They approached the house, struggling with a heavy object between them.

Irma opened the door. "Good morning, Chad. Do you need any help?"

Chad shook his head, his face red with exertion. "Morning, Mrs. Willoughby. We've got it, thanks. This here's my son, William. He's helping

me today.”

William nodded politely, unable to offer his hand as it was occupied with the fireplace insert. Irma stepped back, allowing them to maneuver the bulky object into the living room. They made several more trips, bringing in boxes of parts and setting up a ladder outside to access the chimney.

Hilary wandered in from the kitchen, coffee mug in hand. Her eyes widened as they fell on William. “Oh my God,” she gasped.

William's face broke into a broad grin. “Hilary? Is that you?”

Irma looked between them, confused. “You two know each other?”

Hilary nodded stiffly. “We, uh, went to school together.”

William laughed. “That's putting it mildly. We dated for two years in high school.”

Irma's eyebrows shot up. “You what?” She turned to Hilary. “How come I never knew about this?”

Hilary shrugged, avoiding her mother's gaze. Back then, the less her mother knew about her life, the more likely she could hold on to anything good. “It wasn't a big deal, Mom.”

William's eyebrows raised at that comment.

But Irma's mind whirled. She'd thought she'd maintained tight control over her children's lives. Had Hilary been sneaking out? Lying to them? The thought made her stomach churn. What might the child have disclosed?

As Chad and William began the installation, Irma retreated to the kitchen, needing a moment alone. Her house felt suddenly crowded, invaded. For years, it had been just her and Hubert, and these past few months, just her. The constant chatter and movement was unsettling. Even if people weren't doing anything wrong, they were just there, in her space.

Around noon, she emerged with bowls of soup and fresh bread. “I thought you might like some lunch,” she offered.

Chad's face lit up. “That's mighty kind of you, Mrs. Willoughby. We'd be glad to take a break.”

As they ate, Irma couldn't help but notice the dynamics at play. Hilary barely met William's eyes, while the young man's gaze rarely left her. There was an undercurrent of tension that even Chad seemed to pick up on. He turned his head away, as if pretending not to notice.

“So, Hilary,” William said, breaking the awkward silence, “what have you been up to since graduation? You kind of disappeared on us.”

Hilary shifted uncomfortably. "Oh, you know. College, work. The usual."

College? Had her daughter gone to college?

"Maybe we could grab a coffee sometime?" William pressed. "Catch up properly?"

Before Hilary could respond, Chad interjected. "Say, Mrs. Willoughby, how's that furnace of yours holding up? Hilary mentioned you were having some trouble with it."

Grateful for the change of subject, Irma explained their heating woes. Chad nodded thoughtfully. "I'm not an expert on furnaces, but I could take a look if you'd like. Might be able to give you an idea of what you're dealing with."

"That would be great," Hilary said quickly, jumping at the chance to escape William's probing gaze. "It's down in the basement." Well, duh. What furnace wasn't?

As the group moved towards the basement door, Irma hung back. "I think I'll stay up here and clean up the kitchen. I hate leaving things in a mess," she said. "Let me know what you find."

The moment they disappeared down the stairs, Irma sank into her rocking chair, exhaling heavily. The house felt oppressive, filled with too many people and too many unspoken words.

When they returned, Chad's expression was grim. "I'm afraid that furnace is beyond my skills, Mrs. Willoughby. You're going to need someone with more specialized knowledge. This could be dangerous if not handled properly."

Hilary bit her lip. "What about Jim Rawlings? Abe at the hardware store mentioned him."

Chad nodded. "Old Jim knows his stuff, especially when it comes to these older systems. He's an odd one, but harmless. He's retired, but still does the occasional job that sparks his interest. Might be worth calling him."

As Chad and William packed up their tools, having finished the installation, both relief and anxiety filled Irma in equal measure. The new fireplace insert gleamed in the fading afternoon light, promising warmth and efficiency. Its glow behind the thick glass cheerful. Heat came from the blower fans hidden behind grills underneath the firebox. Cozy and warm.

But the cost... and the furnace still loomed as a problem to be solved, one that would require even more money.

Seated across from her, Hilary tapped away on her laptop. Although Irma'd had to get used to the incessant drone of the television during her decades with Hubert, in the last month or so, she'd started to appreciate silence. She even gained some appreciation for Hubert's annoyance at the clicking of her knitting needles. That was on a par with Hilary's computer keys. Couldn't they make a silent keyboard?

She couldn't help herself. "What are you constantly doing on that machine?"

Hilary didn't look up. "Working."

"Working? What kind of work are you doing?"

"Writing."

Could the girl speak in more than one-word sentences? "What are you writing?"

Hilary's sigh and eye-roll said far more than her words. "Mother, do you mind? I'm trying to concentrate." She waited a couple of seconds. "If you must know, I'm writing an article for my editor." Now defiance narrowed her eyes. "I have to make a living, you know."

That night, Irma went to bed early, leaving Hilary working on her laptop in front of the new fireplace. The girl seemed to relish in the warmth, but Irma couldn't shake her discomfort. The day had been too full of people, of questions, of reminders of how little control she truly had.

She tossed and turned, sleep eluding her. The expenses weighed heavily on her mind, each imagined dollar draining from her account like water through a sieve. Finally, with a sigh of defeat, she reached for the bottle of sleeping pills on her nightstand. One of Hubert's old prescriptions. She hesitated for a moment before swallowing one. The last time she'd taken one, her dream unsettled her for days.

As she drifted off, Irma's last coherent thought was a vague worry about what the morning might bring.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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HILARY

The new fireplace cast a warm, flickering glow across the living room, shadows dancing on the walls like restless spirits. Hilary paced back and forth, the worn carpet silencing any sounds her sock-clad feet might have made.

She wiggled her toes in the socks that fit like no others, perfectly shaped to her foot, knitted by her mother years ago, the only motherly thing she could ever remember their mother doing for the family.

The house was quiet, almost unnaturally so, with only the occasional pop and crackle from the fire breaking the stillness. She glanced at the clock: 10:23 PM. Her mother had gone to bed over an hour ago, leaving Hilary alone with her thoughts.

Alone. The word echoed in her mind, a familiar companion.

The darkness pressed against the windows, the world beyond the glass a black void, as if she and this room were suspended in space, cut off from everything else. It was a feeling she knew well.

She stopped in front of the fireplace, holding her hands out to the warmth. The heat seeped into her skin, but it couldn't touch the cold core inside her. That chill had been there for as long as she could remember, a legacy of growing up in the Willoughby household.

Her mind drifted to what she could not avoid. "Damn it, William," she muttered, resuming her pacing. "Why did you have to show up now?"

His appearance threw her off-balance. She couldn't afford distractions, not when so much was at stake. Their plan required focus, determination. She couldn't let old feelings cloud her judgment.

But oh, those feelings. Hilary's steps faltered as memories washed over her. William's smile, the way his eyes lit up when he saw her, how safe she felt in his arms. For two years in high school, he had been her escape, her glimpse of what life could be.

Warm. That's how William made her feel. Warm and protected, admired and loved. With him, she was enough, just as she was. The antithesis of life with her mother.

Hilary's jaw clenched as she thought of Irma. All her life, she'd lived under the weight of her mother's expectations, always falling short, never good enough. Every achievement met with a cool nod and a reminder that she could do better. Every failure was a disappointment, but not a surprise.

She remembered the day she'd told her parents about her college plans. The excitement of that acceptance letter bubbling inside her, the future stretching out bright and promising. And then, Irma's cold voice: "Don't expect any help from us. What we have, we need for ourselves."

The memory still stung. Hilary had no idea about the financial tightrope her parents walked. All she saw was selfishness, an unwillingness to give their child a helping hand.

Hilary sank onto the couch, drawing her knees up to her chest. The fire's warmth couldn't reach her here, couldn't thaw the ice in her veins. She'd left town the day after graduation, fleeing the oppressive atmosphere of home, seeking the freedom and opportunity she craved.

But freedom, she'd learned, came with its own price. In all the years since high school, she'd never found another relationship like the one she'd had with William. Never again felt that warmth, that sense of belonging.

And now he wanted to get together. For coffee, he'd said. What harm could there be in that?

Hilary laughed bitterly, the sound swallowed by the quiet room. The harm was in the wanting. In the possibility that coffee could lead to more. That she might start to hope again, to believe in warmth and love and belonging.

She couldn't afford that, not now. Not with everything hanging in the balance. The plan was too important, the stakes too high.

Even so, a traitorous part of her whispered, wouldn't it be nice? To feel that comfort again, even for a moment?

Hilary shook her head, dispelling the thought. No. She couldn't let herself be weak. Couldn't let old dreams and wishful thinking derail everything she'd worked for, they'd worked for, she and Brody. It was their time.

She stood abruptly, moving to the window. Her reflection stared back at her, superimposed over the darkness outside. Who was this woman she'd become? Sometimes, she hardly recognized herself.

But then, had she ever really known who she was? Always trying to meet her mother's impossible standards, then rebelling against them. Always searching for something—care, acceptance, love—that seemed just out of reach.

Hilary pressed her forehead against the cool glass, closing her eyes. The silence of the house pressed in around her, a tangible thing. In this moment, she could almost believe she was the only person left in the world.

But she wasn't. Her mother slept upstairs, blissfully unaware of what was coming. And out there, somewhere in the darkness, was William. A ghost from her past, threatening to complicate her future. And Brody was out there, too; she owed him.

Hilary straightened, squaring her shoulders as she turned back to face the room. The fire had died down, leaving the room in semi-darkness. She moved to add another log, stoking the flames back to life.

As she watched the fire grow, Hilary decided. She would meet William for coffee, be polite, catch up on old times, and then she would walk away. She was not that naive girl anymore, yearning for caring and acceptance. Now she was Hilary Willoughby, and she had a plan to see through.

No matter what it cost her. No matter who it hurt.

The fire crackled, sparks flying up the chimney. Hilary watched them disappear, her face set in determined lines. She had come too far to turn back now. William, her mother, her own traitorous heart. None of it mattered.

Only the plan mattered now.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

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Irma woke slowly, her mind foggy from the sleeping pill. As consciousness returned, she became aware of an odd weight on the bed beside her. She turned, blinking in the pale morning light.

Her breath caught in her throat. There, curled up on a cat bed that certainly hadn't been there when she went to sleep, was a dead cat, its fur matted and muddy, its eyes glassy, staring sightlessly at her.

For a moment, panic threatened to overwhelm her. But then, like a mantra, her father's words echoed in her mind: "Never show fear. Never let them see you flinch." Even old and alone, Irma refused to give in to the urge to scream or run.

She sat up slowly, her heart hammering in her chest. The cat looked disturbingly familiar. It couldn't be... but it looked just like Percy, their beloved gray Persian.

Irma took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. She'd dealt with worse, hadn't she? Growing up poor, facing bullies, weathering life's storms. This was just another challenge to overcome.

"I'll deal with it after some coffee," she muttered to herself, swinging her legs out of bed. Her hands trembled slightly as she pulled on her robe, but she clenched them into fists, willing them to be still.

Descending the stairs, movement caught her eye. There, curled up on Hubert's old recliner, was Percy. Alive. The cat raised its head, regarding her with its usual haughty mix of indifference and expectation of food.

Irma froze, her mind reeling. If Percy was here, then what...? She shook her head, pushing the thought away. Coffee first. Think later.

In the kitchen, she went through the motions of making coffee, the familiar routine helping to steady her nerves. As the rich aroma filled the air, Irma leaned against the counter, her knuckles white as she gripped its edge.

The world is a dog-eat-dog place, and ya gotta be tough. Her father's words, drilled into her since childhood, steeled her resolve. She was Irma Plath-Willoughby. She'd faced poverty, raised children, buried a husband and a child; she could and would handle this.

With a deep breath, Irma collected a large garbage bag from under the sink and a pair of long rubber gloves. She trudged back upstairs, each step heavy but determined.

In her bedroom, she pulled on the gloves and shook out the garbage bag, spreading it wide on the bed. "Don't think," she told herself firmly. "Just do what needs to be done."

Trying not to look too closely, Irma attempted to slide the cat bed and its macabre inhabitant into the bag. It was heavier than she expected, and for a moment, she faltered. But then she remembered her mother, quiet and acquiescent, cleaning her scrapes and lash marks, with tears glimmering in her own eyes, but never standing up for her. Irma had vowed to be stronger.

With a grunt of effort, she maneuvered the whole thing into the bag. She twisted it closed, surprised at its weight. "It's just a cat," she muttered. "No more than carrying a few pieces of firewood."

Double-knotting the bag, Irma carried it downstairs and outside to the dumpster. The morning air was crisp, biting at her skin through her thin robe. Looking around the still, damp yard, Irma couldn't shake the feeling of eyes watching her. Glancing toward Hilary's window, she saw no movement of the closed curtain.

Hoisting the bag into the dumpster, trying not to think about what it contained or how it had gotten into her bedroom, Irma did what needed to be done.

Back inside, she showered quickly, scrubbing her skin as if to wash away the memory of what she'd just done. She dressed in her usual practical

attire and headed back to the kitchen.

By the time Hilary came downstairs, yawning and stretching, Irma sat at the kitchen table. Her checkbook opened before her, she methodically entered and tallied figures, a cup of coffee at her elbow.

"Morning, Mom," Hilary said, heading for the coffeepot.

Irma looked up, her face composed. "Good morning, dear," she replied, her voice steady. "Sleep well?"

As Hilary chattered about her plans for the day, Irma nodded in the right places, all the while thinking about the events of the morning. Something was very wrong. Who had done this? Hilary was the only other person in the house. Would her daughter have it in her to kill a cat? To bring the carcass into their home?

What kind of child had she raised who could do such a cruel thing to an animal, and worse, to her own mother?

Irma sipped her coffee, hiding her expression behind the mug as she watched Hilary move around the kitchen. Who had this young woman become? What level of hatred did she harbor in her heart? How could *anyone* do this to anyone, let alone her mother?

Well, game on, little girl. The audacity of the child to think she could one-up her mother. What was the plan, drive her mother nuts so the old lady had to be put away, then take over her money? Hah. *That* would be a surprise. The girl would inherit debts, a run-down old farmhouse, a battered truck, an ancient car, and little else. That, and memories.

Irma squared her shoulders. She'd weather this storm as she had all the others in her life. Alone, if need be. After all, she'd learned long ago: never complain, never explain. It was the only way to stay strong in a world determined to knock you down.

Leaving the kitchen, she muttered the mantra drilled into her from early childhood. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and ya gotta be tough.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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“So? How’d she react? I didn’t hear any screaming, although the wind in these trees drowns out sounds.”

“She didn’t.” Hilary glanced back at the house, making sure she was out of the view of the kitchen window. She knew from childhood experiences that their mother had eyes in the back of her head. But today they were well hidden.

“She didn’t what? Scream?”

“No, she didn’t scream.” Hilary responded. “She didn’t do anything.”

Brody squinted, looking at his sister out the side of his eyes. “What do you mean? No one finds a dead cat on their bed and does nothing. Not even our mother.”

“Whatever she did, she kept it to herself.”

“You mean she said nothing about it? Did she at least appear rattled?”

“She didn’t mention it. In fact, I wouldn’t have known you’d left it there last night if you didn’t tell me.”

Brody scrubbed a hand over his face. “The broad’s an old lady. Surely something like that would shake her. It’d shake anyone.”

“Not her, apparently.” She held out her hand, displaying its slight tremor. “Just the thought of what you did shook me.” She couldn’t meet his

eyes. "I still don't know how you could do it, how you could even think of such a thing."

"It's not like I stay up at nights thinking of creepy things. It just came to me when I saw the cat on the side of the road and realized how much it looked like Percy. Kinda freaked *me* out, so I thought it would unhinge her, too."

"Yeah, well, not so much."

"Does she think you did it?"

That got Hilary's attention. "Me? Why on earth would she think *I'd* do such a gross thing?" She ignored the quaver in her voice.

"You're the only one in the house with her. Who else would have access? She certainly didn't sleep walk and put it there herself."

This put a whole new spin on the situation. While the plan was foremost in their minds, a ripple of doubt made its way through her gut. All this sounded so right when they were in the city, formulating their strategy. But it was different being on the front line, the face of the assault, the one having to look their mother in the eyes every day.

For the first time, a fissure of resentment passed through her. Originally, she'd felt badly that her brother had to do all the hard work from scheming, to sneaking, and living out in the shed. It seemed like she'd have it easy, all cozy inside the house with nothing to do but gain their mother's trust.

Now, she wondered. Who bore the brunt of their plan? Could she hold up her side of their agreement?

"Brody, look..." Hilary began.

"Oh, no. No, you don't. No way! Don't get soft on me now. When did she ever get soft with us? With Owen? You know what she's done. She deserves everything we're going to throw at her, that and more."

"I know. It's just that I'm seeing another side of her now."

"No!" Brody's yell rent the air, silencing the chipmunks' chatter, making the sparrows take to the air. He softened his voice. "She's playing you, Hil. You know she's a master manipulator, spinning anything to her purposes."

"Yeah, but I'm not so sure that's her anymore." Glancing toward the house, she added, "Maybe there's stuff we didn't know."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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Irma sat at the kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. The house was quiet, with only the faint ticking of the old grandfather clock breaking the silence. She stared into the dark liquid, her mind churning.

How could she have been so foolish? So weak? Irma chided herself for allowing comfort to seep in, for letting her guard down even for a moment. Hilary's presence in the house had lulled her into a false sense of security, and now... this. A dead cat on her bed. A macabre message that couldn't be ignored.

"You're smarter than this, Irma," she muttered to herself, her voice barely above a whisper. "You should have known better."

She took a sip of coffee, grimacing at its bitterness. It matched her mood perfectly. Had this been Hilary's plan all along? To worm her way back into Irma's life, to make her reliant on the young woman's presence? To uncover her secrets?

Irma's jaw clenched. No. She was stronger than that. She'd momentarily succumbed to weakness, yes, but now she knew better. It was time to harden her heart, to stand firm against whatever game Hilary was playing.

She would pretend, of course; she was good at that, very good indeed. She'd act as if nothing had changed, as if she still trusted her daughter. But

beneath that facade, she'd be watching. Always watching.

Irma closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath. In moments like these, she found herself reaching back to her academic past, to the philosophical teachings that had shaped her worldview. Few people knew about her Master's degree in Philosophy. It wasn't something she advertised, but the knowledge, the way of thinking it had instilled in her, had been a source of strength throughout her life.

Now, faced with this bizarre and unsettling situation, she turned to those teachings once again.

Death. That was what this was all about, wasn't it? The dead cat was a message, a reminder of mortality, of the life Hubert had lost. Irma's lips curved in a humorless smile. As if she needed reminding.

The human mind, she mused, is uniquely aware of its own mortality. It's a terrifying concept, really. We spend our entire lives striving to manage this fear, to keep it at bay. Some people throw themselves into work, others into religion. And many, she knew, projected it onto politics, finding a sense of immortality in causes larger than themselves.

Irma remembered reading about how death was once a more accepted part of life. In past generations, people died at home, often in the very beds they shared with family members. Children witnessed it firsthand, unshielded from the harsh realities.

She hadn't done that with her own children, been too soft. Maybe that was where this all stemmed from.

"Previous generations couldn't run from their fear. Instead, they had to learn to manage it," Irma murmured. She'd do no less.

She stood, moving to the window. The sky outside was just beginning to lighten, the first hints of dawn creeping over the horizon. Irma watched as the world slowly came into focus, her mind still churning.

Someone was trying to scare her. Most likely Hilary, though Irma couldn't discount the possibility of other players in this twisted game. But she couldn't let herself become paranoid or frozen by fear. That's exactly what they wanted.

Irma's lips pressed into a thin line. She knew better than to let fear control her. After all, she understood its mechanics better than most, she reminded herself. Memories of her old university training took over, calming her with its logical analysis.

Basically, humans have two brains—the cortex and the limbic system. The cortex, found only in our species, gives us the ability to think, to reason, and to imagine, while the limbic system we inherited from our animal ancestors.

Animals, lacking the cortex necessary for processing abstractions, aren't aware of death as a concept. They panic in the face of immediate danger, yes, but they don't live with the constant, looming awareness of mortality that humans do.

That cortex was feeding threat signals to her right now, big time, provoking her animal-like limbic system into fight, flight or freeze mode.

No good. She was a rational creature, capable of using her cerebral cortex to make sense of what was happening, rather than simply responding in panic. Panic was something she'd never done, not even during their most dire times.

"Use your brain," Irma told herself. "Think this through."

She turned away from the window, pacing the kitchen. The limbic system, in response to threat signals, releases cortisol, the threat chemical. It creates a full-body sense of alarm, that feeling of dread and unease that's so hard to shake. But shake it she would.

Irma paused, bracing her hands on the kitchen counter. She could feel that alarm now, coursing through her body. But understanding its source gave her a measure of control.

Animals, she knew, relax once they escape from a threat. But humans? Humans move on to find another potential danger. It's a never-ending cycle, fueled by our own intelligence.

"Once your cortisol turns on," Irma mused, "the threat feels real. You don't realize you've created it with your own thoughts."

And then the intelligent cortex, ever helpful, tries to assist by finding more information about the perceived threat. It's remarkably good at finding evidence when it looks, confirming our worst fears and perpetuating the cycle of anxiety.

Irma pushed away from the counter, squaring her shoulders. No, she wouldn't fall into that trap. She refused to let fear control her, to dictate her actions. Whoever was behind this, Hilary or someone else, they were counting on her fear, her paranoia. They wanted her off-balance, vulnerable.

"Not going to happen," Irma said firmly, her voice stronger now. She may be older, may be alone, but she was far from helpless. She had faced



challenges before, had weathered storms that would have broken a weaker person. This was just another test, another hurdle to overcome.

She moved back to the table, sitting down once more. Her coffee had gone cold, but she sipped it anyway, still grimacing at the taste. The bitterness grounded her, reminding her of the reality of the moment.

Yes, someone had left a dead cat on her bed. Yes, it was a threatening gesture, designed to unsettle her. But she was Irma Willoughby. She had buried a husband, raised children, faced poverty and hardship. She had earned her Master's degree while working full-time to put herself through university, with no help from anyone.

She was not someone to be trifled with.

Irma's eyes narrowed as she stared into the middle distance. She would play along for now. She would pretend everything was normal, that she suspected nothing. But beneath that calm exterior, she would be planning, watching, preparing.

Let them think they had rattled her. Let them believe their mind games were working. Irma knew better. She understood the mechanics of fear, the interplay between cortex and limbic system. Irma Willoughby could rise above the animal panic, could think clearly even in the face of threat. She'd done it before.

As the first rays of sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, Irma felt a sense of resolve settling over her. Whatever came next, whatever schemes were in motion, she would face them head-on. Not with fear, but with the clear-eyed determination that had carried her through life thus far.

Let the games begin, she thought, a grim smile playing at the corners of her mouth. They have no idea who they're dealing with.

From upstairs came the sounds of feet shuffling in the bathroom.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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The bell above the door chimed as Hilary stepped into the coffee shop, a gust of cool air following her inside. The rich aroma of freshly ground beans enveloped her, mingling with the sweet scent of pastries. Her eyes scanned the room, heart quickening as they landed on William.

He was sitting at a corner table, fingers drumming nervously on the worn wood. The years had been kind to him, Hilary noted. His jawline was sharper, shoulders broader, but his eyes—those warm, honest eyes—were just as she remembered.

“You came,” William said, standing as she approached.

His voice was deeper than she recalled, but that shiver down her spine was nothing new. How often had she felt that just before their hands connected, wondering what a guy like this ever saw in her?

“I did,” Hilary replied, slipping into the chair opposite him. She forced a smile, hoping it masked the turmoil churning inside her.

The server appeared, and Hilary ordered a latte, more for something to do with her hands than any desire for caffeine. As the woman walked away, an awkward silence settled between them.

“So,” William began, his fingers still tapping out that restless rhythm. “How have you been?”

Hilary's mind raced. How to answer that? Should she tell him about the years of struggle, of working multiple jobs just to afford night classes? Of the loneliness that had been her constant companion? Of the anger that had slowly taken root, fueling her determination to succeed, and to make her mother pay?

"I've been... busy," she said instead, wincing internally at the inadequacy of the response. "Finished my degree in journalism."

William's face lit up. "That's fantastic! I always knew you'd do great things. Never could understand why you weren't part of the school newspaper crew."

Because her mother would never have allowed it.

But the genuine pride in William's voice made something twist in Hilary's chest. She remembered this, his unwavering belief in her, his constant support. It had been a balm to her soul back then, a stark contrast to the cold indifference she faced at home.

Their drinks arrived, and Hilary wrapped her hands around the warm mug, inhaling the comforting aroma. She took a sip, the rich flavor blooming on her tongue.

"And you?" she asked, partly out of politeness, partly to shift the focus away from herself. "How have you been?" Married? Kids? She wanted to, but didn't ask those things.

As William talked about his work with his father's business, Hilary found herself studying him. The way his hands moved as he spoke, the little crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. It was all achingly familiar, stirring memories she'd long kept buried.

She remembered stolen moments in the bed of his pickup truck, stargazing and dreaming of their future. The warmth of his embrace after a particularly vicious fight with her mother. The safety she felt in his presence, a feeling she hadn't experienced since.

"Hilary?" William's voice cut through her reverie. "You okay? You seemed miles away for a moment."

Hilary blinked, forcing herself back to the present. "Sorry, just... remembering."

Something softened in William's expression. "Yeah, me too. I do that a lot, but especially since seeing you last week." He cleared his throat, raising his mug to half cover his face. "We had some good times, didn't we?"

The lump in Hilary's throat made it hard to speak. She nodded instead, taking another sip of her latte to buy time.

Part of her longed to reach across the table, to take his hand and never let go. To sink back into that feeling of safety and acceptance, to let herself be loved again. It would be so easy, she thought. William was looking at her the same way he had all those years ago, like she was something precious, something worth cherishing.

But another part of her recoiled at the idea. She'd worked so hard to become strong, to shed the vulnerable girl she'd once been. The girl who'd run away because she couldn't face disappointing her parents. The girl who'd let her mother's bitter words chip away at her self-worth.

And what about Brody? What about their plans? The thought of her brother sent a jolt of guilt through her. They'd promised each other they'd make things right, that they'd show their mother exactly what it felt like to be powerless and afraid.

"Earth to Hilary," William said softly, a hint of concern in his voice. "Where do you keep disappearing to?"

Hilary forced a laugh, the sound brittle even to her own ears. "Sorry, it's just... a lot to process, you know? Seeing you again, after all this time.

William nodded, understanding in his eyes. "I know what you mean. When I saw you at your mom's place... it was like all those years just melted away."

His hand inched across the table, not quite touching hers, but close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his skin. Hilary stared at it, her heart pounding. It would be so easy to close that gap, to lace her fingers with his like she'd done countless times before.

But the memory of her mother's dismissive words, of the crushing disappointment when her dreams were callously brushed aside, rose like a wall between them. The soft, yearning part of her withered in the face of that remembered pain, replaced by a familiar, comforting anger.

Hilary pulled her hand back, curling it around her mug. "It was good to see you, William," she said, already reaching for her purse. "But I should go. I have... things to take care of."

The hurt and confusion in William's eyes made her stomach clench, but she pushed the feeling aside. She couldn't afford to be soft, not now. Not when she was so close to finally settling the score. "Wait," he called. "I don't even have your number."

She pretended not to hear.

As she walked out of the coffee shop, the bell chiming a mocking farewell, Hilary told herself she was doing the right thing. Love was a luxury she couldn't afford, not when revenge was within her grasp. But even as she stepped out into the cool afternoon air, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd just walked away from something precious, something she might never find again.

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## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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“I’ll drive,” Hilary said. Why, she didn’t know, but something in her wanted Irma to see her pride and joy, her car. It sucked that the little girl part of her sought her mother’s approval.

“What are you doing?” Irma frowned at her daughter. “Why did you drive so close to the house? Your tires will leave marks on my lawn. What on God’s green earth possessed you to move your little car from the driveway?”

“I had to charge it.” She felt her mother’s eyes on her as she bent to unplug the charging cord from the side of her car.

“Charge it?” Disdain dripped from her voice. “Using *my* electricity?”

Hilary straightened. “It’s not like there are a lot of other places around here to plug it in.”

“How long have you been stealing electricity from me?”

“I plugged it in last night.”

“It ran all night? Just how long does it take to charge the blasted thing?”

This was the part she didn’t want to get into. “For every hour it’s plugged into a 120 volt outlet, it goes an extra two miles.” If you said it quickly, it didn’t sound so bad. As a journalist, she felt bound to disclose the full truth. “Two-and-a-half days for a full charge.”

Irma's scowl said it all. "Your father would have a lot to say about that. But you have gasoline back-up in that thing, surely."

Hilary shook her head. "It's a fully EV."

"EV? As if everyone's supposed to know what that means."

"It stands for electric vehicle. It's fully electric."

"I'm not getting in that thing. What if it leaves us stranded somewhere because it decides to run out of electricity?"

"Mom, it won't. I carry a portable charger that gives it an extra boost if needed."

"Yeah, like a boost of an extra two miles. Girl, have you forgotten that we live in the country?"

"No, mother, I have not forgotten." Like she'd ever let me forget. Why on earth had her parents ever moved to a place like this when her mother forever whined about the inconveniences? "Just get in, okay?"

As Hilary walked by the passenger door, the car gave a beep.

Irma jumped. "What's that? Is this thing going to blow up on us?"

"Mother." Now she remembered the irritation she'd felt as a teenager when her mother said such inane things. "The door just unlocked to let you in."

"Without a key?" Skepticism dripped from her voice.

Reaching over, Hilary opened the door, holding it open for her mother. Sure, no EV was perfect; like everything, they had their flaws, but no bill for filling up at the gas pumps trumped any of the minor inconveniences. And the interior of the car compensated for any small downside.

Irma grunted as she lowered herself into the car. Against her will, her hand caressed the soft leather of the seat.

But Hilary noticed, hiding her smile. The car's dramatic black and red interior pleased her every time she seated herself behind the wheel. She pushed a button on the dashboard, then shifted the car into drive.

Irma grabbed the door's armrest. "We're moving!"

"Kind of hard to drive someplace without moving."

"But I didn't hear the engine start."

"Mom, it's an *electric* vehicle. You won't hear it. It creates no noise pollution or foul gas emissions."

Irma's grip lessened. "Do you know where we're going?"

How like her mother to hate admitting weakness. After her initial surprise about the Nissan Leaf's quiet motor, Irma said no more about her

ride, although Hilary noted her mother's eyes darting to the eight-inch center display panel.

"Yes, I know where we're going. I grew up around here, remember?" Her mother likely had no idea just how well Hilary knew these back roads. She eased onto County Road 7, where Abe from the hardware store said Jim Rawlings lived.

Neither Abe nor Chad the chimney guy knew of a phone number for this Rawlings guy, so there was nothing for it but to drive to his place.

The thing was, this road was the pits, way rougher than her mother's road. Obviously, very few people came down here. If you had a truck, it might be okay, but it challenged her Leaf's ground clearance of just under six inches. She winced as yet again, her little car slammed into a pothole, scraping its way out of it. Hilary glanced at the console's screen, touching a button to bring up more information. The car's traveling distance was for ideal conditions, which meant pavement. Gravel roads ate up more energy, and pushing and pulling itself across uneven ground consumed even more power.

If there was any other alternative, she'd have voted to call in a furnace specialist, but nowhere she found seemed willing to come inspect such an old furnace. Sure, they eagerly volunteered quotes on replacement furnaces, but the look on her mother's face shut that down.

So, 'Old Jim' was their only alternative.

Brody'd asked why she cared. But *he* didn't have to live in that house for who knew how long? Yeah, the fireplace insert helped, but only with the living room. Upstairs, it was absolutely freezing. Ever tried taking a shower when the air temperature didn't even reach 60 degrees? Hilary had tried keeping a bath towel in bed with her, hoping the terry cloth would retain some of her body heat long enough for her to shower and dry off. Nope, didn't work. By the time she climbed out of the shower, the stupid towel had taken on the room's temperature. Even the steam from the shower didn't warm things up enough to prevent shivering in the chilly air.

Wham! The car slammed into another rut. Hilary noticed the smirk on her mother's face. There was something wrong with a woman over 70 who still smirked.

She ignored it, refusing to give the old lady the satisfaction of seeing she'd hurt her daughter yet again. What possessed the needy little girl in her



to want her mother's approval to show off her car? Would she never shake off the bonds of her childhood?

She made sure nothing showed on her face.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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The Nissan Leaf jolted violently as it hit another pothole, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from Irma. Hilary gripped the steering wheel tighter, her knuckles white against the black leather. She'd insisted on driving, hoping to impress her mother with her car's sleek interior, but now she regretted that decision. The rutted dirt road was taking its toll on her prized possession.

"I told you we should have taken my car," Irma muttered, her hand braced against the dashboard. "This... toy of yours isn't built for country roads."

Hilary bit back a retort. She'd been hearing variations of this theme since they'd left the house. First, it had been about using Irma's electricity to charge the car. Now, it was about the car's suitability for rural driving. She couldn't win.

"We're almost there," Hilary said instead, forcing her voice to remain neutral. "Old Jim's place should be just up ahead."

As if on cue, the road narrowed, eventually dwindling into little more than two worn tracks cutting through the overgrown grass. A rusted mailbox came into view, listing to one side like a drunken sentinel. The peeling letters spelling out 'Rawlings' were barely legible.

Hilary steered the car carefully onto what passed for a driveway, wincing at every bump and scrape from below. The yard that opened up before them was a graveyard of mechanical relics. Abandoned vehicles in various states of decay dotted the landscape, interspersed with carcasses of appliance and unidentifiable metal scraps. The grass, where visible, looked as though it had never been acquainted with a lawnmower.

“Good Lord,” Irma breathed, her eyes wide as she took in the scene. “Are you sure you brought us to the right place?”

Hilary nodded, putting the car in park and shutting off the engine. “Unless there's another Jim Rawlings who used to work in heating around here.” She recognized the shell of something similar to the furnace residing in her parent's basement.

As they stepped out of the car, the front door of the unpainted house creaked open. A figure emerged, backlit by the dim interior. Even from a distance, Hilary could see the scowl etched deep into the man's weathered face.

“Hey!” the man bellowed, his voice rough and hostile. “What d'you think you're doing? This is private property!”

Hilary froze, one hand still on the car door. She glanced at her mother, expecting to see fear or at least apprehension. Instead, Irma looked... nervous?

“Jim?” Irma called out, her voice carrying a slight tremor. “It's Irma. Irma Willoughby.”

Her mother *knew* this guy? Why hadn't she let on that this wasn't the first time she'd heard his name? Just another the secret peppering her mother's life.

The man squinted, taking a few steps forward. As recognition dawned, his demeanor changed, his scowl melted away, replaced by an expression of pure wonder.

“Well, I'll be,” he said, his voice noticeably softer. “Irma? Is it really you?”

As Jim approached, Hilary got her first good look at him. He was shorter than she'd expected, with a barrel chest and arms corded with muscle despite his apparent age. His beard was a wild tangle, salted with gray and, bizarrely, what looked like wood chips. As he reached up to smooth it, more chips fell to the ground.

“Jim Rawlings,” Irma said, extending her hand, then looking like she regretted the action. “It's... it's been a while.”

Jim took her hand in both of his, holding it perhaps a moment longer than necessary. His eyes never left Irma's face, drinking in every detail. “That it has. That it has.” His eyes finally slid to Hilary, curiosity evident. “And who's this young lady?”

“This is our daughter, Hilary,” Irma said, her tone uncharacteristically subdued.

Some of the smile faded from Jim's face at the word ‘our’. “Pleasure,” he grunted, giving Hilary a perfunctory nod before turning his attention back to Irma. “So, what brings you out to my neck of the woods? Surely not just to admire the scenery.” He chuckled, gesturing at the cluttered yard, his eyes never leaving Irma's face.

Irma shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. “We're here on business. Our furnace is acting up, and you're the only person anyone recommended who might be able to help.”

Hilary frowned at her mother. Why let the guy know he was the only game in town? That just gave him permission to charge whatever he wanted.

Jim's chest puffed up at the compliment, but there was a softness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. “Is that so? Well, I'd be happy to take a look. For you, Irma, anything.”

Hilary watched the interaction with growing interest. There was clearly history here, more than just an ‘old acquaintance’. The way Jim looked at Irma, it was almost with... longing. Ew, no. That couldn't be right. They were old.

“If you're free, we were hoping you might come by today,” Irma said, her eyes darting everywhere but Jim's face. “The nights are getting colder, and I'd hate to be without heat if this cold snap continues.”

Jim nodded eagerly. “Of course, of course. I'll just grab my tools and follow you in my truck. Wouldn't want you to be cold, Irma.” He turned back around, an important detail snagging his memory. “Can't your husband fix it?” His tone gave nothing away.

For the first time since they'd arrived, Irma met the man's eyes full on. “He died.”

A variety of expressions paraded across Jim's face before he disappeared into his house.

Hilary turned to her mother, eyebrows raised. "Well, that was... interesting."

Irma's cheeks were flushed, and she still wouldn't meet Hilary's glance. "I don't know what you mean."

It was Hilary's turn to give a smirk, far more like her mother's than she'd ever willingly admit. A small thrill of satisfaction ran through her at seeing her usually composed mother flustered. "Oh, I think you do. You and Jim seem to have a history."

Before Irma could respond, Jim emerged from the house, a battered toolbox in hand. "All set," he called, heading towards an ancient pickup truck. As he passed by Irma, he paused, his voice dropping low. "It's good to see you again, Irma. Real good. We should catch up sometime, just the two of us." His gaze slid to Hilary, then back to Irma.

Irma's eyes widened, and she took a small step back. "I... we should get going. Hilary and I will see you at the house. You can follow us."

As they settled back into the car, Hilary couldn't help but push a little more. "So, you and Jim...?"

Irma's eyes flashed with a mixture of emotions Hilary couldn't quite decipher. "Jim Rawlings is... complicated. It's not something I want to discuss, especially not with you."

The sharp tone in Irma's voice was familiar, but there was an undercurrent of something else. Vulnerability, perhaps? It was a side of her mother Hilary had rarely, if ever, seen.

As they pulled out of Jim's driveway, Hilary's mind raced. There was clearly more to her mother's past than she'd ever imagined. The way Jim had looked at Irma, the way Irma had reacted... it hinted at a entire world of secrets and unresolved feelings. Fitting. Those were the stories of her family, all revolving around her mother.

For a moment, Hilary felt a flicker of curiosity about her mother's life before she was born. What other mysteries might lurk in Irma's past? And how might they affect the plans she and Brody had so carefully laid?

For sure, something had shifted. As they bumped and jolted their way back down the rutted road, with Jim's truck following close behind, Hilary struggled to put a name to her feelings. Pleased with herself? No, too tame. Gloating? Maybe. As a journalist making her living with words, she should be able to capture just the right one. But, as with most things regarding her mother, feelings remained unclassifiable.

No matter what you called it, she'd learned something new about her mother, something to hold close. Each tiny tidbit of information needed squirreling away, waiting to be used at the opportune time.

Irma and another man. Who knew?

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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“What’s up with you and that guy?”

“Nothing.” The answer came quickly. “He’s coming to look at my furnace.” Couldn’t the girl leave things alone?

“He was hitting on you.”

Irma scowled. Was the girl mocking her? She made that offensive remark on purpose, just to stir things up. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She turned away. This conversation was over.

As their vehicles came to a rest in front of her house, Irma drew in a breath, glancing back at Jim’s truck. Awkward. She didn’t do awkward. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if Hilary wasn’t here to witness their interactions with that smug look on her face. Was she laughing at her mother?

Jim Rawlings was already out of his truck, doing his own version of a smirk as he watched Hilary string the cord to plug in her car. A glance at the young woman’s face told him to keep his mouth shut; he might live almost a hermit-style life, but he remembered enough about body language to know to say nothing. Wanting to stay on the good side of Irma, he switched his attention to the house. “I see you have a nice little system set up here,” he said, checking out Irma’s log splitter, chainsaw, and neat wood pile.

Irma nodded, not wanting to show her pride. Yeah, it was a small thing, but she was chuffed at what she'd accomplished with the whole fireplace business. Maybe not much to a hands-on guy like Jim, or not even something most people would notice, but it was a big deal to her, and she did it. Sure, she might have taken advice from some people, but still, she'd taken action on her own.

A wise person knew when to listen to the counsel of others. As Josh Billings, the 19<sup>th</sup> century lecturer and humorist, said, "Advice is like castor oil, easy enough to give but dreadful uneasy to take." Who said her university education was a waste if she could pull out little nuggets like that quote?

Hiding her smile, Irma brought her attention back to the present. Small steps, she reminded herself. That's how she'd gotten herself through so many things in life. Glitzy or not, over time, they all added up. Today was just another step.

From the basement came clattering, grating metal on metal, hammering, and muffled curses, the latter so much like Hubert made whenever he worked on the furnace.

Adding some homemade chicken broth, Irma pureed the russet potatoes, celery, and broccoli she'd boiled in the soup pot, adding in roasted mashed garlic, thyme and rosemary, then fresh cream. Once the concoction was smooth and lump-free, she pulled a ziploc bag from the freezer. The paper-towel wrapped contents of crumbled bacon went into the pot.

Once the kids left home, she and Hubert discovered something. Bacon went bad when stored in the fridge for weeks. Who knew? Those greenish bits couldn't be good; Percy confirmed her suspicion when even he turned up his snooty nose at it. From then on, she'd buy a pound of bacon, bake the slices flat on a cookie sheet in the oven until done to perfection. Transferring the cooked slices to paper towels to absorb any excess grease, she'd then bundle the bacon into sealed bags for the freezer, using her hands to break some into bits for uses such as this soup.

After stirring the bacon bits into the soup, she reached in the cupboard for two bowls.

"Aren't you going to invite *him* for lunch?" Hilary asked, pointing her chin toward the basement stairs.



Irma furrowed her brow. “Why would I do that?”

“Because he’s given up his own lunchtime to work on *your* furnace. Because he’s spent almost two hours down in that hell-hole of a basement you have.” She paused, looking at her mother through lowered lashes. “And because you *know* him; he’s an old friend.”

“He is no such thing! Why on earth would you say that? Girl, you do not know what you’re talking about.” Doth the lady protest too much? She shut her mouth, turning to add sour cream and cream cheese into the soup, using the whisk the whole time. As they blended seamlessly into the thickening liquid, she then Gruyère and Monterey Jack she’d grated into the pot.

The toaster popped. She buttered the flawlessly browned bread.

Hilary joined her mother at the counter. Grudgingly, she admitted, “No one could ever make toast like you, Mom. You brown it just right.”

Funny how even that tiny pinch of praise got her in the heart. Or the gut. Wherever it originated from, a lump rose in Irma’s chest cavity. Clearing her throat, she fell back on what had always sustained her—logic and research. “The trick is understanding the science of what you’re doing. You need the right toaster, with the correct positioning of the wires holding the bread in place. In most of these appliances, the wires conduct the heat too well, browning those spots while leaving other areas of the bread still soft.

“Perfect toast required the surface of the bread to be heated to as close to 150 degrees centigrade as possible. The bread’s proteins and starch start the Maillard reaction, creating the brown color and the flavor we want.”

“Geez, Mom, I just made a comment; I didn’t need the textbook version for an answer.”

Ungrateful child. But when did a kid ever realize there was more to their parents than what that the child saw?

“So,” Hilary persisted, “are you going to invite Mr. Rawlings to have lunch with us?”

Irma carefully cut the toast in half diagonally, checking that it fit inside their soup bowls. “As you can see, I only made enough toast for the two of us. I can’t give a guest an ungarnished feed of soup.”

“Moom,” Hilary drew out the name the same way she had as a teenager. “Make more toast,” she ordered. “I’m going to tell him to come eat with us.”

Soon, Hilary's light footsteps came back up the steps, followed by heavier tromps.

"Something smells delicious in here," Jim said.

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## Chapter Thirty

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Keeping her back to the intruders, Irma said, “It’s just soup.” How had it come to her having to explain herself? While the days after Hubert’s death had stretched long and lonely, at least she had the house to herself, answering to no one. Since Hilary arrived, it seemed someone was always questioning her. Maybe Jim made what he thought was an innocent comment, still it irked.

Ladling the creamy mix, she carefully centered a triangle of buttered toast in the middle of each steaming bowl. Not meeting anyone’s eyes, she placed a bowl on the plate at each of the three place settings. No one moved.

“Dig in, dig in,” she ordered. “Can’t let the food get cold.”

“We’re waiting for you, Irma,” Jim said.

Hilary, though, picked up her spoon.

“I’ll be right there.” From the fridge Irma pulled another bowl of shredded cheese, this time mozzarella, as well as a smaller bowl of chopped chives. Placing them in the middle of the table, she added, “Put whatever you want on top of your soup.”

Jim recognized her tone, and obeyed, adding more cheese, spreading it on his toast. With a satisfying crunch, he dug his spoon into a corner of the toast, creating a mini tidal wave in to bowl. “Sorry.” Using his finger, he

mopped up the mess he'd made, bringing the finger to his lips until no evidence of his misdeed remained.

Irma ignored both him and Hilary as she ate.

"So, Mr. Rawlings. What do you think of the furnace?"

"I'll get it going. It needs some work, but it shows that someone at least paid some attention to it these last years. Not easy to keep an old thing like that working."

No one took him up on his conversation, so he continued. "That thing has got to be going on 60 years old." He grinned at Irma. "Almost as old as you and me, eh, old girl?" He ignored the silence after a few seconds. "You'd never find a modern furnace lasting that long. The ones you buy these days, you're lucky if they keep running even ten years. It's a part thing, you know. It's possible to fix 'em, oh yes, but trying to get in the parts is the catch. They just don't make them, or if they do, it can end up costing you half the price of buying a new furnace. So that's what young people do; no patience, no ingenuity. They want it fixed now, and they want someone else to do it for them. Don't know what's going to happen to this country if we lose the ability to fix things."

Jim cleared his throat, glancing between the two women. "I see you got your fuel tank filled. Good move."

She gave a brief nod without looking up.

Yeah, that fuel tank. She still did not know who made the call to order it. But if Jim wanted to assume she'd had the foresight to do it, she'd take it.

"That's good because I'll have this ready to try out this afternoon, if all goes well."

Hilary looked up with a smile.

Jim held up his hand. "Don't get your hopes too high yet, young lady. With mechanisms as old as this one, you never know what you'll get into. But, since you said it ran last winter, a cleaning and sprucing things up might be enough to bring it to life again this winter."

"That's good," Hilary said. "It's getting cold in here, especially at night."

"It's not too bad in here right now." He looked around the kitchen. "I kind of thought you might have a wood stove here in the kitchen."

Irma didn't think that called for a response.

"We got an inset put into the fireplace in the living room and use the wood for that."

We? What kind of ‘we’ did the girl mean? *She* didn’t make the calls to order it, or pay for the thing, plus the installation. *She* didn’t pay for the log-splitter or chain saw. True, the kid had run them a few times, but there was no ‘we’ business in this.

“Good girl to help your momma. It’s not always easy for someone on their own. Family needs to stick together.” He gave a glance at Irma from under bushy brows. “Friends, too.”

Later that evening, Irma removed the blanket from her knees and the shawl from her shoulders, noticing that Hilary had already done the same. They’d gotten used to bundling up once the sun set, despite the heat radiating from the fireplace.

Now, despite the slightly dusty scent in the air, the old house was warm, or at least as warm as a place with sawdust shavings for insulation could get. Tonight’s fireplace glow was more for comfort than a necessity.

“You weren’t very nice to Mr. Rawlings,” Hilary said.

Irma raised her eyebrows at her daughter, barely glancing up from her knitting.

“Want to tell me about him?”

No comment.

She persisted. “Did Dad know about him?”

That brought a scowl. “Of course, your father knew him! We lived here for twenty years and knew the same people.” Well, that was mostly true, but the rest was none of her daughter’s business.

“More secrets, Mom?”

“Not every aspect of my life is your concern.” She narrowed her eyes. “There’s lots I don’t know about *your* life, things you never cared to share with your father and I.”

“What do you want to know, Mom? How I survived on my own at age 18? How I could make it through college with no help from you? Or how I managed to grow up in this household intact?”

Irma ignored the seething young woman on the other side of the fireplace.

“Okay, Mom, let’s play Truth or Dare. I’ll go first.” Her chin jutted out. “Why’d you kill Owen?”

## Chapter Thirty-One

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Irma dropped a stitch. That never happened to her; she could knit with her eyes closed.

“Never let them see you flinch”. Those words from her father echoed in her brain. Mining the well of inner resources she’d thought had run dry long ago, she schooled her expression to show none of the turmoil inside her.

She finished the row she was on.

Folding the three needles together, she placed them and the partially finished sock into her knitting bag, folding the top over so no dust would get in and cling to her wool. Not that it mattered; Hubert was no longer here to wear the socks once she finished them.

So why was she still working on the pair? Habit. Seeing what she started through to the end, a well-honed habit that had gotten her through many a rough patch.

Hah! Rough patch. Just how often had her life been upheaved?

Using her hands, she pushed herself up from her rocking chair, standing in place for a second to ensure she had her balance. Wouldn’t do to wobble now.

Without even glancing toward the glare her daughter leveled at her, Irma swallowed to make sure her voice would not let her down. “Good night,” she said with as much dignity as she could muster, and left the

room. Gripping the handrail tightly to mask her trembling hand, she went up the stairs with slow, measured steps, keeping her head high as she felt Hilary's eyes boring into her back.

Irma lay in bed, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, tracing the familiar patterns of shadows cast by the moonlight filtering through her curtains. The house was quiet now, but her mind was a cacophony of thoughts and emotions she couldn't silence.

"Why'd you kill Owen?"

Hilary's words echoed in her head, each repetition a dagger to her heart. How could her own daughter think her capable of such a monstrous act? Irma closed her eyes, willing the tears not to fall. She wouldn't cry. Crying was a weakness, and she had learned long ago never to show weakness.

But here, in the solitude of her bedroom, the carefully constructed walls began to crumble. The anguish she had suppressed in front of Hilary now threatened to overwhelm her. Tears she didn't know she still had dripped down the sides of her face, wetting the pillowcase.

Owen. Her firstborn. Her beautiful, troubled, suffering boy.

Irma's hand instinctively reached for the empty space beside her, where Hubert should have been. He would have known what to say, how to comfort her. But Hubert was gone, and she was alone with her grief and her memories.

She remembered the day Owen was born, how tiny and perfect he had seemed. They had so looked forward to his first steps, his first words, the proud smile on his face when he brought home his first A, or hit a home run.

But none of things happened. Ever.

Where had it all gone wrong? When had the sweet little boy they'd anticipated turned into the tortured child he'd become?

Irma's mind drifted back to the agonizing day-and-a-half of labor as she fought to bring their baby into this world. Then the pain and pressure were over and the medical staff relaxed as Owen made his entrance into the world. Then hushed words, quick glances over their shoulders at her, and worst of all, no crying from the infant.

The excitement of welcoming her firstborn had quickly turned to fear and confusion as the doctors explained his condition. Cerebral palsy - the words had seemed foreign and terrifying then. She remembered holding her

tiny, fragile boy, marveling at his perfection even as she grappled with the reality of the challenges that lay ahead.

Memories flooded her mind: the countless doctor's appointments, the sleepless nights, the struggle to communicate with a child who couldn't speak, to guess at his needs and decipher his wants. Owen's life had been one of dependency and pain, yet he had brought so much love and meaning to their family. She recalled his bright eyes, always so expressive, the way his face would light up when she entered the room. He may never have taken a step or uttered a word, but Owen had taught them all about resilience, about finding joy in the smallest moments.

The ache in her chest intensified as she thought about the years of care, the hopes and dreams adjusted, the fierce love that had driven her to do everything in her power to give Owen the best life possible. How could Hilary think, even for a moment, that she would have ended that precious life? The very idea was a betrayal of everything they had lived through as a family.

Irma's hands clenched in the darkness. She had spent years fighting for Owen - fighting insurance companies, fighting for accommodations, fighting against a world that often overlooked or undervalued children like him. She had been his voice, his advocate, his constant protector. And now, to be accused of being his murderer... the pain was almost unbearable.

She thought of Hilary and Brody, growing up in the shadow of their brother's needs. Had she done enough to make them feel equally loved, equally important? Had the demands of caring for Owen unknowingly created resentment in her other children? Guilt and self-doubt gnawed at her. But what was she supposed to do? Those children walked and talked, were going to make their way in this world. But Owen couldn't and never would. He needed her.

As she lay there, Irma realized Owen's death had left a void that could never be filled. The constant care that had defined her life for so long was gone, leaving her adrift. Perhaps that's why Hilary's accusation cut so deep - it struck at the core of her identity as Owen's mother, protector, and advocate.

In the quiet of her room, Irma allowed herself a moment of grief for the son she had lost, for the years of struggle and love, for the future they would never have. And with that grief came a renewed determination to



mend the relationships with her surviving children, to help them understand the depth of love she held for all of them, Owen included.

Irma's fingers clutched at the bedsheet, her knuckles white with the effort of containing her emotions. She wanted to scream, to rage against the unfairness of it all. But she remained silent, her pain locked away where no one could see it.

As the night wore on, Irma's thoughts drifted to Jim. His presence today had stirred up old memories, feelings she had long since buried. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine a different life, one where Jim was a factor in her world, was still there, partnering with her through life.

But no, she couldn't think like that. That was not her style. When she committed, she committed, no matter how tempted her heart had been to look toward another man.

She had done the right thing, the expected thing. No sense speculating on what-ifs.

All she could do now was face whatever tomorrow might bring, and hope that somehow, someday, no matter how unlikely it seemed, she could mend the broken bonds with her remaining children.

And if not, she would endure, just as she always had.

As dawn began to break, Irma finally drifted into a fitful sleep, her dreams filled with the ghosts of what might have been and fears of what was yet to come.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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Hilary stared at the empty doorway where her mother had disappeared, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. The silence in the room was deafening, broken only by the soft ticking of the antique clock, battling with the deeper tones of the grandfather clock. It had always irked her that the two timekeepers were never in sync.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, her voice trembling with anger. How dare her mother just walk away like that? The woman had the audacity to act offended, as if Hilary's accusation was so beneath her that it didn't even warrant a response.

She paced the living room, her movements sharp and agitated. Now, alone with her thoughts, Hilary's mind raced.

"Why'd you kill Owen?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered. Hilary had expected denial, outrage, maybe even tears. But this... this cold silence? It only confirmed her suspicions.

She remembered Owen, or at least, she remembered the idea of him. A brother who never spoke, never played, never did any of the things brothers

were supposed to do. What she recalled most vividly was the constant attention he garnered, the way her mother's world revolved around him.

Hilary's jaw clenched as she remembered the countless times she'd been told to be quiet, to wait, because Owen napped or needed something. The birthdays overshadowed by Owen's medical appointments, the family outings canceled because he was having a bad day.

And then, one day, he was gone. Just like that. No more Owen, no more wheelchair, no more constant medical equipment cluttering the house. She'd been too young then to question it, but as she grew older, the pieces started to fall into place.

Her mother had always been so capable, so in control. The idea that Owen could have died on her watch without her allowing it seemed impossible to Hilary. No, in her mind, there was only one explanation: Irma had decided Owen was too much work, too much of a burden, and had taken matters into her own hands. It would have been easy; Owen was defenceless.

Hilary's eyes burned with unshed tears of frustration. She'd hoped that confronting her mother would bring some kind of closure, some admission of guilt. Instead, all she ended up with were questions, more anger.

She glanced at the staircase, considering for a moment going up to confront her mother again. But no, that's probably exactly what Irma wanted, a chance to play the victim, to turn the tables on Hilary and make her feel guilty for even asking the question.

"Well, not this time, Mom," Hilary muttered. She wouldn't let her mother's silence manipulate her. She knew the truth, or at least, she believed she did.

As she sank onto the couch, her eyes fell on her mother's abandoned knitting bag. Maybe her mother thought she'd hid it, but Hilary noticed the dropped stitch which stood out like a deformity in an otherwise perfect pattern.

It was so unlike her mother to make a mistake like that. For a moment, Hilary felt a flicker of doubt. Was it possible she'd misjudged the situation?

No, she pushed the thought away. Her mother was a master at maintaining her composure, at presenting a flawless facade to the world. That dropped stitch was just another act, a ploy for sympathy.

Hilary pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over Brody's number. He needed to know about this. They had to move forward with their plan.

Their mother couldn't be allowed to get away with what she'd done, not anymore.

As she typed out a message to her brother, grim determination settle over Hilary. One way or another, she would get the truth out of her mother. And when she did, Irma would finally have to face the consequences of her actions.

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“How’d she react?”

“She didn’t,” Hilary told her brother.

“What do you mean? Did she yell, scream? Look like she wanted to slug you? I know she didn’t cry, because this is our mother, after all.”

“She did nothing. Said nothing.” For some reason, she kept the information about the dropped knitting stitch to herself. Normally she shared everything with Brody, any morsel of a detail could help move their plan forward. But seeing this glimpse of a vulnerable Irma, a woman who could be hurt, maybe *had* been hurt, made her tuck the incident into a corner of her brain. She’d analyze it later.

“You’re saying she sat there like a statue after you accused her of killing our brother?”

“Not quite. She finished her row of knitting, put it away, said ‘goodnight’, then went up to her room.”

Brody’s fists grabbed either side of his hair as he paced the shed. “How can that be? It’s not like you *asked* her if she killed Owen, you asked her *why* she did, since it was already a known fact that she did it. No normal person could not react to something like that.”

“Who said Irma Willoughby is normal?”

The siblings shared a half-smile.

Brody’s analytical mind snapped back into place. “Okay. The gloves are off and she knows you know.”

Hilary nodded, not sure where to go from here.

“We need to keep up the pressure. You’ve wormed your way into the house, you’ve been helpful, and she trusts you, or at least as much as that woman ever trusts anyone. So let’s step things up.”

Not that she disagreed, but how? Her bold move hadn't worked with last night's question. What was left?

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## Chapter Thirty-Three

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Keep on keeping on. Those words from her childhood rattled around in her brain, her mother's mantra. What else was there to do? When her mother had been most upset, she'd cleaned. The house looked its best when the greatest turmoil lodged in their home.

It was a gift. At least that's how Irma chose to think about much of what she'd gleaned from her parents' ways of handling life. So she cleaned, too.

Picking up the feather duster, a warm place in her heart remembered Hubert hating that tool. He believed it just swooshed the dust into other spots, rather than collecting and eliminating it. Still, or maybe because of that, Irma continued to use it.

Approaching Hubert's desk, she brushed the closed roll-top, then moved each picture frame from its perch atop the desk. She froze, the duster falling from her boneless fingers. One picture, one of the few they'd had professionally taken, was altered, damaged beyond recognition. Yes, she and Hubert's smiling faces were still there, as were those of Hilary and Brody, but the center of their lives and the wheelchair they posed around were gone. A black marker had eradicated Owen from the picture and from their lives.

With a hand to her heart, Irma staggered back, reaching for something, anything, to brace against. Her grasping fist found the back of Hubert's

recliner, gripping it, gnarled knuckles stark white against the oxblood leather. With her hands to guide her, Irma felt her way along the back, then the side of the chair, allowing herself to fall into the cushioned seat molded indelibly to Hubert's form.

Slowly, she willed her heartbeat into a more normal rhythm. Old tricks from her youth came flooding back. Transcendental meditation. That one she could get behind, although some of the others from the early 70s eluded her. Primal scream therapy. Didn't make sense back then, and certainly didn't now. But exercises to slow her heart rate and steady her breathing had their uses. Without conscious thought, she pressed a hand to the side of her neck, the pads of her fingers resting on the pulsing artery she found there.

It worked, as it always did. Throughout her adult life, she'd used whatever tips and tricks necessary to calm herself. How could you think, how could you plan, if you didn't allow your rational mind to do its job? Reacting by emotions alone never helped anyone. Only a few, a very few times in her life had she allowed the wants and the feels to take precedence, and look how *that* turned out.

When did this defacing of the photo happen? Surely, she would have noticed it before. Although she had not glanced that way before going upstairs last night, you'd think that something so glaring and horrific would have stood out.

More important than the *when* was the *who*. Who could have done such a thing?

That tiny kernel in the back of her mind, the one that suggested she was crazy, germinated just a bit more. Was it possible that she'd gotten up in the night and done this herself? In an effort to erase her guilt and despair, had she eliminated Owen from that photo, art imitating real life?

Plant both feet firmly on the ground and take one step at a time. *That* had been her guiding principle, with no room for sentimentality, no room for weakness. Did that include mental illness? Did one know when they were losing their mind?

No, that was not her style. At least she'd go to her deathbed believing her sanity to be rock solid.

That left just one other person. There was no one else in this house. Could Hilary have done such a vile thing? The girl purported to love her older brother. What would be the point of expunging his face from the

photo? To get back at her mother? After the girl's accusation last night, you'd think she'd want to scrub away her mother, the murderer, from the family picture, not a beloved brother.

Was her resentment of her mother so intense she'd desecrate the reminder of when they'd had a family of five?

Upstairs, the toilet flushed, then pipes rattled as the shower came on.

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Two could play this game.

Waffles and maple syrup, a childhood favorite of Hilary's. Let her daughter see that Irma remembered, yes she remembered every detail of their family's life together.

Butter, (the real stuff, not that chemically enhanced butter wannabe garbage), sat on the table near the center of Hilary's plate. To the right was a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice with the pulp already strained out. (As a child, Hilary had hated those bits landing on her tongue). Beside the juice glass was a mug ready for the brewing coffee. By the fork's tip was the warmed jug of maple syrup. Satisfied as she surveyed the table, Irma knew the stage was perfectly set. Kill 'em with kindness.

The table required just one more addition, but that could wait until Hilary arrived, tucking in to the breakfast her mother prepared and served.

The floorboard in the doorway between the living and kitchen squeaked the way it always did. Hubert had tried nailing down that board, then screwing it. Finally, he'd removed all his quick fixes, pulling up the board, adding wood filling the uneven surface of the subfloor, and gluing the board back in place, then screwing it down for good measure. Still, it squeaked, but it told Irma the exact moment to plaster a welcoming smile onto her face to greet her daughter.

"Morning, dear. The coffee just finished brewing a few seconds ago." She brought over the carafe, along with a pot of locally produced honey. "Let me pour you some."

Hilary didn't speak.

"Before you can take more than two sips of that caffeine, your waffles and bacon will be ready." She peered through the glass of the oven door.



“Ah, crisp, just the way you like it.” Reaching for the oven mitts, she withdrew the cookie sheet of perfectly cooked bacon, transferring each strip to paper towels. From the warming drawer beneath the oven, she pulled the plate of already cooked waffles, and added the freshest from the waffle iron onto the top of the stack.

When Hilary just sat there, Irma urged, “Dig in, dig in. Eat this while it’s hot.”

For the first time, Hilary raised her eyes to her mother’s. Irma smiled back, hoping it looked sincere, full of warm, motherly love.

Once her daughter had put the choicest pieces from the platters onto her plate, Irma seated herself on the other side of the table, reverting to the places they’d had when their family of four had gathered around for meals.

Satisfied that Hilary concentrated on her meal, Irma reached over to the empty chair beside her, the one mostly tucked under the table, retrieving what she’d stored there.

“Hilary, dear, why’d you do this?” She placed the defaced family photo in her daughter’s direct line of sight.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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Hilary's fork clattered to the table, leaving splatters of dark amber syrup on the scarred wooden table. She looked from the defiled photo to her mother, then back again. A shudder ran through her and she covered her eyes.

"Why did you do this?" Irma repeated, her tone even as if they were discussing what they'd make for lunch.

That shook Hilary from her paralysis. She recoiled, pushing back from the table and the horrendous picture. Standing, she said, "Me? How could you think that *I'd* do such a thing?" She was here to avenge Owen, not to mar his memory.

Irma's voice remained placid. "Because, dear, there are only two of us here, and I know it wasn't me."

Hilary's head twisted side to side the whole time her mother spoke. Her hands went up to block the image from her sight. "No way. No way I would *ever* do something like that to Owen. *I'm* not the one who hurt him."

That dug the knife in. Irma couldn't stop herself. "Do you take schadenfreude in my suffering? Is that what this is about?"

That jarred Hilary from her stupor. "How do you know about schadenfreude?"

Her mother laughed, although there was no mirth in it. "You young people think you have the corner on knowledge."

Pushing aside that jab, Irma continued. "Here's the way I see it. This picture was fine yesterday. Now it's ruined today. There is no one else here that could have done this, and just last night, you brought up Owen." She tilted her head to the right. "See where I'm going with this, dear? How else could you explain this happening?"

Hilary's shocked stillness morphed into the expression of a rabbit sensing the predator's breath the back of her neck. Her eyes darted from the kitchen table out the window toward the old shed barely visible through the trees.

Irma knew those expressions flitting across her daughter's face. Hilary had always been a terrible liar, only marginally better when she covered for her little brother.

"No, that's going too far," Hilary whispered.

"I would have to agree with you on that," Irma said. "Do you hate me that much that you would harm one of the few memories I have of your brother smiling?" She let that hang in the air for a minute. "If you harbor that much antagonism, why are you even here?"

Whirling, Hilary ran from the kitchen, shoving her feet into the boots on the mat beside the front door, yanking her coat from the peg. Then she was out the door, into the chilly morning air.

A few of the brain cells still operating after the shock got their synapses firing, and instead of marching straight to the shed, she headed the opposite way around the house, into the woods. She'd circle back from the other side, away from her mother's prying eyes, and hopefully find Brody in the shed.

"Hey, sis, did you bring me some of that breakfast? I can smell it on you. Been years since I had Mom's waffles. At least not *everything* about the old gal is lousy. She can make pancakes and waffles." His expression changed. "Looks like your sucking up is working if she'd go to that much effort for you. Before you showed up, she only ever had toast and coffee for breakfast, if that."

"How could you?"

Brody lay on his back on the cot, casually peeling a mandarine orange, most of the peel tumbling from the bed covers onto the floor. "How could I what? Long for waffles? Did you forget that while you're warm and cozy in that house with meals prepared for you, I'm making do in this freezing shack, scrounging what I can for food?"

“Give me a break.” Nope, not this time. She was not getting hooked into feeling sorry for her brother. She watched in disgust as a fresh orange peel joined the old shriveled ones in a pile by the side of the bed. “Don’t you ever clean up after yourself? You’re going to attract mice.”

“Citrus is a natural rodent deterrent.”

Hilary rolled her eyes, then fisted her hands on her hips. “How could you do that to Owen’s picture? That’s sick, just sick.”

“And you don’t think killing him wasn’t sick?” Brody stood, his face in his sister’s.

The older sibling backed down. “Look, Brody, what if we got this wrong? What if there’s some other explanation? Mom was genuinely choked about someone ruining that picture.”

“How could you tell with that iron woman? Anyone who could kill her own kid doesn’t have feelings, at least not normal ones.”

Hilary’s shoulders sank. “I think we should lay low for a bit. Give me a chance to dig into things a bit more. I feel like there’s something we’re missing.”

“Yeah. Justice.”

“Look, Brody, we have to get this right.”

“Don’t I know it? Justice is a dish best served cold, and we’ve waited a long time for this.”

“But we need to be sure. Remember that saying, ‘...injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’?”

“There you go again, throwing around your sayings, showing off your research with obscure bits of information.” He shook his head in disgust. “You sound like Mom.”

“It’s not obscure. That’s a famous quote by Martin Luther King Jr.” She ignored his last comment.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get sidetracked. We’ve waited years for this opportunity to pay Mother back for everything she did to destroy our family.”

Hilary’s voice got quieter. “That’s just it. I’m not so sure about what she did.”

“She always did have you hoodwinked. Her little darling, who could do no wrong.”

“Cut it out, Brody. I just want to make sure we’re in the right.”

“Here are the facts. Our handicapped brother was there, then he wasn’t. No hospital, no getting hit by a bus, no anything. She simply got tired of looking after him. Then our dad’s suddenly dead, too. Again, no hospitalization, no records of treatment.”

“None that we’ve been able to find. HIPAA is strong about protecting patient records, even more so now than 20 years ago.”

“There isn’t a file I can’t hack into.”

“Then why haven’t you found any information about dad’s medical condition?”

“Because there wasn’t one. He just got old and needed some care. Once again, Mommy dearest wasn’t willing to knock herself out.”

“Maybe...”

“What do you mean, maybe?” Brody was back in her face. “Don’t let that old cow suck you in. We’ve got her right where we want her. Now is *our* time, ours and Owen’s.” Quieter, he added, “...and Dad’s.”

“If she did it, then fine. I’m on board with you. But I want to make sure.”

“How do you think you’re going to do that? Ask her? You already tried that.”

“Let me poke around a bit more. There are stacks of boxes in your old room. She doesn’t want me in there, but I’ll find a way. Something in there may hold the answers we need.” Seeing Brody puffing up, about to explode, she said, “we might even find further ammunition to help us.”

That deflated him somewhat. Over the years, she’d had plenty of experience trying to keep her little brother under control. As a child and teen, it had been expected of her. She drew upon her big sister voice. “In the meantime, tone it down with what you’re doing to her. No more wrecking things, and definitely no more dead animals.”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

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Throwing open the shed door, Hilary stormed out, not caring that slamming the thing against its hinges was childish, or about her brother's curses. Usually, the peacemaker trying to smooth things over, right now she felt no peace inside her.

In fact, right now she didn't think she could stomach being anywhere near her brother or her mother, the only family she had left in this world. She knew these woods surrounding their house well, having worn paths in them during her long years growing up here.

Crashing through the underbrush, twigs snapping beneath her feet, the anger pulsed through her veins, hot and unfamiliar. She'd forgotten how infuriating Brody could be, how stubborn and cold Mom was.

She needed air, air not shared by either of her remaining family members.

The woods swallowed her, muffling the echo of the slammed shed door, and the interactions she'd had that morning with her mother and brother. Hilary's pace slowed as she picked her way over gnarled roots and moss-covered logs. The forest floor was springy underfoot, cushioned by years of fallen leaves.

She inhaled deeply, the scent of damp earth and decomposing foliage filling her lungs, earthy and sweet, with hints of mushrooms and wet bark.

The aroma tugged at something deep in her memory, and she felt her shoulders begin to relax.

Shafts of sunlight filtered through the canopy, painting dappled patterns on the forest floor. Leaves drifted lazily downward, spiraling in the soft breeze. The air was cool against her flushed cheeks, carrying a crisp bite that hinted at frost to come.

A rustling in the underbrush caught her attention. A chipmunk scurried across a fallen log, cheeks bulging with acorns. It paused, regarding her with bright, curious eyes, before disappearing into a hollow. The small creature's presence reminded Hilary of countless childhood afternoons spent exploring these same woods.

She came to a small clearing and sank down onto a flat rock, feeling the lingering warmth of the day's sun. The angry voices in her head began to fade, replaced by the gentle whispering of wind through leaves, a jay's raucous call, and the distant tap-tap-tap of a woodpecker. The rhythm of the forest washed over her, steady and unchanging. It spoke of cycles and seasons, of life continuing regardless of human drama.

Hilary closed her eyes, letting the peacefulness of the woods seep into her bones, as it so often had in this refuge she'd sought in childhood. The knot of anger in her chest loosened, replaced by a bittersweet ache. These woods, this land—it was still home, despite everything.

When she finally stood to head back, the last of her fury had dissipated like morning mist. In its place was a quiet determination. There were hard conversations ahead, but now she felt ready to face them with the calm strength these woods had always given her.

Pushing open the back door, a wave of warm, sweet-tart fragrance enveloped Hilary. The kitchen air was heavy with the scent of apples, fresh, crisp, and slightly floral. It was the smell of fall distilled into its purest form.

Irma was making juice from the bushels of apples she'd picked earlier in the week. Mingling with the apple scents was the homey aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg. Mom must have sprinkled some into the press for flavor, evoking memories of pies cooling on the windowsill and mugs of hot cider on chilly evenings.

The yeasty smell of rising dough suggested that Irma had started a batch of her famous apple bread to use up the excess pulp. Underlying it all was the faint, comforting scent of lemon oil rubbed into the weathered wooden

cabinets and well-worn linoleum, the baseline smells of home that Hilary would recognize anywhere.

It was a smell that wrapped around her like a warm embrace, momentarily pushing aside the tension from earlier and reminding her of simpler times.

Petrichor clung to Hilary's clothes from her walk in the woods, bringing in hints of damp earth and leafy decay.

Underneath the dominant apple aroma, Hilary detected the earthy sweetness of bruised fruit, and the slightly fermented note of apple peels discarded in the compost bin. Irony, like their family. One thing on the outside, but dig deeper and the rot appeared.

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## Chapter Thirty-Six

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“In another two hours, the fresh buns will be out of the oven, ready for lunch,” Irma told her daughter. “I notice you didn’t finish your breakfast.” Her face showed no undercurrents.

“I wasn’t hungry.”

Irma turned her back and rolled her eyes. “Suit yourself, dear. We’ll have soup and buns at noon.”

“Thanks. I’ll, um...” Hilary looked around the room. “Looks like you have things under control here. I have work to do, so I’ll be upstairs.”

Making a show of opening and then shutting her bedroom door, Hilary waited in the upstairs hallway until the sound of steam hissing from the juicer resumed. Irma would be busy for some time. Now was her chance.

Thankful for her thick, hand-knit wool slippers, she silently made her way down to the hall, and slowly turned the doorknob on what had once been Brody’s bedroom.

Hilary eased the door shut behind her, wincing at the soft click of the latch. For a moment, she stood motionless, ears straining for any sign that her mother had heard. Only the distant whir of the apple press reached her, and she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

True, Brody had always kept the place like a pigsty, but he’d been gone from the house for years. Even the essence of him was gone from this room,

buried under the current tangle of boxes and papers.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, the room's chaos came into focus, a lifetime of memories dumped unceremoniously into this single space. Cardboard boxes teetered in precarious stacks, their contents spilling onto the faded carpet. Plastic tubs lined the walls, labels scrawled in her mother's spidery handwriting. "Christmas '92," "Brody's baby clothes," "Tax stuff '80-'85."

Dust motes danced in the thin shafts of light sneaking through the thin curtains. The air was thick with the musty smell of old paper and forgotten things.

Hilary's gaze swept over the clutter, trying to discern some pattern, some clue where to start. A battered filing cabinet stood in one corner, its drawers slightly ajar. Nearby, a stack of old photo albums threatened to topple at the slightest touch.

She moved carefully, stepping over a box of old National Geographics, past a dress form draped with what looked like her mother's wedding gown. Her fingers trailed over dusty surfaces, leaving clear paths in their wake.

A large cardboard box marked "Hubert's stuff" caught her eye. Hilary hesitated only a moment before lifting the lid. Inside was a jumble of items: old tools, a few books, a tarnished watch. She rummaged gently, her hand closing around something smooth and cool.

Pulling it out, she held a faux leather folder. Flipping it open, her breath caught in her throat. There, protected by clear plastic, was a degree certificate. "Bachelor of Science in Engineering," it proclaimed in ornate script. And below that, her father's name: Hubert J. Willoughby.

Hilary stared at the document, her mind reeling. Dad, an engineer? But that was impossible. He'd always been just... Dad. The guy who fixed cars down at Jay's Garage. The man who could barely operate the TV remote, let alone design complex systems.

She sank to the floor, the folder heavy in her hands. It was as if the foundation of her childhood memories suddenly shifted. If Dad was an engineer, why did he work at a menial job with low pay? Why had her parents never mentioned college? What else didn't she know? What other secrets were buried in this room full of forgotten things?

The whirl of the apple press stopped abruptly, and Hilary's head snapped up. She could hear her mother's footsteps moving around the kitchen.

Quickly, she tucked the folder under her arm, and pushed the box back into place.

As she slipped out of the room, carefully closing the door behind her, Hilary's mind raced. The image of that degree certificate burned in her memory, a key to a past she'd never known existed. And she couldn't shake the feeling that it was just the tip of the iceberg.

Being a journalist had its perks; one thing she'd learned was how to research. The National Student Clearing House indeed confirmed that Hubert Willoughby graduated with an honors degree in engineering. Next up would be checking the State Registration Board for Professional Engineers.

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“No, Hilary. I don't care what all the other girls are wearing. *These* are the shoes we can afford, and they're the shoes you will wear.” She could still hear her mother's words in her head. She'd been 15 and wanted so badly to fit in at the new high school.

Memories of when she'd been younger flooded in. “But Mom, why can't I have a birthday party?”

“Because we have enough mouths to feed with the four of us without trying to serve food to a hungry horde of kids. Besides, they'd trample through here, leaving mud everywhere, disrupting our lives.”

And another time. “No, you can't go to Bernadette's birthday party. They'd expect you to bring a gift, and we don't have money for frivolities like that.”

Second-hand clothes, never money for treats or class trips, all the talk about making do. Engineers made decent salaries. Why hadn't Hubert worked in his profession, making their lives easier?

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“Hilary, lunch is ready.” Irma's words drifted up the stairs.

Sliding the degree and its folder under her mattress, Hilary put her phone in her pocket. “Coming, Mom.” She'd eat lunch with her mother;

maybe help her finish canning and clean the kitchen. Get her mother's guard down before she started asking questions.

But first, she had more research to do.

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## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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Homemade soup, and grilled cheese sandwiches stuffed with bacon, mayonnaise and several kinds of cheese - staples from her childhood. Did Mom make this on purpose to get on her good side?

Right now, from Hilary's perspective, everything looked suspicious.

On the side of the kitchen table was Irma's checkbook. Who these days used a checkbook?

"Mom, you know you can see all that stuff online." Hilary nodded toward her mother's papers. "Plus, you could have your bills sent to you electronically and pay them that way. No wasted stamps or paper."

"I'm aware of that." But when every penny mattered, it was better so see them all laid out in front of her. "I've always done it this way, and I prefer it." End of story. She gathered the bills into a pile, closing the checkbook and setting it atop the pile. Later. She'd struggle with this later when she had privacy.

Irma blew gently on her spoonful of tomato soup, savoring the warmth that spread through her fingers from the ceramic bowl. Across the kitchen table, Hilary picked at her grilled cheese, separating the bacon from the sandwich

with disinterest. The girl had been quiet since coming downstairs, eyes darting to Irma when she thought her mother wasn't looking.

A gurgling noise from the basement interrupted Irma's thoughts. She cocked her head, listening. There it was again, a sound like water struggling through a narrow pipe.

"You hear that?" she asked, lowering her spoon.

Hilary nodded, her brow furrowing. "What is it?"

"Furnace, I imagine." Irma pushed her chair back, joints creaking as she stood. The linoleum was cold under her stockinged feet as she moved to the basement door, pressing her ear against its worn surface.

The gurgling intensified, followed by a high-pitched hiss that made the hairs on the back of Irma's neck stand up. It sounded like the furnace was gasping for air, desperately trying to suck in fuel that wasn't there.

"That doesn't sound good," Hilary said, coming to stand beside her.

Irma shook her head, a knot of worry forming in her stomach. "No, it surely doesn't."

They stood there, listening as the furnace sputtered and coughed, each failed ignition sending a jolt through Irma's chest. She'd heard these sounds before, years ago, when Hubert had...

A final, wheezing gasp echoed from below, followed by an ominous silence.

"Mom?" Hilary's voice was uncertain, tinged with a fear Irma hadn't heard since she was a little girl afraid of thunderstorms.

Irma moved to the kitchen window, pushing aside the yellowing lace curtain she'd made decades ago. Outside, fat snowflakes began falling, stark white against the gathering gloom. The barren branches of the old oak swayed in a strengthening wind, and Irma could almost feel the temperature dropping.

"We're going to need that furnace," she muttered, more to herself than to Hilary.

"Can't we just call a repairman?" Hilary asked, rubbing her arms as if she could already feel the cold creeping in.

Irma turned, studying her daughter's face. So much like Hubert's, especially around the eyes. "This late on a Friday afternoon? With snow coming in? We'd be lucky if anyone showed up before Monday."

She moved back to the table, her soup now cool, coagulating and unappetizing. The kitchen suddenly felt too small, too quiet without the

familiar hum of the furnace. Irma could feel the weight of unspoken words, of secrets kept for decades, pressing down on her.

"I need you to drive over to Jim Rawlings' place," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "Ask him if he'd come take a look."

Hilary's face scrunched up in that way it did when she was a teenager, about to argue. "Old Jim? Mom, he's weird. He got the furnace going once, and I'm sure that was no fun for him. Why would he even bother coming out here again?"

Because he owes us, Irma thought. Because of what happened that summer, what your father did. What we all did.

But she couldn't say any of that. Instead, she met Hilary's gaze, injecting as much authority into her voice as she could muster. "He'll come. Just tell him Irma Willoughby needs help with her furnace."

Hilary opened her mouth as if to protest, then closed it again.

"Take my car," said Irma. She didn't trust Hilary's flimsy little thing, especially if it started snowing in earnest.

Hilary nodded, grabbing the keys from the hook by the door.

As the screen door slammed behind her daughter, Irma sank back into her chair. The house creaked and settled around her, already seeming colder. She could picture Hilary driving down the rutted driveway, tires crunching over the newly fallen snow, headlights cutting through the gathering darkness.

Irma's gaze drifted to the basement door. She should go down and look herself. But the thought of descending those stairs, of facing the silent furnace and whatever else the cellar might hold, made her chest tighten.

Instead, she pushed herself up and began clearing the table. The clink of dishes and the rush of water from the faucet filled the silence, giving her hands something to do while her mind raced.

Jim would come. She was sure of that. But what would he say? How much would Hilary pick up on? The girl was sharp, always had been. Just like her father.

Irma's hands stilled in the soapy water. Hubert. God, she missed him. Missed his humor, his steady presence, the way he could fix anything with those clever hands of his. If he were here, he'd already be down in the basement, toolbox in hand, muttering about fuel lines and filters and what have you. Life just worked when his steadying presence was around.

But he wasn't here. And now their carefully constructed life threatened to unravel, one loose thread at a time.

So many half-truths. So many secrets.

How did you unkeep a secret?

A gust of wind rattled the kitchen window, and Irma shivered. She dried her hands on a dishtowel, then moved to the living room to stoke the fire. As she added another log, watching the flames leap higher, she sent up a silent prayer.

Let Jim fix the furnace quickly. Let Hilary not ask too many questions. Let the past stay buried, like the secrets hidden in that upstairs room.

Another blast of cold air found its way through some unseen crack. Winter was coming, in more ways than one, and she wasn't sure they were prepared for the storm.

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## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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Hilary eased the old Buick out of the driveway, feeling the familiar resistance of the steering wheel. The car was a behemoth compared to her Nissan Leaf, but she had to admit it felt more reassuring as the snowflakes became bigger and fell faster, coating the car's hood and covering the road.

The windshield wipers squeaked across the glass, struggling to keep up with the thickening flurries. Hilary leaned forward, squinting through the swirling white. The headlights cut a weak path through the gathering darkness, illuminating the falling snow in hypnotic patterns.

As she turned onto the main road the car's tires crunched over loose gravel. She used the term "road" loosely. The Buick shimmied slightly, and Hilary tightened her grip on the wheel. It felt like driving on marbles, each turn threatening to send the heavy car sliding.

Memories of her teenage years surfaced unbidden. How she'd begged her parents for a car, or even just driving lessons. But they'd always dismissed it as frivolous. "A waste of gas," they'd say, as if that explained everything. Now, navigating these treacherous back roads, she wished she'd had more practice.

The snow fell faster now, already beginning to stick to the roadside. Hilary flicked on the defroster, fighting back a surge of claustrophobia as

the windows fogged up. She'd grown up here, but suddenly the landscape seemed alien and threatening.

After what felt like hours but was probably only twenty minutes, she spotted the turnoff to Jim Rawlings' place. The road narrowed abruptly, dwindling to little more than two rutted tracks cutting through overgrown grass. Hilary slowed the Buick to a crawl, wincing at every bump and scrape from beneath the car.

A rusted mailbox loomed out of the gloom, listing drunkenly to one side. She could barely make out the peeling letters spelling "Rawlings" as she passed.

Nope, she hadn't imagined it the first time she'd been here. The yard that opened up before her was like something out of a post-apocalyptic movie. Abandoned vehicles dotted the landscape, their rusted husks barely visible under a growing blanket of snow. Appliances in various states of decay poked through drifts, and unidentifiable metal scraps created eerie silhouettes in the fading light.

Hilary brought the Buick to a stop, the engine's rumble seeming obscenely loud in the muffled quiet of the snowfall. For a moment, she sat there, hands still gripping the wheel. The house, if you could call it that, loomed ahead, a single yellow light glowing in a downstairs window.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the car door. The cold hit her like a physical force, and she tugged her jacket tighter around herself. Her boots crunched in the fresh snow as she made her way towards the house, picking her way carefully through the mechanical graveyard. Her city clothes would not cut it if she'd be here much longer as winter approached.

As she neared the porch, a figure emerged from the shadows. Jim Rawlings' barrel chest and muscled arms spoke of a strength belying his age. His wild beard was a tangle of gray, but shorter now, trimmed and no longer shaggy. He reached up to smooth it, as if expecting the usual tangled mat.

"Hilary Willoughby," he growled, his voice like gravel. "What brings you out on a afternoon like this?"

Hilary swallowed hard, suddenly aware of how isolated she was. But her mother's words echoed in her mind: He'll come. Just tell him Irma Willoughby needs help with her furnace.

"Mr. Rawlings," she began, her voice sounding thin in the cold air. "It's my mom. Irma Willoughby. She, we need help with our furnace. She

thought... she thought you might be able to look at it?"

Jim's bushy eyebrows drew together, and for a moment, Hilary thought he might refuse. But then he nodded, a strange expression crossing his face.

"Irma's furnace, eh?" he muttered, more to himself than to her. "Alright then. Let me turn off the stove and get my coat. Come in and wait."

As she followed him as he disappeared back into the house, Hilary hugged herself against the cold, watching through the side window as the snow erased her footprints. An aroma caught her attention. Turning toward the wood stove, something simmered on the back burner, scents bringing back childhood memories of her mom's rich, hearty beef stew. Anyone can cook a stew, but how many make the spices just like her mom's? Possibly, she supposed.

Still...Something was up; her journalist instincts screamed at her, along with the feeling that she'd just set something in motion, something bigger than a broken furnace on a snowy night.

But as Jim reappeared, toolbox in hand, she pushed those thoughts aside. Right now, all that mattered was getting home and getting warm. Whatever secrets lay buried in her family's past would have to wait for another day.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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He was quick for an old guy. She'd barely turned off her mom's car when Jim was at her side, opening the car door for her. Chivalry was not dead, although she'd never have pegged Jim Rawlings as a charmer.

The curtain in the front room twitched. Mom must have been watching for them. As she and Jim stomped the snow from their boots on the porch, then entered the front door, Irma stood well back, the fire illuminating her from behind.

Without meeting anyone's eyes, her mother said the right things. "Thank you, Jim for coming. We didn't know who else to ask."

"I'm always the one you can ask, you know that, Irma."

Weird. That was a strange thing to say.

Jim couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her mother. Maybe the old guy had difficulty seeing and refused to wear glasses.

"Sorry your furnace is ailing. Might I ask you to come downstairs with me? I will likely need a hand holding the light if I'm to figure out what's going on."

Irma half-turned away. "Hilary can do that." She left for the kitchen.

Hilary shrugged and descended the cellar stairs behind Jim, her hand trailing along the rough stone wall for balance. The dank chill hit her immediately, seeping through her sweater and raising goosebumps on her

arms. The single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling cast more shadows than light, creating a claustrophobic bubble of visibility, beyond which lurked impenetrable darkness.

The musty smell of old earth and mildew filled her nostrils, mingling unpleasantly with the acrid scent of diesel oil. Hilary wrinkled her nose, fighting the urge to cover her face with her sleeve.

"Watch your step," Jim cautioned, his voice echoing slightly in the confined space. "Floor's uneven down here."

Hilary nodded, then realized he couldn't see her. "Okay," she said, wincing at how small her voice sounded.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Jim set down his toolbox, the metallic clank reverberating through the entire cellar. Hilary's eyes were slowly adjusting to the gloom, and she could make out the hulking shape of the furnace in the center of the room.

"Hold this for me, would you?" Jim handed her a flashlight. Their fingers brushed as she took it, and Hilary was surprised by the warmth of his hand. She flicked the light on, aiming it where Jim indicated.

As he worked, Jim spoke softly, his voice a low rumble that seemed to cut through the cellar's oppressive atmosphere. "So, Hilary, tell me about yourself. What do you do these days?"

The question caught her off guard. When was the last time anyone had asked her that? Really asked, not just as small talk? "Oh, um, I'm a journalist," she said. "I have a base in the city, but I mostly work freelance." Then, before she knew it, more words came out. "I used to work as a librarian assistant."

"A librarian, eh?" Jim's head was buried in the furnace, but his tone was warm, interested. "That must be fascinating work. All those books, all that knowledge at your fingertips."

Hilary found herself smiling. "It is, actually. I loved it. There's always something new to learn. That's the cool thing about journalism, too."

As Jim worked, he gently probed further, asking about her friends, her life in the city. Hilary found herself opening up, surprised by how easy it was to talk to this man she barely knew. There was something about him that felt... familiar. Comfortable.

"You seem happy with what you do," Jim observed, glancing up at her with a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "That's good. It's important to be happy in your work, in your life."

Hilary nodded, a warm feeling spreading through her chest. When was the last time someone had cared whether she was happy?

As Jim moved around the furnace, his own flashlight beam swept across the cellar walls. Hilary caught glimpses of shelves laden with dusty jars, old cardboard boxes stacked haphazardly, and what looked like ancient gardening tools hanging from rusted nails.

"Huh," Jim muttered, frowning at something near the base of the furnace.

"What is it?" Hilary asked, leaning in closer. The smell of diesel was stronger here, making her eyes water slightly.

"The fuel filter's clogged," Jim said, his brow furrowed. "But that doesn't make sense. I changed it just a few weeks ago."

He stood up, stretching his back with a soft groan. "I'm going to need to check the fuel tank. Can you hold the light steady for me?"

Hilary nodded, training the beam where Jim indicated. She watched as he inserted a long, thin rod into what she assumed was the fuel tank. When he pulled it out, the end was coated in a dark, sludgy substance.

Jim's frown deepened. "This isn't right," he muttered, almost to himself. "Last time I was here, there were just some rust flakes. This looks like..." He rubbed the substance between his fingers. "Soil. And decomposed leaves. Almost as if someone had thrown stuff into the tank."

A chill that had nothing to do with the cellar's temperature ran down Hilary's spine. "But that's impossible, right? I mean, who would do that?"

Jim didn't answer immediately. Instead, he moved towards the cellar doors, his flashlight beam sweeping across the old wood. "The latch is unlocked," he said, his voice tight. "I made sure it was locked last time. Warned your mother to keep it that way."

Hilary's mind raced/ Who could have gotten into the cellar? Why would anyone want to sabotage their furnace?

Brody. It had to have been him. But *she* lived here, too. She'd told him how cold the house got. Didn't he care about his sister?

Jim. Why did Jim seem so... concerned? It was more than just worry over a malfunctioning appliance. Did he suspect something more was going on?

As if sensing her unease, Jim turned back to her, his expression softening. "Don't worry," he said gently. "We'll get this sorted out. Your mom and you will be warm again in no time."

There was something in the way he said "your mom and you" that struck Hilary. A note of... what? Protectiveness? She shook her head, trying to clear it. This dank cellar must be getting to her.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it. "For coming out here, for helping. I know it's a lot to ask, especially on a night like this."

Jim's smile was warm, reaching his eyes. "It's no trouble at all, Hilary. I'm glad to help. Always."

As they worked to clean out the fuel filter and tank, Hilary found herself studying Jim surreptitiously. His beard was neatly trimmed now, his hair combed. He'd clearly made an effort to clean up. And the way he moved, sure and confident despite his age, was oddly compelling.

She caught herself thinking he wasn't bad looking for an old man, and immediately felt her cheeks grow warm. What was wrong with her? This was Old Jim Rawlings, the weird hermit her mother had sent her to fetch. And yet...

There was something about him. Something in the set of his jaw, the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. It tugged at her memory, like a word on the tip of her tongue that she couldn't quite recall.

As they finished up, Jim explained what he'd done and what to watch out for. Hilary listened attentively, oddly reluctant for their time in the cellar to end. Despite the cold and the musty air, despite the lingering smell of diesel and the shadows lurking just beyond the light's reach, she felt... safe. Comfortable in a way she hadn't in a long time.

They climbed the stairs back to the kitchen, where Irma waited, her face a mask of forced politeness. Hilary watched as her mother thanked Jim stiffly, still refusing to meet his eyes. There was a tension in the air that hadn't been there before, a weight of unspoken words pressing down on all of them.

As Jim gathered his tools to leave, Hilary felt an inexplicable urge to prolong his stay. "Would you like some coffee before you go?" she blurted out. "It's still snowing pretty hard out there."

Jim's eyes met hers, a flash of something—surprise? pleasure?—crossing his face before he glanced at Irma. "That's kind of you to offer," he said carefully. "But I should be getting back. Maybe another time?"

Hilary nodded, trying to hide her disappointment. "Of course. Drive safely."

As the door closed behind him, Hilary turned to find her mother watching her with an unreadable expression. The kitchen suddenly felt colder, emptier.

"I'm going to bed," Irma announced abruptly. "Lock up, will you?"

As her mother's footsteps faded up the stairs, Hilary stood alone in the kitchen, listening to the renewed hum of the furnace. Something had shifted tonight, some invisible balance tipped.

And as she moved to lock the door, her gaze was drawn to the cellar door. What other secrets lay hidden in the shadows below?

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## Chapter Forty

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Irma pulled the quilt up to her chin, staring at the shadowy ceiling. The house creaked and settled around her, punctuated by the muffled sounds of Hilary moving about downstairs. She knew her daughter was probably confused, maybe even hurt by her abrupt retreat, but Irma couldn't bear to be in the same room as Jim for another moment, nor the memories he brought with him.

Who cared if it was barely past six? She was a grown woman; she could go to bed whenever she damn well pleased.

Closing her eyes, Irma felt the years slip away, memories rising unbidden like bubbles in fizzy water.

She was back in their tiny city duplex, the air thick with the acrid smell of Owen's medications and the underlying scent of bleach she used to keep everything sterile. Outside, the city pulsed with life, but inside their four walls, time seemed to stand still.

Owen was four then, a beautiful boy trapped in a body that refused to cooperate. His big brown eyes followed her around the room as she moved from task to task - changing his diaper, administering medications, coaxing food past his uncooperative lips.

Irma's days blurred together, an endless cycle of care. Physiotherapy exercises three times a day, each session a battle against Owen's rigid

muscles. Doctors' appointments that always seemed to bring more bad news than good. The constant fear of aspiration every time she fed him.

And through it all, the gnawing loneliness. Hubert was rarely home, always at work, chasing the next dollar to cover Owen's mounting medical bills.

Irma turned on her side, clutching a pillow to her chest as the echoes of the past washed over her. The guilt, the longing, the bittersweet ache of what might have been - all came flooding back, as fresh as if it had happened yesterday instead of decades ago.

It began innocently, as such things do. Their furnace broke down. Ordinarily such a thing could wait until Hubert got home, but with the long days he now worked, the passing hours mattered. For Owen, always Owen. His spasticity worsened when he got chilled, and keeping him covered up was an impossibility with his limbs jerking in ever-present spasms.

Hubert advised calling in a furnace repair service; normally, they economized as much as possible with Hubert doing any needed maintenance, but he couldn't get off work to look at their heating system.

When the man with a toolkit arrived, the badge sewn onto his shirt said "Jim". He introduced himself as Jim Rawlings and was as courteous as you'd hope for. The fellow got the furnace running, apologized that it was only a temporary fix. He'd order the needed parts and hopefully be back next week to do the job properly. Unlike most people, he didn't ignore Owen, but smiled at the child, saying they wouldn't want him to get chilled. Somehow, Jim saw past the hypotonia that caused drool to pool in the corner of Owen's mouth, then spill out in a never-ending stream.

True to his word, Jim returned the following week and did more work in the basement with the furnace, working through his lunch hour. It seemed only courteous to offer the man coffee and a sandwich. Conversation was easy and he didn't avoid Owen. That pleasant, extended lunch ended with his promise to check in again to make sure the furnace stayed functioning.

She remembered the day Jim's visits became something more than just friendly check-ins. It was a Tuesday, unremarkable except for the relentless rain that drummed against the windows. Owen was having a particularly rough day, his muscles seizing up more than usual, every movement a struggle.

The doorbell rang just as Irma was finishing Owen's physiotherapy exercises. Her hair was a mess, her clothes rumpled and stained with Owen's lunch, but she didn't care. She knew who it was.

Jim stood on the threshold, rain dripping from his beard, a thermos in one hand and a paper bag in the other. "Thought you could use some reinforcements," he said with that crooked smile that never failed to warm her heart.

The rich aroma of coffee filled the apartment as Jim poured her a cup. He'd brought pastries too - real, honest-to-goodness pastries from the fancy bakery downtown, not the stale donuts from the corner store she usually settled for when she felt they could afford the indulgence.

"You didn't have to do this," Irma protested weakly, even as she sank into a kitchen chair, cradling the steaming mug like a lifeline.

Jim just shrugged, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I wanted to."

They talked as they ate, Jim regaling her with stories from his day, making her laugh in a way she hadn't in months. When had laughter become such a rarity in her life?

As Jim reached for the coffeepot to refill their mugs, his hand brushed against hers. A jolt of electricity shot through Irma, and she jerked back, nearly knocking over her cup.

"Sorry," Jim murmured, his eyes meeting hers. But he didn't look sorry. He looked... hungry. And heaven help her, Irma felt the same yearning stirring in her own chest.

From that day on, their interactions took on a new charge. Every smile, every casual touch, loaded with meaning. Irma found herself looking forward to Jim's visits with thrilling yet terrifying intensity.

It was wrong. She knew it, knew they were tempting fate, but oh, it felt so good to be noticed, to have someone look at her with desire. How long had it been since Hubert had done that?

The fault was not with Hubert. The man worked 14 to 16 hours most weekdays, and often on the weekends as well. Sometimes, a niggling thought would enter her mind. Shouldn't his paycheck reflect those extended hours of labor? She'd shake those suspicious thoughts from her head.

But there was more, like those credit card charges for expensive dinners, and the occasional hotel room. Business expenses, Hubert would

say, entertaining clients, bringing in new business. Of course, that made sense.

Did it?

Was that also why some nights he'd come home wearing different clothes than he'd left the house with that morning? Or why there were ticket stubs in his pockets when he'd never mentioned having to take clients to a show or concert? And what made that lingering scent of perfume on his shirts some days? It definitely didn't come from *her*, although she maybe should consider cologne to cover up the scent of when Owen regurgitated his food onto her.

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## Chapter Forty-One

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Still, she craved adult attention, and someone who could do more than make sounds or grunts at her.

She started taking more care with her appearance, snatching moments to run a brush through her hair or dab on a bit of lipstick before Jim arrived. It was silly, she knew. Jim had seen her at her worst, covered in baby food and utterly exhausted. But still, she wanted to look nice for him.

One afternoon, as summer faded into autumn, Jim arrived unexpectedly. Irma had just put Owen down for his nap, the apartment quiet save for the soft whir of the baby monitor.

"I was in the neighborhood," Jim said by way of explanation, but his eyes told a different story.

They sat on the couch, closer than usual, their knees almost touching. Jim was telling her about a book he'd been reading, something about quantum physics that went way over Irma's head. But she didn't care about the words. The movement of his lips, the passion in his voice, mesmerized her. Shades of her old university days and the discussions swirling around the campus.

"Irma," Jim said softly, breaking off mid-sentence. His hand reached out, gently tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

The touch sent shivers down her spine. Irma knew she should pull away, should say something to break the tension. But she was tired, so tired of being strong, of being alone.

When Jim leaned in, she met him halfway.

The kiss was everything she'd imagined and more. Soft at first, then deepening, years of pent-up longing pouring out in a rush. Jim's hands cupped her face, and Irma found herself clinging to him like a drowning woman to a life raft.

They stumbled to the bedroom, shedding clothes along the way. A small part of Irma's mind screamed at her to stop, but it was drowned out by the roaring in her ears, the desperate need for connection, for touch, for something that was just for her.

Afterward, as they lay tangled in the sheets, reality came crashing back. Irma stared at the ceiling, shame and guilt warring with the lingering afterglow.

"We can't do this again," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Jim propped himself up on one elbow, his eyes searching her face. "Irma..."

She shook her head, cutting him off. "I'm married, Jim. I have a son. This... this was a mistake."

The words tasted like ashes in her mouth, but Irma forced herself to say them. She watched the hurt bloom in Jim's eyes, hating herself for putting it there.

"Is that really how you feel?" Jim asked quietly.

No, Irma wanted to scream. No, this felt more right than anything has in years. But she couldn't say that. Couldn't admit, even to herself, how much she wanted this man.

"It has to be," she said instead, her voice barely audible.

Jim nodded slowly, understanding and resignation etched in the lines of his face. He dressed in silence, pausing at the bedroom door.

"For what it's worth," he said, not quite meeting her eyes, "I think I'm falling in love with you, Irma."

Then he was gone, the soft click of the front door closing like a gunshot in the quiet apartment.

Irma lay there, tears streaming down her face, until Owen's cries from the nursery forced her to move. She went through the motions of caring for her son, her body on autopilot while her mind whirled.

What had she done? How could she have betrayed Hubert like this? Sweet, hardworking Hubert, who was killing himself to provide for their family. The guilt was a physical thing, clawing at her insides.

But beneath the guilt was something else, something she was afraid to examine too closely. A small, traitorous voice whispering that for one afternoon, she had felt alive again. Desired. Seen.

In the days that followed, Irma threw herself into caring for Owen with renewed vigor. She ignored Jim's calls. When Jim showed up at the door, she refused to see him.

It was for the best, she told herself. She was a wife, a mother. She had responsibilities. There was no room in her life for stolen afternoons and impossible dreams.

But oh, how she missed him. Missed his laugh, his gentle hands, the way he looked at her like she was the most fascinating person in the world. Some nights, after Hubert had fallen asleep, Irma would lie awake, remembering the feel of Jim's lips on hers, the warmth of his embrace, and more.

In her darkest moments, she wondered what would have happened if she'd made a different choice. If she'd thrown caution to the wind and followed her heart. But those were dangerous thoughts, and Irma pushed them away as quickly as they came.

She had made her choice. She would live with it, no matter the cost.

Irma blinked, the memories fading as she returned to the present. The bedroom was dark now, the house quiet. Downstairs, she could hear Hilary moving about, probably getting ready for bed herself.

Hilary. Her beautiful, curious daughter, who looked so much like Jim, it made Irma's heart ache. Did the girl suspect? Had she sensed the undercurrents of tension between her mother and the man who had come to fix their furnace?

Irma turned over, burying her face in the pillow. All these years later, and still the memories had the power to wound her. She wondered about the path not taken, the life she might have had.

But it was too late for regrets now. She had made her choices, for better or worse. All she could do was live with them, and pray that the past stayed buried where it belonged.

## Chapter Forty-Two

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It was fine, Irma told herself back then. She'd had a "thing". It only happened once and never would again. One blip in an otherwise perfect marriage.

But oh, how she missed the talks, the attention, the little touches and lingering looks. These days she didn't think Hubert hardly glanced at her.

No point in dwelling on what could never be. Life needed to be gotten on with; that's how she'd been raised and what would see her through this rough patch.

She'd looked at Owen, a four-year-old strapped snugly into his reclining highchair. Applesauce coated his face from his hair, across his cheek, down to his chin, with some on the lobe of his right ear. Try as she might, aiming for his mouth was tricky when his head jerked unpredictably and either of his hands could flail at the spoon at any time. Mealtime meant they both wore more food than went in him.

Owen, like many with cerebral palsy, had impaired swallowing, the spasticity causing uncontrolled contractions of the esophagus. This meant that saliva, food, fluids, phlegm, as well as stomach contents from acid reflux could be inhaled into his lungs, leading to respiratory infections, slow, progressive damage to his breathing passages, or even death. Feeding



time required constant vigilance. But oh, it was tiring, some days more than others.

Today especially. Well, if she was being honest, this week, or a few weeks. She thought she was used to the fatigue that dragged down her bones non-stop. She had a thick skin and even stronger stomach; she had to from the beatings she took from Owen's flailing limbs, and the frequent regurgitation of the pureed food she worked so hard to get in him. Usually none of those things fazed her, but lately.... With a quick tug on the straps to make sure her son was safely secured in his chair, she raced to the bathroom to lose her lunch. Again.

As the weeks went on and her symptoms increased, Irma could ignore her situation no longer. She was used to hefting Owen in and out of his car seat as she took him to his medical appointments, but today, this appointment was for *her*.

As she suspected, the doctor confirmed her fear. She was pregnant. Ever practical, she asked the physician what the chances were that she'd have another child with cerebral palsy. Familial cerebral palsy only accounts for approximately 1.6% of all cerebral palsy cases; most likely Owen's CP was because of brain trauma during the birthing process. This time, she'd be classed as a high-risk pregnancy and monitored closely for any fetal distress.

Irma left the doctor's clinic, hefting Owen into his car seat, double-checking that the straps were secure, then drove home on autopilot, not heeding the gurgles and noises from her son. Her son. How was she going to look after him with the demands of a new baby? She already felt like she could not cram in one more thing into her day.

Baby. A part of her smiled inside. She remembered those early days of when she and Hubert were expecting their first child, the excitement, the jitters, the longing for the next months to speed along. Dared she let some of those feelings resurface?

And then reality struck. The baby would be here in another seven months. She tried counting back, trepidation filling her as she tried to remember the last time she and Hubert had been intimate. Even more importantly, would *he* remember?

## Chapter Forty-Three

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She sent a text to her brother.

“Do not ever, ever mess with the furnace like that again. It’s barely hanging in there.”

Hilary stared at her phone, frustration bubbling up inside her. Brody's nonchalant “So?” in response to her admonishment about the furnace made her want to scream. She furiously typed back:

“So? SO? I live here too, you idiot! What if it couldn't be fixed? We'd freeze! There's no money for a new one!”

She hit send, then tossed her phone onto the bed with more force than necessary. Sometimes her brother's recklessness was too much to bear. Didn't he understand the precariousness of their situation?

Shaking her head, Hilary turned her attention back to the cardboard boxes stacked haphazardly in the spare bedroom. The house was quiet, her mother having retreated to her room shortly after Jim left. Hilary couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on here than a simple furnace repair, but she pushed that thought aside. Right now, she had a mystery to solve.

She settled cross-legged on the floor next to the box where she'd found her father's engineering degree earlier. That discovery had shaken her

understanding of who her parents were, and she was determined to uncover more.

Rifling through the box, her hand closed around a leather-bound book. She pulled it out, running her fingers over the worn cover. When she opened it, she realized this wasn't just a book; it was a journal. Her father's journal.

Hilary's heart picked up its pace. This was it - a window into the man she thought she knew so well. She hesitated for a moment, feeling like an intruder in her father's private thoughts. But curiosity and her journalist's quest for knowledge won out, and she began to read.

The first entry made her smile:

*I suppose few engineers have a yen for writing, but here I am, starting a journal, something I haven't done since I was a kid. There are thoughts I need to get out, things I'd never dare say aloud. So, dear diary (God, that sounds ridiculous), here goes nothing.*

As she read on, Hilary felt like she was seeing her father - and mother - through fresh eyes. There were entries about waiting for her older brother Owen's birth, her father's admiration for her mother clear in every word:

*Irma amazes me. Eight months of all-day 'morning' sickness, and she still plugs away at her job at the university. I don't know how she does it.*

Hilary paused, frowning. University job? She'd always assumed her mother had been a secretary or something similar, if she worked at all. What else didn't she know?

She continued reading, her heart clenching as she reached the entry about Owen's birth. Her father's fear was palpable.

*The labor's been going on for hours and it's now day two. How much more of this can Irma take? How much can I take as I watch her suffer in silence, helpless to do anything but hold her hand? I'm ashamed to admit how many times I excuse myself and go out into the hallway, to the cafeteria, anywhere to get away from all that pain etched into my wife's face, and the spasms*

*arching across her abdomen, visible even through the covers. The doctor's worried about both Irma and the baby. I can't lose them. I can't.*

Then, the devastating news:

*Owen has cerebral palsy. The words don't even seem real. How can this be happening? Our beautiful boy... I feel like I'm drowning. But Irma, my God, Irma is so strong. She's holding us together when all I want to do is fall apart.*

Hilary wiped away a tear. She'd never known her father to be anything but solid, dependable. This vulnerable side was entirely new to her.

As she read on, the reality of life with a severely disabled child unfolded before her. The medical crises seemed endless:

*Owen had another seizure today. It lasted five minutes - felt like an eternity. The ER doctor says it's common with CP, but how can we ever get used to this?*

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*Aspiration pneumonia again. Third time so far this year. The doctors are talking about a feeding tube. How are we supposed to make these decisions?*

Hilary's heart ached for the brother she'd never known and for her parents, facing challenge after challenge.

Then she came to an entry that made her gasp:

*Irma's maternity leave is up, but Owen needs constant care. She's asked for another six months, but we both know it won't be enough. No daycare will take him, and we can't afford a full-time nurse. I don't know how we're going to manage.*

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*Owen's hip dislocated. They say it's from the muscle spasticity. Surgery is scheduled for next week. He's not even a year old. How much more can his little body take?*

And then, a few entries later:

*Irma resigned from her tenure-track position today. She didn't complain, just did what needed to be done. But I saw the light go out in her eyes. All those years of hard work, her brilliant research... gone. And for what? To become a full-time caregiver? It's not fair. None of this is fair.*

Hilary sat back, stunned. Tenure-track position? Her mother had been a professor? The woman who had raised her, who she'd always seen as just... Mom... had had a whole other life, a career, ambitions cut short.

She thought about her mother now, the woman who spent her days puttering around the house, who seemed content with her small, quiet life. Had she always been that way? Or had circumstances forced her into that role?

Hilary's mind reeled. How could she not have known any of this? She thought about all the times she'd rolled her eyes at her mother's outdated opinions, the times she'd dismissed her as out of touch. Shame washed over her. There was so much more to Irma than she'd ever realized.

She turned back to the journal, hungry for more insights. The entries became less frequent as the years went on, but no less poignant:

*Owen's fifth birthday today. The doctors had said he might not make it to three. My boy is a fighter, but then he's his mother's son.*

---

*Irma hasn't left the house in weeks. I'm worried about her, but I don't know how to help.*

---

*Got a promotion at work. The extra money will help with Owen's medical bills, but it means longer hours. Irma will have to manage on her own more. I hate leaving them, but what choice do we have?*

As Hilary read, a picture emerged of two people struggling under an immense burden. Her father, working longer and longer hours to keep them afloat financially. Her mother, isolated and overwhelmed, her world shrinking to the size of their small home.

She came to an entry that made her breath catch:

*I think Irma's having an affair. Or if not an affair, there's something going on. That furnace repairman is here all the time. I see the way they look at each other. I should be angry, I know. But mostly I'm just sad. When did Irma and I become such strangers to each other?*

Hilary's mind flashed to Jim Rawlings, to the tension in the room earlier. Could it be...? She shook her head, unwilling to follow that train of thought.

The last journal entry date was just a few months before Owen's death.

*Owen's in the hospital again. Pneumonia. It's bad this time. Irma hasn't left his side in days. I don't know how much more any of us can take.*

Hilary closed the journal, her mind whirling. The ground had shifted beneath her feet. The parents she thought she knew were strangers to her now. Her mother, especially, was a mystery. A former professor who had given up everything for her child. A woman who might have had an affair out of loneliness and desperation.

She thought about her mother now, shut away in her room. How much pain was she still carrying? How much of herself had she lost along the way?

Hilary stood up, her legs stiff from sitting so long. She looked at the clock, surprised to see that hours had passed. The house was quiet, Irma long since asleep.

She carefully placed the journal back in the box, her mind made up. Tomorrow, she would talk to her mother. Really talk to her, maybe for the

first time. There was so much she needed to understand, so many questions she needed to ask.

As she crawled into bed, Hilary's last thought before sleep claimed her was of her mother. Not as the sometimes frustrating, often distant woman she'd known all her life, but as Irma - young, brilliant, full of promise, facing challenges Hilary could scarcely imagine.

For the first time in years, Hilary felt a surge of something she hadn't expected: respect, and a deep, aching something she didn't want to name for the woman who had given up so much for her family.

But then her brain and heart reverted to how she'd always felt about her mother - resentful. An affair! How could she do something like that to the man who worked so hard to support his family, who was always there for them? Just another example of Irma putting herself and her needs first.

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## Chapter Forty-Four

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Irma straightened up the living room. Hilary had never really been a sloppy girl, so why did she leave the living room in this mess? Hubert's pipe was upside down on the rocking chair, charred bits of tobacco smeared into the cushion. Picking it up to try to clean away the soot revealed the corner of the spilled open tobacco pouch beneath the cushion. Over the last months, the dried leaves were less pungent than they'd once been.

On Hubert's desk, two of the family pictures were upside down. Wasn't that a rather juvenile prank for a girl of Hilary's age to play? At least she hadn't defaced any more photos.

No telling how late Hilary went to bed, but the girl sure slept in this morning. Being in bed by 6:30 last night gave Irma plenty of sleep, or at least plenty of time to toss and turn, trying to calm the memories infiltrating her brain.

She needed a task; getting things accomplished always soothed her, allowing her to push away thoughts best not dwelt upon.

Even though Hubert was the mathematical one in the family, he'd never been good with finances. It hadn't mattered much when they were both young and pulling in good salaries. Back then, his sometimes impulsive spending had seemed an amusing indulgence. But once she had to leave her



job and the medical expenses piled up, there was no longer that savings account cushion, and she'd had to put her foot down about their budget.

She got it. Hubert worked hard, spending long hours at the engineering firm, and he deserved some time off, some play time. But so did she. No longer contributing to the family financially, her days and nights were tied to Owen's ever-present needs. Maybe *she'd* like some time off, too.

Wishful thinking. It never happened.

Then her mind drifted to those blissful six months when she'd found a diversion and a shoulder to lean on, making her not feel so alone with the burden of childcare.

No. She could not allow her thoughts to go there. That was in the past, as wrong as it was at the time. Two wrongs never made a right. She clanged shut the mental gate in her mind, imprisoning any of those hopes of what might have been, or could be.

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Hilary dragged herself downstairs, her mind still churning from the revelations in her father's journal. She'd stayed up far too late, poring over every word until she could take no more, and now her eyes felt gritty with lack of sleep. But she was determined. Today was the day she'd confront her mother about her hidden past and the possible affair with Jim Rawlings.

As she entered the kitchen, all her carefully rehearsed words evaporated. Irma sat at the table, surrounded by piles of papers, her checkbook open before her. Her mother's shoulders slumped, her face drawn and tired. For the first time, Hilary saw not just her mother, but a woman worn down by life's burdens.

"Mom?" Hilary said softly, her planned confrontation dying on her lips.

Irma looked up, startled. "Oh, Hilary. I didn't hear you come down." She made a halfhearted attempt to gather the papers, but then seemed to deflate, leaving them scattered across the table.

Hilary approached cautiously, her eyes scanning the documents. Bills, bank statements, and hand-drawn spreadsheets covered every inch of the table's surface. "What's all this?"

Irma sighed, a sound so heavy with defeat that it made Hilary's chest tighten. "Just trying to make sense of our finances. It's... it's not going

well.”

Hilary pulled out a chair and sat down, her curiosity overriding her initial purpose. “What do you mean? I thought... I mean, I always assumed we were doing okay.”

A bitter laugh escaped Irma's lips. “Oh, Hilary. We haven't been 'okay' in a very long time.” Her voice lower now, she added, “And it's far worse since your father died.”

“Didn't he plan for this? Have things in place to take care of you?”

“He tried, but there wasn't much to work with.”

“I always saw you as such an organizer, a woman with all of her ducks in a row.”

Irma's smile was sardonic. “There's what we plan for, then what actually happens. Life's like that, you know.”

As Irma began to explain their financial situation, Hilary felt like she was falling down a rabbit hole, each revelation a physical blow.

“Wait,” Hilary interrupted, her mind reeling. “You're telling me you only get \$1,860 a month? That's... that's nothing!”

Irma nodded tiredly. “It's not much, but it's what we have. Half of your father's pension and 80% of his Social Security. That's all. I'd be okay on that income if I had no other expenses.”

Hilary's mind raced, trying to make sense of the numbers. “But... but how do you manage? The bills, the groceries, everything?”

“Very carefully,” Irma said with a wry smile that didn't reach her eyes. “And sometimes, not at all.”

A damn burst, and the always closed-mouthed Irma spilled decades of worries and struggles. As she continued to explain, Hilary's horror grew. The mountain of medical bills from Owen's care, the interest piling up faster than they could pay it off, the constant struggle to make ends meet. It was all so far removed from the childhood she thought she'd had. Now the second-hand clothes, the lack of frivolities, made sense. It wasn't just her mother being mean, as she'd believed all of her life.

“Why didn't you declare bankruptcy?” Hilary asked, her voice rising with frustration. “All this debt, it's crushing you!”

Irma's face hardened. “Your father and I discussed it, but we couldn't bring ourselves to do it. These debts... they're from caring for your brother. He was our child; we couldn't just walk away from that responsibility.”

Hilary felt a flash of anger at her parents' stubbornness, quickly followed by a wave of shame. How could she judge them for a decision made out of love and integrity?

"But Dad had health insurance, right?" Hilary grasped at straws, desperate to find some silver lining.

Irma's eyes grew distant. "He had insurance, at first. When he worked for that engineering firm, we were doing fine. Even with Owen's health issues, we were staying ahead. But then..."

As Irma recounted the story of the firm closing, Hubert's desperate search for a job with insurance that would cover Owen with his pre-existing condition, and their eventual move to this property, building a new life here.

Hilary's world tilted on its axis. Everything she thought she knew about her family's history was being rewritten before her eyes.

"What about life insurance? Surely Dad had that." Brody said Dad did, and that they were entitled to a good chunk of it. That's the least their mother could do for them.

"When we were younger, he paid into a life insurance policy, but when things got tough, he had to cash it out. We put that money toward one of your brother's surgeries."

Unable to sit still any longer, Hilary stood and paced the kitchen. Her eyes fell on her mother's checkbook, and she picked it up, flipping through the pages. "Mom, this doesn't add up. There's not enough here to cover everything, with the biggest chunk going for old medical bills."

Irma's smile was sad and knowing. "I'm aware, Hilary. Believe me, I'm very aware."

Hilary's gaze shifted to the handmade budget sheets stapled together. She reached for them, half-expecting her mother to snatch them away. But Irma just sat there, resignation on her face.

## Chapter Forty-Five

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As Hilary thumbed through the pages, going back years to when she was just a little girl, a lump formed in her throat. The careful accounting, the meticulous tracking of every penny... it was a testament to her mother's determination to keep their family afloat.

Then something caught her eye. "Mom, what's this other income listed here? It's not from Dad's job at the garage."

Irma shrugged, trying to brush it off. "Oh, just some contract work I did."

But Hilary wouldn't let it go, couldn't let it go. She dug through the metal box of receipts and pay stubs, her eyes widening as she saw the source of the payments. "University of Pennsylvania? Other colleges? Mom, what kind of work were you doing?"

Irma sighed, her resistance crumbling. "I did some work for the university. Teaching assistant roles, mostly. Grading papers, running seminars for correspondence classes, tutoring. That sort of thing."

Hilary stared at her mother, a mix of confusion and disbelief on her face. "But... how? I mean, don't you need qualifications for that kind of work?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Hilary regretted them. She saw the flash of hurt in her mother's eyes, quickly masked by a weary

acceptance, then that blankness she wore so well.

“I have a master’s degree, Hilary,” Irma said quietly. “In Political and Moral Philosophy.”

Hilary felt like she'd been punched in the gut. A master’s degree? Her mother, whom she'd always seen as just... Mom... had a higher level of education than Hilary herself.

“Why... why didn't you tell me?” Hilary asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Irma's eyes grew distant. “It never seemed relevant. That part of my life... it was over.”

Hilary wanted to ask more, to understand why her mother had given up her academic career. But the answer was there in her father's journal, in the story of Owen's birth and the impossible choices her parents had faced.

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words and long-buried emotions. Hilary's mind raced, trying to reconcile the mother she thought she knew with this new, more complex version.

She thought about all the times she'd rolled her eyes at her mother's opinions, dismissed her as out of touch. Shame washed over her. There was so much more to Irma than she'd ever realized.

“Mom,” Hilary began, her voice thick with emotion. “I... I had no idea. About any of this. The money problems, your education... I'm so sorry.”

Irma looked up, surprise flickering across her face. “Sorry? For what?”

“For not seeing you,” Hilary said, tears pricking at her eyes. “For not understanding what you and Dad went through, what you're still going through.”

Irma reached out, taking Hilary's hand in hers. “Oh, sweetheart. We never wanted you to worry about these things. Your father and I... we did our best to give you a normal childhood, despite everything. These were our burdens to bear, and we didn’t want you kids worrying.”

Hilary squeezed her mother's hand, a lump forming in her throat. “I never knew... I never even suspected.”

As they sat there, hands clasped across the table covered in bills and budget sheets, Hilary felt a shift in her relationship with her mother. The woman before her was no longer just 'Mom', but Irma - a complex, intelligent, resilient woman who had faced challenges Hilary could scarcely imagine.

“Is there anything I can do?” Hilary asked, suddenly desperate to help. “To help with the bills, or...”

Irma shook her head. “No, honey. This is my problem. I've managed this long, I'll keep managing.”

But things needed to change. Hilary couldn't un-know what she'd learned, couldn't un-see the struggle her mother confronted every day.

As she helped Irma gather up the papers and put them away, Hilary's mind was already working, trying to come up with ways to ease her mother's burden. Maybe she could look for a better-paying job, or find some extra freelance work to supplement their income.

And there was still the matter of Jim Rawlings and the potential affair. But that conversation would have to wait. Right now, Hilary was seeing her mother in a new light, and she needed time to process everything she'd learned.

As they finished clearing the table, Hilary impulsively hugged her mother. Irma stiffened for a moment, then relaxed into the embrace.

“I'm here for you, Mom,” Hilary whispered. “Whatever you need.” It surprised her that she meant it.

Irma's arms tightened around her daughter. “I love you, sweetheart. More than you know. And I'm glad you're here.”

As they pulled apart, Hilary saw tears in her mother's eyes. For the first time in years, maybe ever, she felt like she was truly seeing her mother. Not as the sometimes frustrating, often distant and harsh woman she'd known all her life, but as Irma - young, brilliant, full of promise, facing challenges Hilary could scarcely imagine.

And maybe for the first time ever, Hilary felt a surge of something she hadn't expected: respect, and a deep, aching affection for the woman who had given up so much for her family.

As Hilary left the kitchen, her mind whirled with everything she'd learned. This was just the beginning. There were still so many questions, so many things to understand. But one thing was clear: her relationship with her mother would never be the same. And maybe, just maybe, that was a good thing.

## Chapter Forty-Six

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Hilary's mind reeled with this new information. A Master's degree in Political and Moral Philosophy. It explained so much about her mother that she'd never understood before. The way Irma could dissect an argument, her insightful comments on ethical dilemmas in the news, her passion for justice that Hilary had always dismissed as simple-minded idealism.

It made sense now. The memory of her college acceptance day hit Hilary like a physical blow. She remembered the excitement bubbling through her veins, the future bright and full of promise.

And then, her mother's callous words: "Don't expect any help from us. What we have, we need for ourselves."

At the time, those words cut deep.

What her teenaged mind interpreted as callous selfishness on her mother's part, a lack of interest in her daughter getting ahead, was really a cover-up for the financial straits her parents were in. If only they'd explained, she'd have understood, rather than writing them out of her life for all these years. She would have been able to spend time with her father before he died.

Hilary stepped out onto the porch, the wooden boards creaking beneath her feet. The crisp fall air nipped at her cheeks, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. She watched as her mother rummaged through the toolshed, muttering under her breath.

"I always put it right back on the charger," Irma said, frustration clear in her voice. "I can't imagine where it could have gone."

Hilary could, keeping those thoughts to herself. She joined in the search, her eyes scanning the ground for any sign of the missing chainsaw battery. The fallen leaves crunched under her feet, a mosaic of reds, oranges, and browns carpeting the forest floor. For once, she and her mother moved in tandem, the invisible barrier between them less solid than it had been just hours ago.

The rumble of an approaching engine drew their attention. A battered pickup truck rolled into view, and Hilary recognized Jim Rawlings behind the wheel. He climbed out, his weathered face creasing into a frown as Hilary explained the situation, Irma barely acknowledging his presence...

"That's not like you, Irma," Jim said, shaking his head. "You're always so careful with things."

But his frown quickly turned to a smile as he reached into the truck bed. "Lucky for you, I've got a spare. I'm a Milwaukee man myself."

Without being asked, Jim seamlessly integrated himself into their wood-cutting operation. He backed his truck around to the pile of logs behind the house, the tires squelching in the damp earth. The air filled with the sharp scent of fresh-cut wood as Jim fired up the chainsaw, its high-pitched whine echoing through the trees.

Hilary watched as her mother and Jim fell into an easy rhythm. They moved around each other with a familiarity that made her wonder again about their relationship. Was there more between them than she knew?

The log splitter's hydraulic hiss joined the cacophony of sounds, punctuated by the satisfying crack of wood giving way. Hilary felt like a fifth wheel, watching as the pile of neatly split logs grew along the porch.

"Hilary," Jim called out, holding up a black plastic jug. "Irma says you're out of bar oil. Mind running to Abe's Hardware to pick up some?"

Grateful for something to do, Hilary nodded and headed for her car. The drive into town took concentration on the slick lane, the winding road lined with trees in full fall glory. As she pulled into the hardware store's parking lot, a knot formed in her stomach. Abe was okay, but what if she ran into



someone she knew? She'd avoided contact with anyone from town since she got here.

Her fears were realized the moment she stepped inside. There, examining a display of power tools, was William. Hilary ducked behind an aisle, her heart racing. William had made her feel seen and valued when they were dating in high school, something she'd never gotten at home. But her trust issues, which she'd always blamed on her mother, had driven her away from this town. Besides, she'd gotten the message loud and clear from her parents that she needed to make her way in the world on her own. She could not burden William with her plight.

Now, with her newfound understanding of her mother's struggles, Hilary wondered if she'd been wrong about more than just Irma. Had she been too quick to push people away, fearing they'd hurt her like she thought her mother had?

"Hilary?" William's voice cut through her thoughts. "Are you hiding from me?"

Caught, Hilary straightened up, forcing a smile. "Oh, hi William. I didn't see you there."

William's eyes narrowed. "Right. Look, since you never gave me your number, how about you hand over your phone and I'll program it in mine? Just in case you ever want to reach out."

Hesitantly, going against every instinct she'd honed over the last years, Hilary complied. As William typed, warmth spread through her chest. Maybe it was time to let down some of those walls she'd built.

It wasn't until she was halfway home that Hilary realized she'd forgotten the bar oil. Cursing under her breath, she turned around, this time successfully completing her errand. On a whim, she stopped at the grocery store, picking up a crusty loaf of bread, garlic butter, and ingredients for butternut squash soup.

When she pulled back into the driveway, the scene before her was a symphony of fall activity. The chainsaw's growl and the log splitter's hiss punctuated the air, mingling with the earthy scent of freshly cut wood. Leaves swirled in the crisp breeze, dancing around Irma and Jim as they worked.

Hilary noticed her mother's shoulders seemed less tense, her movements more fluid as she stacked the split logs along the porch. The pile had grown considerably in her absence.

As she prepared lunch, the comforting aroma of simmering soup filled the kitchen. When everything was ready, Hilary called out to Irma and Jim.

“Lunch is ready,” she announced, poking her head out the door.

Jim looked to Irma, deferring to her. “Am I invited to stay?”

Irma nodded, not quite meeting his eyes. Jim's face split into a grin as he turned to Hilary, giving her a conspiratorial thumbs up.

As they settled around the table, Hilary studied her mother and Jim. There was an ease between them, a comfortable silence that spoke of years of shared experiences, despite Irma's walls. Yet there was also a tension, an unspoken something hanging in the air.

Hilary's mind wandered back to her encounter with William. She'd spent so long pushing people away, convinced that keeping her distance was the only way to protect herself from hurt. But watching her mother now, seeing the weight of years of silent struggle etched in the lines of her face, Hilary wondered if she'd been wrong.

Maybe the actual strength wasn't in building walls, but in letting people in despite the risk of pain. Maybe her mother's apparent coldness had been a misguided attempt at protection, not rejection.

As she passed the bread to Jim, catching his warm smile of thanks, Hilary decided. She'd give William a call. And more importantly, she'd try to bridge the gap between herself and her mother. It was time to tear down those walls, brick by carefully laid brick.

She'd grown up hearing her mother's words stated over and over: “If you never ask anything for yourself, you'll never be disappointed.” Maybe that wasn't right. What if she *could* ask something for herself?

The meal passed in comfortable conversation, the warmth of the soup matching the growing warmth in Hilary's chest. For the first time in years, she felt like she might be truly home.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

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Hilary watched as her mother abruptly stood up from the table, her chair scraping against the wooden floor. “I’m tired,” Irma announced, her voice flat. “I’m going to lie down upstairs.”

Jim’s eyes followed Irma as she left the room, a flicker of something—concern? disappointment?—crossing his face. “Well,” he said, turning back to Hilary with a forced smile, “I guess that’s my cue to leave. But not before I help you with these dishes.”

As they fell into a simple rhythm of washing and drying, Hilary relaxed in Jim’s presence. Strange how comfortable she felt with this man she barely knew. This wasn’t like her at all. And her mother’s awkwardness around Jim was equally out of character for the usually composed Irma.

Suddenly, a realization struck Hilary. “Jim,” she said, setting down the plate she was drying, “you just showed up this morning. We never asked why you came by.”

Jim chuckled, his weathered hands still submerged in soapy water. “No special reason. Just wanted to check up on how my girls were doing.”

“Your girls?” Hilary echoed, eyebrows raised.

Jim’s cheeks reddened slightly. “Just a turn of phrase,” he said, laughing it off. “I guess I should have said ‘you girls’.” But when Hilary pressed for more, he became politely evasive.

“Well,” he admitted after a moment, “I’ve known your mother for a long time. Since before you were born, actually.” He hurriedly added, “I knew your father, too.”

“Were you friends?” Hilary asked, curiosity piqued.

Jim’s eyes took on a faraway look. “Of a sort. Depends on how you define friends. Life is complicated sometimes.” He dried his hands on a dishtowel, his movements deliberate. “For anything more, you’d have to ask your mother.”

Sensing his reluctance, Hilary changed the subject. She found it surprisingly easy to talk to Jim, his presence oddly comforting. “I miss my dad,” she confessed, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. “I regret not seeing him before he passed away.”

“Why didn’t you?” Jim asked gently.

Hilary felt a twinge of shame. “I... I didn’t know he was sick. Mom and I weren’t in touch. She wouldn’t have known how to contact me.”

“Or your brother?” Jim prodded.

“Brody and I text sometimes, but neither of us had much to do with our parents after we left home.” The admission left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Desperate to move away from her own failings, Hilary circled back to her father. “It just seems so unfair that he died,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jim’s response was unexpected. “We all die, Hilary,” he said, his tone matter of fact but not unkind. Then, to her surprise, he quoted, “‘Death is no enemy of life; it restores our sense of the value of living. Illness restores the sense of proportion that is lost when we take life for granted. To learn about value and proportion we need to honor illness, and ultimately to honor death.’”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with meaning. Hilary felt something shift inside her, a perspective tilting ever so slightly.

“Who said that?” she asked, her voice hushed.

“Arthur W. Frank,” Jim replied. “He’s a sociologist who writes about illness and storytelling.”

Hilary nodded slowly, turning the quote over in her mind. It challenged her anger at her father’s death, forcing her to confront the inevitability of loss and the preciousness of the time we have.

Quotes and sayings had been a part of her life growing up; Irma had one for every situation. Did the man in front of her and her mother share this

habit?

As she looked at Jim, she saw him in a new light. This man, with his quiet wisdom and gentle presence, had known her parents for decades. He'd been there, a silent fixture in their lives, while she and Brody had run away, building walls to protect themselves from real or imagined hurts.

For the first time, Hilary felt the full weight of the years she'd lost, the relationships she'd discarded. But alongside that regret, a small spark of hope flickered to life. It wasn't too late to change, to rebuild those connections.

"Jim," she said, her voice steady despite the emotions roiling inside her, "thank you. For being here, for... everything."

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "That's what family's for," he said, then quickly added, "Or friends. Whatever we are."

As Jim gathered his things to leave, the house that had felt like a prison now seemed filled with untold stories and missed opportunities. Her mother, upstairs and out of sight, was no longer just the cold, distant figure of Hilary's memory, but a complex woman with her own history and struggles.

And Jim... Jim was a mystery, a link to a past Hilary had never bothered to explore. As she watched him drive away, she made a silent promise to herself. She would unravel these mysteries, rebuild these relationships. It was time to stop running and start understanding.

The afternoon sun slanted through the windows, casting long shadows across the kitchen. Hilary stood there for a long moment, feeling the first tentative stirrings of change within her. The road ahead wouldn't be easy, but for the first time in years, she felt ready to move forward, rather than letting the past rule.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

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Pooling the covers around her body in bed, Hilary stuffed two pillows behind her back and opened her father's journal. Some pages she skipped, ones talking about clients and engineering problems; things holding little interest for her. In his ramblings about work, one name cropped up far more frequently than any other - Willow.

At first it was a joke, the link between his last name, Willoughby, and this woman's first name. This Willow woman did clerical work for the engineering team Hubert was part of.

Hilary put the journal down. It made sense that Dad and Willow would have to spend time together. But something seemed off.

She flipped forward a few pages.

*February 2 - Irma. Why can't that woman leave things alone? She has this weird sense of morality.*

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*February 3 - She thought I hadn't noticed. Yeah, she always looks haggard, but lately it's been worse. And the puking. She thinks I don't notice her*

*scurrying out of bed early in the morning, so she can hug the toilet bowl, trying to stifle the horrid sounds of her wrenching.*

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*February 4 - Again. She just won't give it a rest. She told me this morning that she's pregnant. Like that was a surprise. Okay, we'll deal with it, although I don't know how. She was so sick when she was expecting Owen. How will she manage to look after him if this pregnancy is the same way? And how will she cope with a new baby on top of all she has to do for Owen? She'll cope; she's Irma.*

*I hate it when she starts a conversation with, "Hubert, there's something I need to tell you."*

*"Stop," I told her. "I don't want to hear it."*

*"But..."*

*"No," I roared. "I don't want or need to hear it. It is what it is."*

*Geez. Does she think we're going to get into a discussion about our infidelities?*

The journal fell from Hilary's fingers. What? Like watching a train wreck, she could not stop reading. But there was a gap again, with the next entry starting over a month later.

*March 15 - Lunch with Willow again today. She understands the pressure I'm under. Says I shouldn't be so hard on myself about not being home more. Easy for her to say.*

Hilary frowned. Was it normal for secretaries and engineers to have lunch together so often?

*March 28 - Another rough night at home. Owen's pain was bad. Irma looks like she hasn't slept in days. I should have stayed to help, but I couldn't. Met Willow for coffee instead. She always knows exactly what to say.*

Hilary's stomach clenched. She read on, her fingers tightening on the journal's edges.

*April 10 - Willow's apartment is becoming my refuge. It's so peaceful here. No medical equipment, no tension. Just conversation and laughter. And touch, things I'd forgotten existed. The guilt is eating at me, but I can't stop going.*

“God, Dad,” Hilary whispered, her throat tight. She thought about her mother, alone with Owen, while her father sought comfort elsewhere.

*April 23 - Told Irma I had to work late again. Took Willow to that new Italian place instead. She wore a blue dress that matched her eyes. I know this is wrong. I know what I'm doing to my family. But with Willow, I feel like myself again, not just Owen's father or Irma's husband.*

Hilary's eyes burned. She remembered nights when she was little, her mother moving through the house like a ghost, waiting for Dad to come home. She'd always assumed he was working hard to support them. To support Owen's medical needs.

*May 5 - Got the promotion today. Should tell Irma - the extra money would help with Owen's therapy. But she might figure out I've been lying about the overtime. And honestly, it's nice having something that's just mine, a bit of pocket money. I work hard, and I've earned it. Took Willow shopping to celebrate. She deserves nice things.*

The words blurred as tears filled Hilary's eyes. Their broken-down car, her mother's worn clothes, Owen's second-hand wheelchair, all while their father spent money on another woman.

*May 18 - Weekend conference in Seattle. Irma thinks I'm there alone. Willow's perfume lingers on my collar. The guilt is unbearable, but going home is worse. The sadness in that house suffocates me. At least at work I can escape, can talk to people, can breathe. Irma has no escape. I should be there more, helping with Owen. I know this. But I just can't.*



Hilary slammed the journal shut, her hands shaking. The father she'd idolized, the man she'd blamed her mother for driving away - he'd been living a double life. While Irma struggled alone with Owen's care, with bills, with the endless medical appointments, he'd been...

She opened the journal again, unable to stop herself.

*June 3 - Owen had a bad seizure today. Irma called me at work, desperate for help. I said I was in an important meeting. Truth is, I was having lunch with Willow. What kind of father am I? What kind of husband? Willow says I shouldn't blame myself, that anyone would need a break from that life. But Irma doesn't get breaks. She's there, day after day, giving everything to our son while I... while I betray them both.*

Hot tears splashed onto the pages. Hilary remembered that day. She'd come home from school to find her mother sobbing in the bathroom, Owen finally sleeping after his seizure. She'd blamed her mother for driving Dad away with her neediness, her constant calls about Owen.

*June 15 - Hilary asked me today why I'm never home anymore. The look in her eyes... I told her work was busy, that I was doing it all for them. Another lie. I'm becoming someone I don't recognize. Willow says we deserve to be happy. But at what cost?*

Hilary closed the journal gently this time, feeling sick. All those years of resenting her mother, of believing Dad worked so hard because he had to, of thinking Irma's bitterness had driven him away. She'd had it all wrong.

She thought about her mother upstairs, probably still awake. How many nights had Irma lain in bed, knowing where her husband really was? How many years had she carried that knowledge alone, never telling her children, letting them believe what they wanted about their father?

And Jim... Jim, who'd known her father... who'd known them all back then... What had he seen? What did he know?

The journal sat heavy in her lap, its revelations changing everything she'd believed about her childhood, her parents, herself. She'd built her whole adult life around running from what she thought was her mother's coldness, her father's absence. But the truth had been so different.

“Oh, Mom,” she whispered into the darkness. “I’m so sorry.”

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## Chapter Forty-Nine

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Sometimes waking felt like slowly rising up from the depths of who knows what. Except this time, it was different.

Irma shivered, pulling the quilt up to her chin. Why was it so chilly, almost like a draft came in under her bedroom door?

Huddling in the blankets wouldn't get anything done today, so Irma threw back the covers, her left foot contacting the frigid hardwood floor. It really was cold.

Belting her robe tightly, and slipping her feet into worn shearling slippers, she opened her bedroom door, the temperature even lower in the hallway. Doing only what was necessary in the bathroom, she hurried down the stairs. Funny how she used to scurry up and down these stairs without thought, but since Hubert's death she always grasped the handrail. What if she slipped and fell when she was here all by herself? She could lie here with a broken hip for weeks before anyone thought to come look for her.

Life was different when you were on your own.

But she wasn't totally alone, at least not for a while. Hilary. As surprised as she'd been to have the girl turn up on her doorstep, as suspicious as she'd been, the kid's presence grew on a person. Sure, there were still some questions about why she'd suddenly arrived, but it was comforting to have her here.

Don't get used to it. Hilary has a life elsewhere, and this is only temporary. But somehow, they'd formed a bond, one they never had when the child was little. Oh, she'd always loved the girl, but maybe she hadn't taken the time to show it as the girl grew, to really get to know who this person was.

She liked the adult Hilary had turned into.

Mostly. If the girl would stop leaving such a mess in the living room and kitchen.

It was definitely colder on the first floor. Had that blasted furnace broken down again? That would mean throwing themselves on Jim's mercy yet another time. Talk about conflicting emotions. Yes, she absolutely knew it in her bones that if they asked, he would come; that wasn't the question. It was how she felt about him coming that stirred up torments both old and new. How could she dread seeing the man, yet have her heart speed up at the thought of being in his presence again?

It had only been scant months since her husband's death; shame on her for letting her thoughts drift toward another man. She'd allowed that only once.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she paused, feeling the draft. Instead of turning into the living room, she headed the opposite way to a part of the house used only for laundry and storage. There was a back door they seldom used; in fact, Hubert often sealed it in plastic once winter arrived, trying to preserve the heat in the house.

She'd have to think about that. Just one more item on the burgeoning list of things to do. It was different when it all rested on one person's shoulders.

There! To the left of the door was a window, but why was it open? The sharp bite of winter's breath prickled her skin, lodging in her spine. The chill curled around furniture, creeping into every corner and making the curtains flutter as if trying to escape the cold. Now that she was close to the open air, her breath emerged in small clouds; nature's reminder that winter in these parts was not to be trifled with.

How had the window gotten open? It had a latch on the inside, one that was never touched. No way the wind could have forced the window open. Had Hilary opened it for some reason, then forgot to close it? The girl knew how precarious their furnace's situation was.

Forcing her arthritic thumb and forefinger to cooperate, Irma shut the window, checking it latched firmly closed. Immediately, the breeze ceased, but the cold and damp lingered. Pausing, she listened. Yes, in the basement, the furnace lumbered away, belching out heat, but unable to combat the cold welcomed in by the open window.

A pile of split logs waited beside the fireplace, a lesson learned from those first few weeks of cold, before Jim got the furnace going. Jim.

She pushed that thought from her mind.

Placing one log on its end to serve as a balance point, Irma lowered herself to the floor in front of the fireplace. Chad, the chimney guy, had been right, and this insert provided more heat than had their open fireplace. Still, wood heat was not immediate. She needed to get this going before she started the coffeepot.

Pulling her rocking chair closer to the fireplace, she left the insert door open so heat from the flames poured out at her feet and lower legs. Yes, it would delay the buildup of heat in the firebox so the fan would not kick in as quickly and blow heat into the room, but right now, she needed this comfort. From the kitchen came the rhythmic dripping, along with the occasional splatter and hiss, as hot water cascaded over the rich, dark blend. Hilary was right. The girl insisted on buying specialty coffee beans and grinding them herself. Pricier for sure, but definitely an improvement in flavor and aroma compared to the no-name ground brand Irma usually bought.

Hilary. What had gotten into that girl leaving the window open? She didn't usually walk around with her head in the clouds. She'd speak to her about being more careful, but something didn't fit. Usually, attention to detail was part of Hilary's *modus operandi*, typical for a journalist.

A journalist. Her daughter had made something of herself, even if Hilary felt that was no thanks to her parents, or at least her mother. That girl idolized her father; always had. It was good to have heroes; she would do nothing to take that away from her daughter, even if that made *her* the sole villain in Hilary's eyes.

## Chapter Fifty

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This was weird. Dad was an engineer, even if he'd kept that fact hidden most of her life. Weren't engineers logical and sequential? Something was off about the dates in this journal. They'd be consistent for a bit, then skip chunks of time. Maybe he simply felt like writing out his thoughts some days or weeks. But why give the day and month? Dad, the man she'd thought she knew so well, was a mystery.

Throwing back the covers, Hilary shivered as her bare feet hit the chilled floor. Was the furnace on the fritz again? That would mean another trip to fetch Jim Rawlings, although the man didn't seem to object to coming around. And for some reason, *she* didn't mind having him here. Did her mother?

Throwing on wool socks her mother had knit eons ago, and dressing quickly, Hilary peered into the hallway. Her mother's door was open, and the smell of brewing coffee wafted up the stairs. But the closed door of the spare room drew her eyes. Donning a heavy Siwash sweater Mom made her years ago, she followed her instinct and entered that room. Crouching by the box where she'd found her dad's journal, Hilary found another notebook, almost identical to the one now resting under her pillow. Unlike the other one, this had a small lock, now broken.

Leafing through the pages, this one, too, had months and days, but not years. Some months coincided with those of the journal she'd read last night, but without years to signify when they were written, there was no way to tell which year or even decade they'd been penned.

One thing hurt last night, that is, one thing beside the crushing disappointment that the man she'd believed a hero had leaden feet of clay, and that was personal. What about *her*? The journal talked about a life comprising Hubert, Irma, and Owen (with the addition of *that* woman), then suddenly there was mention of Hilary, but a Hilary who could talk. Previously, the journal noted their excited anticipation of Owen's birth. Had they not been happy to welcome her into their family as well? And while Owen's first year was chronicled with all its medical complications, where was the talk about the infant and toddler Hilary?

Digging through the box produced yet a third journal with entries similar to the first one. Had Dad randomly grabbed any of these to write down his thoughts?

Shivering, she brought them back to her bedroom, climbing back under the covers to get warm.

*October 12 - Bob called me into his office today. Someone told him about Willow and me. He said it had to end - against company policy, against God's will. One of us has to resign by 5 PM or we're both fired. What am I supposed to do? I can't lose this job. Owen's medical bills, the mortgage... Irma would never understand.*

Hilary's hands tightened on the journal. She could almost see her father, shoulders hunched at his desk, scribbling frantically.

*How can Bob be so rigid? Doesn't he understand what it's like at home? The constant stress, the medical equipment everywhere, Irma's exhaustion, Owen's pain... Willow is my only escape. But I can't explain that to Bob. He just sat there, stone-faced, talking about values and morality. With no other option, I had to do it. Left a note on Willow's desk to meet for lunch. She cried when I told her she had to resign. Called me a coward. Maybe I am. But what choice do I have? I promised to help her financially*

*until she finds another job. The look in her eyes... like I was something scraped off the bottom of her shoe. But I can't lose this job. I just can't.*

Stomach bile rose up Hilary's throat. She pictured her father working even later than usual, her mother's drawn face as she balanced checkbooks late at night.

*October 30 - Willow can only find waitressing jobs. Says she's trying for office work, but nothing's coming through. Her rent is due next week. I don't know where I'll find the money, but I promised to help. Maybe I can tell Irma the car needs repairs again.*

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*November 15 - This is spiraling out of control. Willow's rent, her utilities, the money she says she needs for job interviews and clothes... But I can't abandon her. She's the only person who truly understands me. When I'm with her, I can breathe again. Even if it's costing me everything.*

Hilary closed her eyes, remembering one winter when Owen needed new braces but had to wait because "work was slow." All lies.

*December 3 - Irma asked today why I seem so distracted, why money is so tight lately. I told her the project I'm working on is stressful. Another lie to add to the pile. But what can I say? That I'm paying another woman's rent? That I'm still seeing her, even though it could cost me everything I should hold dear? That I'm weak and selfish and can't stop?*

Setting down the journal, Hilary thought about her mother's quiet dignity through those years, never complaining about the ratty furniture or her worn shoes. Had she known where the money was really going? Had she suffered in silence while her husband supported his mistress?

The more Hilary learned about her father, the more her childhood memories shifted, like pieces in a kaleidoscope forming new patterns. She'd always thought of him as the victim of her mother's demanding nature. Now



she saw a weak man, destroying his family piece by piece, unable to face his own failures.

She wondered if her mother had ever confronted him. If she'd ever thrown his betrayal in his face. Somehow, Hilary doubted it. That wasn't Irma's way. She'd simply endured, protecting her children from ugly truths, letting them believe what they wanted about their father.

The weight of that knowledge settled heavy in Hilary's chest.

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## Chapter Fifty-One

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Hilary squeezed her eyes tightly shut, willing away the words she'd just read, not wanting to open them to the reality laid out on the pages before her. So much of the life she'd believed in was a lie.

What if her dad had been a different type of man, a better man?

A whirlpool of emotions swirled within her—confusion, betrayal, and a profound sense of loss. Each word she read peeled back the layers of the man she had idolized, revealing a complex figure who was far removed from the heroic image constructed in her mind. Learning about his long-term mistress struck her like a dagger, a revelation shattering the pedestal she had placed him upon.

Anger surged through her like a wildfire. How could he have done this? How could he have lived a double life, so intimately deceiving her mother and, by extension, her? The betrayal felt personal, as if he had not only betrayed his wife but also her trust in him as a father. A weight settled in her chest, mingling with mourning, not just for her father, but for the innocence of her childhood beliefs.

As she read about the financial hardships he had imposed on his own family by splitting his resources with another household, empathy battled with her frustration. She recognized the struggles, she had seen her parents argue about money, but she had believed it was solely her mother's

harshness that contributed to their troubles. Now, grappling with the knowledge of her father's irresponsibility and the pain he caused, her sense of stability unraveled. The man she thought she knew so well was revealing himself as a deeply flawed human, and the reality was both disheartening yet somehow liberating. Some of the bitter burden balanced on her shoulders for all these years tilted ever so slightly.

Gradually, as the initial shock wore off, a flood of questions wrestled in her mind. Who was her father, really? Could she still love a man who had made such painful choices? Such selfish ones?

The journal transformed from a record of her father's thoughts, into a mirror reflecting her own turmoil, and forcing her to confront the complexity of familial love and the imperfect nature of those we idolize. The threads of her own identity and beliefs frayed, caught between love and resentment, nostalgia and the longing for truth.

How she wished things had been different. But as a kid, when she'd wish for something, Irma had no time for such nonsense. "Deal with the here and now", she'd say. "There's no point in wishing your life away."

Brody. She needed to tell Brody what she'd learned. He'd understand once she explained. How did this change their plans?

But first, something else. She reached for her phone, looking up the number William had programmed into it.

Hey! I'm in the mood for some decent coffee. Would you be interested in meeting me where we went last time?

Before she allowed herself to second guess or do her usual overthinking, her thumb pressed Send.

She'd barely put the phone back in her pocket before a whooshing sound indicated she had an incoming text.

Sure. When?

Nope, don't think about it, just do it. Life was too short for missed opportunities.

How about an hour?

If she gave herself any more time than that, she'd chicken out. As it was, she'd need to leave in just a few minutes.

But first, Brody.

Hilary waited at the side of the deserted road, her father's journals burning a hole in her bag. "I need to tell you something," she began when Brody plunked himself in the passenger side of her car, her fingers tracing the rim of her untouched travel mug.

"What's so urgent you needed to talk right now? I was in the middle of some coding."

"It's about Dad."

As she spoke, laying out the affair, the diverted money, the lies, she watched her brother's face harden.

"That's ridiculous," he cut in. "Dad would never—"

"I have his journals, Brody. His own words."

"And I suppose Mom just happened to find these convenient journals right when you showed up?" He leaned forward, voice low and bitter. "Can't you see what she's doing? She's playing you, Hil. She always was good at mind games."

"This isn't a game. She doesn't even know I've found them. Dad wrote about taking money meant for Owen's medical equipment and giving it to his mistress. While Mom was home alone, dealing with..."

"Stop defending her!" Brody's fist hit the dash. "Mom was a control freak. She drove him away with her constant demands, her need to micromanage everything."

Hilary shook her head, seeing it all differently now. "She controlled what she could because so much was out of her control. Think about it, Brody. She was alone with a severely disabled child, a husband who was never home."

"Because she drove him away!"

"Because he was with another woman!" The windshield steamed from their breath, enclosing them in a fog. "We blamed her for everything, but we were wrong. Our whole plan for revenge... it's based on lies we told ourselves."

"Owen is still dead, and at her hand. Now Dad's dead too, and we don't know for sure how, but you can bet *she's* behind it." Brody's face flushed dark red. "I see what's happening here. She's gotten to you, hasn't she? Turned you against me, just like she tried to turn you against Dad when we were kids."

"Nobody's turned me against anyone. I'm just finally seeing the truth."

“The truth?” He opened the car door, one foot on the gravel. “The truth is you're weak. Always were. Mom just had to shed some tears, play victim for a few days, and you're ready to throw away everything we planned.” His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “Whose side are you on, Hilary?”

“There shouldn't be sides, Brody. I'll give you the journals so you can read them yourself.” She reached for the box of journals in the back seat, but he swatted her arm away. She tried again. “We need to stop and think.” The tremble in her voice matched that of her hand as she reached into the box to again pass Brody a journal, the most offending one.

“No, you need to decide. Are you with me or against me?” When she didn't immediately answer, he pulled on his gloves. “Fine. I'm going ahead with the plan, with or without you. But don't come crying to me if you end up getting hurt along with her. Turncoats don't get special treatment.”

He was gone. The truth she'd discovered in those journals shattered her world, but Brody couldn't, or wouldn't, see it. He was still that angry little boy, clinging to his hatred of their mother like a security blanket. He'd always been a hot-headed kid, reacting first and thinking later. But now? Surely he'd want to know the truth since he was an adult.

His words tore through her. This was her little brother, the child she'd sheltered and nurtured all of her, ever his champion, ever his defender.

And now he was dangerous. To their mother, and maybe to her, too.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

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After the confrontation with Brody, Hilary sat in her car, hands trembling on the steering wheel. Without thinking it through, she grabbed her phone and texted William:

Are we still on for coffee?

His immediate reply made her stomach flip.

Yes! I'm on my way.

The drive to town helped settle her nerves, though her mind kept spinning between Brody's threats and William's quick response. Mae's Coffee Shop looked exactly as it had last week - the wooden sign creaking in the wind, windows steamed up against the November chill.

Hilary chose a corner table near the pot-bellied stove, its warmth chasing away the last of the outdoor cold. The familiar scent of freshly ground coffee and butter pastry wrapped around her like a comfort blanket. She'd just removed her wool hat, trying to smooth down her static-charged hair, when the chair across from her scraped against the tiled floor.

William's grin lit up his entire face as he pulled off his knit cap, revealing dark hair sticking up in unruly tufts. He didn't even try to pat it

down.

"I ordered us drinks," he said, settling in. "Still take yours with hazelnut syrup and way too much cream?"

That he remembered made her chest tight. "Some things never change." But oh, so much had.

"Speaking of which..." He nodded toward the display case. "Those cinnamon rolls look exactly like the ones we used to split during study hall."

Minutes later, they had their coffees - hers light and sweet, his black with one sugar - and a warm cinnamon roll between them, just like old times. The first few bites passed in awkward silence, but then William got a spot of icing on his nose, and they both laughed, and suddenly it was easy.

"Remember when we used to come here after football games?" he asked, breaking off a piece of roll.

"Even when you lost," Hilary said. "Especially when you lost. You said my company was better than any victory."

His eyes met hers over the rim of his coffee cup. "Still is."

Heat crept up her neck. She focused on stirring her coffee, watching the cream swirl into patterns. "Tell me about the past fifteen years," she said softly.

He shrugged, reaching for another piece of roll. "Dated some. Nothing stuck." His casual tone couldn't quite hide the meaning in his next words. "Hard to get excited about anyone else when you're carrying a torch for someone special."

Hilary couldn't meet his steady gaze. Instead, she told him about her own years - the tiny basement apartment with its perpetual damp smell, evening shifts at the library, late-night waitressing at a diner near campus. "One class at a time was all I could manage," she said. "But I did it. I got my degree."

"I never doubted you would." His voice held such certainty, such pride, that she had to look up.

When she spoke about her freelance work, her voice grew animated. "I love the research, the detective work of following leads. And the freedom to choose my projects..."

"Freedom to work from anywhere?" William asked quietly.

The question hung between them, heavy with possibility. Hilary wrapped her hands around her cooling coffee cup, remembering other

winter afternoons in this same shop, other conversations about the future. She'd run away from this town, from him, thinking she had to escape everything to escape her family's dysfunction.

"I was so focused on getting away," she said, more to herself than to him. "I never stopped to think about what else - who - I was leaving behind."

William reached across the table, his finger barely touching her wrist. "Maybe some things are worth coming back for."

The gentle touch spread warmth up her arm. Outside, snow began falling, dusting the window ledges with white. Inside, the coffee shop hummed with quiet conversations and the hiss of the espresso machine. And across the table, William watched her with the same patient devotion he'd had in high school, as if he'd just been waiting all these years for her to find her way back.

Was there a chance she'd been drawn home for more than just vengeance?



## Chapter Fifty-Three

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Hilary sat in her car, staring at Jim's truck parked behind her mother's Buick. The furnace again? But smoke puffed from the chimney, and firelight glowed behind drawn curtains. She scanned the yard, half-expecting to see Brody's car lurking in the shadows. Her little brother's earlier threats echoed in her mind, making her stomach clench.

When had their shared grief over Owen turned into something so dark?

She slipped quietly into the house, surprised to hear the long-dead singer Jim Reeves crooning "*He'll Have to Go*" from the kitchen radio. Was her mother even born when that song first came out?

As a small child, she remembered songs playing in the house, her mother even humming along, but Irma hadn't played music in later years, music had been reserved for special occasions, like Christmas morning or Owen's good days.

Standing in the shadowed hallway, Hilary removed her boots, movements careful and silent. The kitchen doorway framed a scene that made her pause: her mother seated at the table, hands extended across its worn surface, covered by Jim's weathered ones. The harsh lines around Irma's mouth had softened, and something in her expression made Hilary feel like she was intruding on an intimate moment.

"We need to tell her." Jim's voice was gentle but firm.

Irma's response was too quiet to hear.

"The girl has the right to know." Jim squeezed their clasped hands.

Hilary edged closer, straining to hear her mother's words.

"...idolized her father. It would devastate her." Irma's voice trembled.

"Some secrets are better left alone."

"She's stronger than you think," Jim insisted. "We could tell her together."

"You don't understand." Irma's voice caught. "These past weeks... it's the first time Hilary and I have had anything close to an actual relationship. She was always his daughter, never mine. I can't bear to lose that now. I need that..." She trailed off.

Jim's thumb stroked across their joined hands. "That's not the only closeness you could have in your life, Irma. If you'd let yourself..."

To Hilary's amazement, color bloomed in her mother's cheeks.

"What would she think of me?" Irma whispered. "Her mother, sleeping with another man while her father was still alive."

"Secrets have a way of coming out," Jim said softly. "They eat at you."

"I've managed all these years."

"Happily?"

Irma shrugged. "I've managed."

"Maybe it's time to stop managing and start living." Jim's voice grew urgent. "Tell her, Irma. Hilary deserves to know."

Hilary stepped into the kitchen's warm light. "Tell me what?"

They jumped apart like guilty teenagers, her mother's chair scraping against the linoleum. Jim recovered first, standing slowly, his eyes meeting Irma's in silent communication. The radio switched to "*Make the World Go Away*," its melody filling the suddenly tense kitchen.

Her mother's face had gone pale, the softness replaced by familiar rigid control. But something was different now - Hilary could see the cracks in that control, the trembling of her mother's hands as she folded them in her lap.

"Mom?" Hilary's voice was barely above a whisper. "What do you need to tell me?"

Hilary's heart hammered against her ribs as pieces of a lifetime's puzzle clicked into place, her father's cryptic journal entries about Irma's betrayal, Jim's familiar green eyes that matched her own, the way he'd been so quick

to watch out for her and her mother these past weeks, even the shape of their hands, broad across the palm with long fingers.

She faced Jim. "That you're my father?"

The words fell into the kitchen like boulders into still water. The radio switched to "*What's He Doing in My World*," its ironic timing almost making Hilary laugh. Almost.

Jim stood, one hand gripping the back of his chair, knuckles white. The color drained from Irma's face, leaving her lips bloodless, trembling.

"How..." Irma's voice cracked. "How did you..."

"The journals," Hilary said. "Dad's accusations. The dates." She looked at Jim. "And maybe I've always known somewhere deep down. I'm slow to warm up to people. Maybe that's why it felt different with you."

Jim took a step toward her, then stopped, uncertain. "Hilary, I..."

She held up her hand, needing to finish. "These times you fixed the furnace, came by to check on us... you weren't just being a good neighbor, were you?"

The kitchen clock ticked loudly in the silence. Through the window, snow fell, adding another layer of quiet to the world, her mother's hands clasped so tightly in her lap that her fingers had gone white.

The truth hung between them like a living thing, waiting to be acknowledged.

## Chapter Fifty-Four

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“Journals?” Her mother’s voice cracked. She remained seated at the kitchen table, dirty dishes waiting to be cleared.

Hilary nodded. “Dad kept journals. Did you know?”

Irma shook her head.

“I found them in boxes in the spare room.”

“I told you not to go in there.” Some of the firmness returned to Irma’s voice, but Hilary didn’t care.

She faced the pair, these people who were her parents, Jim standing protectively behind Irma. Part of her brain grappled with coming to terms with that fact; the journalist part still had questions.

“How long were you two together?”

“Once,” said Irma.

At the same time, Jim said, “A few months.”

They tried again.

“Almost six months,” Irma said.

“Only one time.” Jim looked at Irma, but she studied her fingers, so he turned to face his daughter. “I’m not sure. I mean, neither of us are sure which question you are asking.” He snuck another glance at Irma, but got nothing from her.

Instead, Irma rose and began stacking the used teacups and plates with more force than necessary. "What's the point in dredging up old details?"

Jim faced his daughter. "I knew your mother for almost six months back then. They called me to their house to fix the furnace. I needed to come back with more parts, but even after that, I returned, ostensibly to check on the furnace, but there was just something about your mother that drew me."

He gave a sigh. This was the time for full disclosure, no matter how that made him look. "Did I know your mother was married? Yes, I did, and I met Hubert. Did I know anything between us would be wrong? Yes. I couldn't stop my feelings, though. Your mother was beautiful but seemed so sad and she had such a burden on her shoulders."

Irma tried to interrupt, but he raised his hand, pleading silently with her to let him get this out. "I was drawn to her enough that I couldn't help myself. We became friends, and for the most part, it was innocent, although I could not hide the fact that I wanted more. Once, just one time, I permitted myself to push those boundaries beyond where I should have." He looked to Irma for permission to continue. "She allowed me, just that one time."

Across the table his eyes met Irma's, and it was like they were the only two in the room. "Those were the best six months of my life, but I ruined it. I pushed her past the point where she knew she should go, and she ended things." He turned to face Hilary again. "That was the last time I saw your mother in person until you came to my place asking for help with your furnace."

Before Hilary could say anything, he added, "I have no regrets. That one afternoon with your mother gave us you."

Finally, looking at her daughter, Irma nodded in agreement. "I'm not proud of what we did," she said, "but I've never regretted having you."

She'd need time to let this soak in; there was only so much information one person's brain could integrate at once. But there were more questions, so many. "How did you come to be here, both of you, near the same small town?" This part of the story didn't ring true. Were they secretly in touch all this time and were lying about breaking it off after being together that one time?

"That is on me," Jim said. "I have not spoken to your mother between that day and when the two of you came to my yard seeking help with your furnace." He'd continue with full disclosure, this time to both to Hilary and to Irma, but he addressed the younger woman. "Even though I knew I could

no longer see her, I tried to keep track of your mother to make sure she was okay. When your brother died, their names were in the paper and the media hounded them. It was such a helpless feeling to watch your mother suffer, knowing there was nothing I could do.” Taking a breath, he paused. “I know this next part does not put me in a good light.” He couldn’t meet either of their eyes. “It’s not like I’m a stalker or anything, but I took to parking near your parents’ place just so I could keep an eye on things and be there in case Irma needed me.”

That caused Irma to look up, surprise painting her face.

“Then suddenly they were gone. Must have packed up in the night because there was no sign of them the next day, nor the days and weeks after that.” He swallowed, studying the wall behind Hilary’s head. “They simply vanished. I can’t explain my panic, the desperation to know where you were and if you were all right. No one in the media could find them either. Maybe they didn’t try too hard, or simply followed the next shiny headline. When I exhausted all my avenues of search, I hired a private detective.”

Irma gasped, then scowled.

“I had to, Irma,” he pleaded. “I had to know that my girls were all right.” He turned to Hilary. “It took months, but finally, he tracked down your dad. When I found out where they were, it made sense. They escaped the media circus and all the speculation and started a new life for themselves. Once I knew the area, I found myself a place in the vicinity. Not so close that I’d make Irma or Hubert uncomfortable by running into them, but in a town near enough that I could help if needed. I worked, kept to myself and laid low.”

“Did you ever marry?” Irma asked.

He looked at her with reproach, shaking his head. “Not really. How could I when I’d already given my heart?”

Irma blushed, her mother actually blushed, then she turned in her chair to face her daughter. “I’m sorry, honey. This must be an enormous shock. I’m sorry that the mistakes of the adults spilled over into your life. But Jim is right; I could never regret something that gave me you. I apologize that I did not uphold my marital vows and understand what you must think of me.”

“But I read his journals. Dad...”

“Hilary Joan.” Irma’s ‘mother’ tone was back. “We are talking about me right now and *my* choices, and how they affected you. We are not talking about Hubert. He is not here to explain or defend himself, so we will leave him out of this.”

“But he...”

“Hilary, I said no. We are *not* going there.”

She’d never been able to move her mother when the woman used that tone. She took a moment to let some of this sink in.

Maybe there had been more between her parents than she knew. Not ever being married or even in a serious relationship, what did she know? Her conscience gave a twinge. In her youthful mind, she *had* been in a serious relationship once, but they were just kids, so that didn’t count.

But her mother not condemning Hubert when given the chance?

And Jim? Something inside her called to trust him, to believe every word he’d uttered. But, on the other hand, she’d also had complete faith in her father all her life and look how wrong she’d been. Was she so needy that she could be taken in by any father-figure type?

Hilary looked from one of her parents to the other, her brain struggling to process everything. Images flashed through her mind like scenes from different movies playing all at once: her father writing in his journals late at night, Jim’s truck appearing in their driveway, her mother’s tight-lipped silence at breakfast tables, the way Jim’s eyes crinkled at the corners just like hers did. Memories shifted and realigned themselves, taking on new meaning—every casual encounter, every lingering look, every time her mother had tensed when Jim’s name came up, her reluctance to be in the same room with him. The weight of decades of secrets pressed against her chest until she could hardly breathe.

She backed toward the door, needing space, needing air. The kitchen suddenly felt too small, too warm, too full of unspoken words, and years of longing and guilt, and sacrifice. Her mother reached out, but Hilary shook her head, unable to process one more touch, one more revelation, one more truth that would reshape her understanding of who she was and where she came from.

Without another word, she turned and fled, letting the screen door slam behind her as she escaped into the falling snow.

## Chapter Fifty-Five

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When she couldn't stand the silence any longer, Irma straightened her back and said, "What now?" She had to ask, even though every molecule within her body wished for these secrets to be shoved back into the sealed boxes where they belonged.

Jim had an answer. "For now, we love our girl and be there for her. As for you and me, I'm here in whatever capacity you want." His eyes told her he meant every word.

Before she could respond, a thunderous bang echoed through the house—the unmistakable sound of the heavy wooden cellar door crashing against the basement wall. Irma's heart lurched. That door was solid oak, installed when the house was built a century ago, and took considerable force to move.

Jim was on his feet instantly, shoulders tense. "Stay here."

But Irma followed him to the basement stairs, flicking on the solitary light as they descended. The musty smell of earth and concrete grew stronger with each step. At the bottom, Jim swore under his breath. The left half of the cellar door hung open, its metal latch flapping uselessly. Beyond it, through the open exterior doorway, snow swirled in on a bitter wind, dusting the concrete steps with white.



Jim took those stairs two at a time, disappearing into the night. Irma clung to the stair rail, hugging herself, suddenly cold in more ways than one.

When he returned, his face was grim. "Someone's been here recently. Footprints in the snow, but they're already filling in." He studied the latch he'd fixed twice before. "This was forced. Irma, has anything else been happening? Anything at all?"

She thought of all the little things she'd dismissed, each one seeming minor until laid out together. "The kitchen window was open one morning a few weeks ago, and the wind came in. Broke my African violet when it fell. And pictures—sometimes they're moved, or turned upside down. Even Owen's, and once a family picture was slashed."

Jim's expression darkened. "What else?"

"Hubert's pipe keeps showing up in odd places. I packed it away after...but it appears on the kitchen table, or on the porch swing. His pouch of tobacco, too, sometimes intact, sometimes with some spilled. I finally threw it in the garbage the other day, sick of cleaning it up." She gave a shaky laugh. "The toilet even flushes sometimes when no one's in there, but that's probably just old plumbing."

"The chainsaw battery?"

"Missing. I thought I'd misplaced it."

Jim ran his hands through his hair, frustration evident. "Why didn't you tell me about these things?"

"They seemed so small, so random. I thought I was imagining things, or maybe..." She trailed off, not wanting to voice her darker thoughts.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe it was Hubert's spirit, trying to tell me something." As soon as she said it aloud, she knew how foolish it sounded.

"This isn't Hubert's spirit, Irma. Someone's been getting into your house." He stepped closer, voice urgent. "Pack a bag. You and Hilary can stay at my place until we figure this out."

"No." The word came out sharp, automatic. "I'm not running from my own home."

"This isn't about pride."

"It's not pride. This is my house. Mine and Hubert's. I won't be chased out."

They stood in the chilly basement, stubborn wills clashing like storm fronts.

"Then let me sleep on the couch," Jim said finally. "Just until we can properly secure the house."

"Absolutely not." The thought of him staying here, after everything that had just happened with Hilary... "I appreciate your concern, but no."

"Damn it, Irma, be reasonable. My girls..."

"Are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves," she cut him off, though her voice softened at his obvious worry. "We've been doing it for years."

Jim's jaw clenched. He looked around the basement one more time, taking in the shadows in the corners, the various entry points, the tools that could become weapons in the wrong hands. "At least let me install better locks. And security lights."

"Fine." She started up the stairs, needing to escape his protective hovering. "Tomorrow." She and Hilary needed time alone together tonight.

At the top of the stairs, she paused. Below, she could hear Jim checking the cellar door one more time, muttering under his breath. Despite her brave words, a tendril of fear curled in her stomach. Someone had been in her house, moving things, watching them. The question was: who? And why?

She pushed the thoughts away. She had enough to deal with tonight without borrowing more trouble. But had trouble already found them?

## Chapter Fifty-Six

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Hilary slipped back in just as Irma was setting two mugs of chamomile tea on the coffee table. The fire had settled into a steady glow, and Irma watched her daughter sink into Hubert's worn recliner chair, looking both older and younger than her years.

"He was good to me, wasn't he? Dad, I mean?" Hilary wrapped her hands around the warm mug. "Like he never treated me differently from Brody."

"He loved you completely." Irma settled onto the couch, tucking her feet under her. "From the moment he first held you. Whatever else happened between your father and me, never doubt that."

The firelight caught the tears gathering in Hilary's eyes. "I'm trying not to be angry about the lies. I understand why, I think. But it still hurts."

Irma nodded, her throat tight. She'd done what seemed right at the time, but watching her daughter's pain made her question every decision she'd ever made.

"What about you and Jim now?" Hilary asked, and there was something tentative in her voice, as if she wasn't sure she had the right to ask.

Irma stared into her tea, watching the steam rise in delicate spirals. How to explain decades of rigid self-denial? Of telling herself that loyalty to Hubert and the family they created together meant closing herself off from

any other possibility? “I honestly don't know,” she admitted. “Hubert and I... we loved each other once. Deeply. But somewhere along the way, we became more like furniture to each other—necessary, functional, but not really seen anymore. We stayed together because that's what people did, what families needed.”

“But Dad's gone now,” Hilary said softly.

“Yes.” Irma touched her wedding ring, a habit she hadn't even realized she had until now. “And I'm finding that maybe I'm not as self-sufficient as I thought. That maybe I've been hiding behind that idea.”

Hilary leaned forward, her face serious. “Mom? Is there anything else I should know? Any other secrets?”

The question hit Irma like a physical blow. Two secrets pressed against her consciousness: one that would devastate Hilary, another that would rewrite everything she thought she knew about their family. But they weren't her secrets to tell, and the fragile new closeness with her daughter felt too precious to risk.

“No,” she said, and hated how easily the lie came. “That's everything.”

Hilary nodded, seeming to accept this, and making Irma simultaneously relieved and ashamed. She watched her daughter sip her tea, saw the woman she'd become superimposed on the child she'd been, and realized with a start that she needed this, needed the connection, the understanding, the chance to know her daughter as more than just someone she'd raised and tried to protect.

The fire crackled, sending shadows dancing across the walls. Outside, the wind had died down, leaving only the weight of snow and secrets in the dark.

Emotions were exhausting. She coped better when everything was kept under wraps. Now, the weight of all these feelings threatened to pull her under. These shoulders, that had weathered so much, took it all on to protect her family, now bowed, almost giving in to the impending tsunami. It was too much. Abruptly she rose, her steps up the stairs heavy.

Irma lay in the darkness, listening to Hilary's footsteps downstairs, dishes rattling in the sink. The house creaked its familiar night sounds, but even those felt different now, loaded with new meaning. Everything felt different.

Emotions were exhausting. She coped better when everything was kept under wraps.

She'd changed into her practical flannel nightgown, the same kind she'd worn for twenty years, but tonight she was aware of it in a way she hadn't been before. Just as she was aware of her hands, folded across her stomach like always, and her hair, still pinned up because that's what she did, what she'd always done.

Hilary had asked what would happen now with her and Jim. Good question. The man's voice echoed in her head: "I'm here in whatever capacity you want."

But what did she want? The question itself felt dangerous. Want belonged to younger women, women who hadn't learned the hard way that life rarely cared what you wanted. Better to focus on need, on duty, on the next necessary thing.

Yet she could still feel the warmth of his hand on her fists from earlier, the current of something alive and urgent passing between them. It reminded her of their time together all those years ago - not just the physical part, but the way he'd looked at her like she was more than a set of responsibilities to be managed.

She rolled onto her side, punching her pillow into submission. This was foolishness. She was too old to be lying awake like a lovesick girl, too sensible to be entertaining fantasies about second chances. And yet...

And yet she was tired of being sensible. Tired of being the strong one, the capable one, the one who never needed anyone. Tired of the shell she'd built around herself that was supposed to keep pain out but mostly kept her locked in.

But breaking free of that shell meant risk. Meant possibly hurting Hilary once more, or Brody, if she ever saw him again. Meant facing all the emotions she'd packed away so neatly over the years. Meant trusting Jim meant what he said, that she was worth more than just whatever capacity she could serve.

She touched her lips, remembering their last kiss decades ago. She'd felt so alive then, so real. When had she stopped feeling real?

Outside her window, snow continued to fall, adding another layer to the white blanket covering her world. Tomorrow it would need to be dealt with, managed, controlled. But tonight, just for tonight, she let herself wonder about want.

## Chapter Fifty-Seven

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After rinsing out their teacups, tidying the living room, and making sure the fire insert's door shut securely, Hilary went upstairs. Something drew her to the closed door of the spare room, the place that harbored so many secrets.

Over the last week, she'd straightened up the room, clearing off the cot that had been Brody's bed. Delving into a crate, she unearthed old family albums. The pictures started with a pregnant youthful Irma, confident, healthy, and happy, with Hubert's arms wrapped around her. Then the pictures recorded their family of three, with Owen between them. Next were pages of an older, more worn Irma, pregnant again. Although still together, Irma and Hubert no longer shared those special looks, no longer constantly touching.

Then there was baby Hilary, shot after shot after shot. Lost in memories, Hilary ran her fingers over the old photographs spread across Brody's childhood bed. Her own chubby-cheeked face beamed from dozens of snapshots— first steps, first birthday, first day of school. Her parents looked so young, especially her mother. There was a softness to Irma's face then that Hilary had never seen in person.

Irma with Owen and Hilary, the two children together, Hubert with his son and daughter, but no Irma with a burgeoning belly this time. Hilary sought through more crates, to no avail. Although they'd chronicled every

step of *her* development, where were Brody's baby pictures? She dug deeper into the boxes, finding more albums, loose photos, even some negatives in yellowed envelopes. Nothing. Brody just appeared in their family photos as if by magic, already walking, already talking. She'd have to ask her mother about that.

Later in bed, Hilary opened Hubert's journal, settling back against her pillows. As she read, her hands began to tremble.

*Willow's pregnant. My child. Our child. I should feel only joy, but fear gnaws at me. How can I possibly manage this?*

"Oh, Dad," Hilary whispered. The pages that followed painted a picture so different from the steady, reliable father she'd known. Here was a man caught between duty and desire, trying desperately to hold two lives together.

*Willow wants things, things I can't give her. She assumed this pregnancy meant I'd leave Irma. I've told her all along that I can't, that I have an obligation to Irma, Owen and Hilary. Willow says that now I have an obligation to her, too, so choose.*

*I can't, I just can't. While Willow has my heart, Irma holds my soul. We once loved each other fiercely. We may have lost that, but she's the mother of my children; she gave up everything to care for Owen. Staying with her is the least I can do. I must.*

Then the baby arrived. The journal entries no longer dated, no longer sequential, they detailed pain, and a mind driven in two. Even while supporting Willow in the hospital during labor, Hubert's torment was about how he was going to pay these medical bills. Poor Dad. Somehow, she felt for his anguish even though it was of his own making.

*All those things Irma made look easy? None of that comes naturally to Willow. I should not compare the two women; they are so different. And yet, with Irma, the children come first, herself last. Willow is different; she finds*

*the baby taxing to care for and complains she hardly gets any time for herself. It's just one baby, and a healthy one at that.*

Her stomach clenched as she read about the baby. Brody, her mind corrected. The journal says they called him Brody. Could one man have named two different sons by the same name? Not likely. Brody. Her brother. Not just her brother, but her half-brother. The entries about his early life made her want to cry. Poor little Brody, neglected while his mother watched TV. She thought of her own childhood photos, every milestone celebrated, every moment captured. The contrast hurt her heart.

*Arrived to find him crying again today. Diaper rash so bad his little bottom is bleeding. Willow says he's too needy, but he's just a baby. What am I supposed to do?*

Hilary had to put the journal down for a moment, remembering how attentive Irma had always been with them when they were little. How she seemed to anticipate their needs before they even knew them themselves.

*No longer does Willow greet me with a kiss and a cuddle. As soon as I appear, she's out the door saying she needs a break, to go have some fun, leaving me alone with Brody. When this happens, I don't know if she'll be back in 15 minutes or 15 hours. I'm running out of explanations to give to Irma for my erratic timetable.*

*I sort of understand where Willow's coming from. Although I love my children, I'll confess that I've never been much of a hands-on father; Irma takes care of all the day-to-day stuff. When I come home, I play with the kids while Irma does the heavy lifting.*

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*Willow says it's not fair that I get to go out into the world while she's stuck at home with the kid. Isn't that the same for Irma, yet Irma's never complained to me about it, not even once?*

*Willow's stepping up her demands for me to leave my wife. If I lived with her, I'd be more help with the kid, she says.*



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*Her threats are increasing. If I don't leave Irma for her, she says she'll prevent me from ever seeing Brody again. How will I know that he's safe?*

As she read about Willow's increasing demands and threats, Hilary's anger shifted. Not at her father anymore, but at this woman who'd used a child as leverage.

*She's done it. Banished me. I am no longer allowed to see my son. He's only a year-and-a-half old. Kids change so much at this age. He won't remember me. What have I done?*

How could a woman do that, deny the father visiting rights? Her dad looked into trying a legal route to ensure he had access, but his chances were slim. He was already married with another family. To an outsider, it would look like Willow had given up on him being a father to their son, and wanted to make a fresh start on her own.

But not actually on her own. The journal entries made it clear that Hubert still supported Willow and Brody financially; the money he made at his second job, (the one Irma knew nothing about) went solely to Willow.

Money wasn't enough for Willow, though. She wanted her life back. A child was too much work, so she decided to finally just... give him away.

The last entries made her sit up straight, fury coursing through her.

*Irma took the news better than I deserved. Just nodded and asked when he'd be coming. Never raised her voice, never shed a tear. Sometimes I think it would be easier if she'd scream at me. But she handled it with her usual stoicism, the way she did everything. So, Brody came to live with us, Irma accepting this new son as her own.*

Hilary slammed the journal shut, her mother's words from earlier echoing in her head: "No, that's everything. No more secrets."

Another lie. How many more secrets were buried in their family's past? How many more times would she have to rewrite her own history?

She thought about her mother, still protecting everyone else's secrets at the cost of her relationship with her daughter. Of Jim, who at least had been honest once confronted.

The snow fell silently outside her window, adding another layer to the drifts. Inside, Hilary lay awake, adding another veneer to her understanding of her family, and wondering what else she didn't know.

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## Chapter Fifty-Eight

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Jim worked methodically, drilling into door frames while Irma hovered nearby, her protests about the expense falling on deaf ears, the sharp whine of the drill piercing straight through her carefully maintained composure.

“The existing locks are perfectly adequate,” she tried again.

Jim didn’t even look up. “They’re not. Neither are the lights, and you need an alarm system.” His tone left no room for argument, reminding her of all the times she’d failed to keep her family safe.

She retreated to the kitchen, busying herself making coffee, when Hilary’s voice cut through the mechanical noises: “You lied to me. Again.”

Irma’s hands stilled on the coffee pot. She’d known this was coming from the moment she’d seen Hilary’s face this morning, tight with barely contained fury.

“You promised no more secrets,” Hilary continued, her voice rising. “But you kept this from me - about Brody, about his mother.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell.” The words sounded hollow even to her own ears. “Brody doesn’t know...”

“Oh, that’s rich. More protection. More lies.” Hilary’s laugh was bitter. “You know he hates you, right? He hates how miserable you made our childhood, always pinching pennies, always pretending everything was fine when it wasn’t. At least Dad made things fun sometimes.”

Each word landed like a physical blow, but Irma held herself still, absorbing them as she had absorbed everything else life had thrown at her. She could feel her carefully constructed walls beginning to crack. The coffee pot trembled in her hands.

“The only things you taught us were how to suffer in silence,” Hilary spat. “How to pretend. How to lie.”

Irma set the pot down carefully, frightened by how close she was to breaking. She couldn’t let Hilary see her cry. No, that wasn’t what strong mothers did. “I should go see if Jim needs any help,” she managed, her voice steady despite the tremor in her chest.

She fled into the snowy afternoon, where at least the cold could explain away her watery eyes.

Hilary paced the living room, her anger slowly giving way to exhaustion. She shouldn’t have said those things, shouldn’t have thrown her childhood back in her mother’s face like that. But the lies - God, the lies.

The open roll-top desk caught her eye. Hadn’t her mother said it was locked? Her hands shook as she pulled open drawer after drawer, finding nothing but old papers until...there. There it was. A stack of cancelled checks bound with rubber bands.

The first one made her breath catch: \$500 to Willow Blake. Then another, and another, month after month, year after year. The amounts increased - \$1000, then \$1500 - the larger amounts starting several months before Brody’s birthday, stretching all the way to September of this year. Hilary did the math in her head and felt sick. All those years of scraping by, of her mother working extra contracts, her dad working extra shifts, of wearing hand-me-downs and making do...

The front door opened, and Hilary heard her mother stamping snow from her boots.

“Mom?” Her voice was gentle now, all traces of earlier anger gone. “Could you come here?”

Irma appeared in the doorway, her face still composed but her eyes red-rimmed. Hilary held up the checks without a word.

She watched understanding dawn on her mother’s face as she flipped through the checks, watched the careful mask finally crack. When the tears came, they were silent. Of course they were silent. Everything about her mother was quiet - but they carved deep tracks down Irma’s cheeks.

Hilary thought of all the bills spread across the kitchen table, of her mother's worn checkbook, of the constant juggling of expenses. She thought of Irma taking in another woman's child without complaint, raising him as her own while his real mother cashed check after check.

"Oh, Mom," she whispered, and for the first time since she was a little girl, she reached for her mother first.

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## Chapter Fifty-Nine

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It was like reading about a stranger, this Hubert Willoughby, whom she'd thought she'd known so well all her life. Her father, or rather, the man who'd raised her.

Even though she knew the odds were high that what she read between these pages would bruise her heart even more, Hilary couldn't stop herself. She settled in bed once again with a journal her father had penned.

Although he no longer dated the entries, she could tell they were later on in years. Brody lived with them. She was in school, her dad proud of her academic skills. Owen, though, was hardly ever in school these days since his health issues made him frailer than ever.

Owen was a teenager now. Even though his mind remained as that of a preschooler, his body showed the promise of manhood.

*Irma astounds me. When I'm home in the evenings to lift Owen out of the bathtub or from his wheelchair to his bed, it taxes me. Yet my wife does this all day, every day.*

*I tell her to just let him sit in his chair, but she won't hear of it. Bedsores develop too easily if he's not repositioned frequently.*

*He needs his diaper changed. Bowel and bladder dysfunction are common in people with cerebral palsy; Irma does the job without complaint.*

*He needed to be on a flat surface for his physiotherapy exercises three times a day. Muscle shortening and muscle rigidity worsened if not treated consistently, resulting in even more surgeries.*

*He needs to be fed small amounts many times a day due to his swallowing issues.*

*He needs to be watched in case he aspirates saliva, or food, both of which happen often.*

*He needs...he needs. It never stops.*

As a kid, she knew Owen was sick a lot, but not to the extent of what had to be done for him.

*He aspirated once more. Irma called me at work to say she was at the hospital with the three kids. Again. This time the cause was something that should have been innocent, a sweet moment between siblings.*

*Hilary came home after being out with some friends, doing the sort of things 10-year-old girls like to do. She brought with her a chocolate milkshake and offered the straw to Owen. My girl was just trying to share a drink with her brother. But the liquid was too thick for him and between the fluid's viscosity and his laryngeal spasms, he aspirated slurps of the milkshake into his lungs.*

*Irma was able to get enough out of his windpipe and get him breathing again, but his breaths were labored after that, and his lips bluish. So, Irma loaded the kids into the van and took them to the emergency room.*

*I don't know how we're going to pay for this.*

Hilary had to put the journal down after reading that. Had *she* hurt her brother? And what about Dad's last statement? With what she knew now, how dare he complain about paying for Owen's medical treatment while he threw money at another woman?

*I was home this afternoon when it happened. I was watching the game on TV while Irma and Owen were in his bedroom getting ready for his physio exercises. I heard loud gurgles of protest from Owen, a cry from Irma, then two thumps.*

*I knew it was happening, or at least a part of me did, the part that didn't want to acknowledge how bad things had gotten.*

*Owen's body was growing fast, even though his mind functioned as a child less than a third his age. Owen weighed more than Irma and had the strength to match. The kid hated his exercises; Irma explained that they hurt him, and with his limited understanding of consequences, he fought them. With everything he had.*

*Over the last year or so, I've noticed bruises on Irma's arms and face. Maybe they are on other parts of her body as well, but I rarely get to see those areas. Owen fights the exercises with every ounce of strength he has; Irma takes a beating in the process.*

*I tell her to just let it go, skip the exercises if he hates them so much. But she says that will result in more frequent surgeries as his tendons and muscles become increasingly rigid. She doesn't want Owen to go through the pain of surgery, plus that would be another medical bill piling onto the ones we already can't pay.*

*She has a point.*

Well then, Dad, why didn't you funnel some of that money you were giving to Willow this way? After all, there was no need to pay child support when the child lived with us.

*We fought last night - a big one. At supper I watched Irma resuscitate Owen once again after he'd choked on some food. That woman is quick with the Heimlich, I'll tell you. She had that kid pushed forward in his chair, the shoulder straps undone and her arms around him from behind before I hardly recognized what was happening.*

*I told her, God help me, I told her she should not have done that, she should just have let him go.*

*I made my wife cry.*

The next entries were inconsequential stuff, mostly about the cars he worked on in the garage. Sometimes interspersed with bitterness about the unfairness of life. He blamed most of his problems on Bob Mader, the guy who owned the engineering firm who forced Willow to resign. Was that really how Dad saw things?



Anyway, apparently life carried on until Mr. Mader decided to retire and sell the firm. The company who took it over had their own engineering staff.

Mr. Mader did his best to find new positions for his employees, writing glowing reference letters and pulling strings. It wasn't that Dad couldn't get another job; he had plenty of offers. The problem was insurance. Sure, the family qualified for medical insurance; that is except for Owen. *He* had a pre-existing condition, an expensive one, so he would not be covered under their group policy. Job after job Dad turned down, searching for that one that would include Owen in an insurance policy.

Meanwhile, they lived on their savings until Irma said there was no more. The family still needed to eat and keep a roof over their heads, so Hubert took a job, not one of the better ones as they'd been snatched up long before then, but it was a job that paid okay, sans any medical coverage for their eldest child.

*God rest his soul, he's gone.*

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## Chapter Sixty

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What did that last, one-line entry mean? She needed to think about something else for a while, shut down the movies playing through her mind.

Images of Owen slugging her mother haunted Hilary's sleep, of her brother choking, an almost daily occurrence at the supper table. Gross, Brody called it, with an eight-year-old's revulsion and fascination with whatever Owen regurgitated. She remembered wanting to chuck her cookies, too, at the sight. She knew Owen couldn't help it, but she wished Mom would feed him somewhere else so the rest of the family didn't have to watch. Yeah, yeah, so I was ten and a brat. So, sue me.

Getting out of bed, she went to the bathroom, noticing the door to Brody's room was ajar and the bed was no longer neatly made. She must have mussed it when she was going through the photo albums.

Her mind shifted elsewhere; she had an article due that afternoon and needed her focus only on that.

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Done. She was up to date on her assignments, with new ones on the way. That was the tricky thing about freelance work, scouting for new work

while completing current contracts on time and doing them well. In this line of work, reputation was everything.

It was a funny thing about using your brain all day; it made you tired. But it was a different kind of fatigue than a day spent chopping wood. This type of tired, a brain weariness made it harder to fall asleep.

She pulled out her father's journal. Who was she kidding? A little light reading to help her fall asleep? Not likely.

*I've had it. I found Irma crying, Irma, the woman who hardly ever shed a tear, despite the number of blows our son heaped on her. When I tried to take her in my arms to find out what was wrong, to see where Owen had hurt her this time, she refused to show me her bruises. She was crying because it was so hard to see Owen in pain. She tried valiantly to keep him exercised, to prevent contractures, but they happened anyway. He needed more back surgery, another rod put into his spine to keep his back upright; breathing was too hard the more he hunched over, folding in on himself. He already had one rod inserted, but the bottom of it caused an infection, one that resulted in significant pain, decreased mobility, and could be life-threatening if not dealt with.*

*Getting oral antibiotics into that man-child was almost impossible. He yanked out any IV that was put in. It was all just too much.*

*I told Irma to get out. Take the other two kids and go someplace fun for the afternoon. She looked at me like I'd lost my mind. When was the last time I'd made her such an offer? I'm ashamed to say that I can't remember.*

*I'd yelled to Hilary and Brody, telling them to grab their swimsuits and towels, that their mom was taking them to the water slides. Their leaping and yelling convinced Irma, or maybe she was desperate for the escape herself.*

*How many times did that woman go over with me the instructions on how to feed and water Owen? Far too many. Did she have an inkling that I wasn't taking them in, that I had no intention of carrying them out?*

Dad? What do you mean by that?

*When they came home, it was over. I sat on the couch with Owen in my arms, my shirt almost as wet as his. "What did you feed him?" Irma*

screamed at me, the woman who never raised her voice. “What did you do?” She tried to pull him from me, to get her arms around him to do the Heimlich.

I didn’t answer her, nor did I let go of our son; I could tell she didn’t really want to hear my answer, anyway.

A banana, but not one cut in the tiny pieces Irma had the patience to feed him. Milk, chocolate milk thickened with as much chocolate powder as the liquid could hold.

It didn’t take much. He choked on the banana, of course he did. Several times, in fact, but the kid was a fighter. He tried gulping it down and came back for more. Finally, too much lodged in his esophagus and he struggled. Nothing new. I’d watched my son struggle hundreds, no, thousands of times over the past 14 years. He was accustomed to it, but it was something a parent never got used to. Never.

But despite his struggles, his eyes lit up when I showed him the clear glass of milk with brown bits floating around. He knew what that was.

With his esophagus clogged, liquid taken in through the straw readily backed up into his windpipe, causing him to retch. Luckily, he didn’t regurgitate, throwing up the banana chunks, just fought for air.

I didn’t do the Heimlich. I didn’t push his chair upright. I waited. I held his hand and talked gently to him and waited.

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Sudden deaths at home are treated as suspicious. The ambulance came (yet another bill). The police came. All the swirling lights outside our house made the place look like a circus. The media came, taking advantage of a slow news night and access to police scanners.

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What I didn’t anticipate was the reaction later. People with cerebral palsy died all the time; their life expectancy was shorter than the general population. Everyone knew that.

Plus, with his medical history, I expected everyone and his dog to understand.

*But it wasn't that way.*

*When interviewed, people at the school he rarely attended these days talked about his smiles, and the devoted care his mother selflessly gave. A reporter asked if it could have gotten to be too much for the mom?*

*That turned the tide. Doctors, and the law interviewed us over and over. Gotta hand it to Irma. Not once did she admit that I'd been the one left alone with Owen when he passed. I could see the effect the unspoken accusations had on my wife, and then the accusations turned more open in the press. Didn't they have anything better to do?*

*What if someone recognized Irma being at the swimming pool? They blazoned her face all over the papers. What if one of the kids let slip that they'd spent the afternoon swimming with their mom, not their dad?*

*We had to get out of here, flee somewhere no one knew us, didn't know our story, where there'd be no accusations and no investigation.*

*It wasn't easy. A private, fast sale didn't bring in nearly what our duplex was worth. We stayed in a dive of a hotel in a small town, Irma making sandwiches and cooking over a one-burner hot plate, while we looked for a new place where we could settle.*

*That's when we found this acreage. It's not much, but it was what we could afford.*

*The other problem was income. I could no longer work as an engineer; they'd want to know my employment history, my credentials. It could all come out.*

*I'd always been good with my hands, and the garage in Nordale didn't ask too many questions. The salary is a third less than what I pulled in from my previous professional job, but we'd get by. Good thing I had some money stashed away so I could keep paying my other obligations. If I slipped up, you never knew what Willow might do.*

## Chapter Sixty-One

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Irma slept in, a rare occurrence, but with so much weighing on her heart, sleep hadn't come easily. Downstairs, she could hear Hilary moving around the kitchen. In the bathroom, the shower shut off.

Wait! It took a few seconds for her groggy mind to reconcile those two facts.

Scurrying as fast as non-compliant limbs would move first thing in the morning, she donned her robe and slippers to check the bathroom.

As she got to that door, it opened, steam rolling out the opening. Then a man emerged, one towel wrapped around his waist, another rubbing his hair.

"Hey, ma," Brody said with a grin.

Irma stood frozen, stunned at the presence of the boy she'd not seen in well over a decade, not since he finished high school.

Moving past his mother, he opened the door to his room.

Irma found her voice. "I'll make waffles."

In the kitchen, she confronted Hilary. "Did you know your brother was here?"

The look on her daughter's face said it all. She'd known. Secrets. And the girl accused *her* of hiding secrets.

“Why is he here, and here now?” Recognition dawned. “You two have been in contact, haven’t you? You told him about your dad’s passing.”

Hilary nodded.

How to explain this to her mother? “We haven’t seen each other much over the years, but we text sometimes. I let him know when I saw Dad’s obituary. Mom...” She didn’t know how to say this, but Irma had the right to know. “We were angry, both of us, about Owen’s death and how his name was never mentioned again. He was there at the center of our lives, and then he was just gone. And you yanked us out of school, and we had to move here.”

Irma said nothing, so Hilary continued. “We thought, well Brody thought, that Owen was a nuisance to you, so you wanted him out of the way. Brody said that if you’d kill Owen, what would have stopped you from doing the same to Dad when he got old and sick, needing care?”

Irma recoiled, each word from her daughter’s mouth causing her to fold in on herself more and more. It took several tries before she could form words. “You thought *that* of me? That I could end your brother’s life? Your father’s?” She steeled herself for the answer.

Hilary closed the distance between them, reaching for her mother’s hand.

Irma took a step back.

“Mom, yeah, I did, at first. We were going to get revenge on you, just little stuff to make your life as miserable as we thought you’d made ours and theirs.” She hurried on. “But that was before I got here, before I got to know you.” She added in a smaller voice. “Before I read Dad’s journals.”

What had I done to these children to make them believe I was so evil?

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, heavy ones.

“I’d better get those waffles started.” Good thing she prepared the batter last night. It was better when the ingredients had time to breathe and come together. How long would it take to thaw sausages in the microwave? Brody had always preferred them to bacon.

“Morning, ladies.” Brody breezed in as if this was something he did every day, heading straight for the coffeepot. Cradling a mug in his hands,

he leaned his butt against the counter, his gaze fixed on Irma. “So, Momma Dearest, I hear Dad kicked the bucket. How’d you bump him off?”

“Brody!” This from Hilary.

“We might as well get right to it, hadn’t we?”

Hilary turned to Irma. “Mom, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for me,” Brody told her. “*She’s* the one who should be on her knees apologizing to *us*.”

“Brody, you’ve got this all wrong. It’s not what you think, what we both thought.”

“Let’s just have our mother explain it to us, then.” His lip curled as he turned back to Irma. “So, what happened to Dad?”

The kids deserved to know the truth. At least some of it. “Your father didn’t feel well, just generally not himself, then he had some abdominal pain and went to the doctor. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It’s fast-moving, and they didn’t give him much time.”

“And what, you didn’t want him to get treatment? Didn’t want to spend the money on him?”

She ignored that. “Treatment for his type of cancer was mostly palliative. There were some experimental trials he could have been part of, but he chose not to. The outcome with treatment was only marginally better, giving him maybe a few more months, but they would be bad months, with no quality of life. At least that’s how the doctors explained it.” Those were hard days, the memories raw. “He didn’t want to go to the hospital.”

Brody snorted.

Irma continued. “He wanted to die at home, so that’s what we did. The living room became his bedroom once the stairs were too difficult for him. He had pain meds; that was our goal, to keep him as comfortable as possible. When it became too difficult for him to swallow pills, they gave him an IV drip to deliver a steady dose of analgesics. After a few weeks, that wasn’t enough, so they added a pump. Hubert could push it when he needed an extra dose of morphine to handle the pain. When he grew too weak to raise his hand to push the pump, I learned to read the tension in his body when the pain was too bad and would push it for him.”



## Chapter Sixty-Two

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There was more, but the kids didn't need to know that part. Despite being an engineer, Hubert was never a detail guy outside of his professional life, so she kept track of his pills, adhering rigidly to the schedule the doctors gave, with only a slight exception. Without making him suffer overly, she held back on some of the pain meds just in case. You never knew when you might need them closer to the end.

She accumulated a nice little stash.

The decline in Hubert came quicker than either of them could have imagined. At first, week by week she could tell the difference, then day by day. All told, it was only a month from the diagnosis when the end came.

Could the end have been held off a little longer? Maybe, but what was the point?

She got good at reading Hubert's body language, reading the signs in his face and body that showed the amount of pain he was in. One day in late September, it seemed unceasing, the pump only giving relief for brief periods. It was time.

In the kitchen, she set a pan of water boiling on the stove. Carefully, so as not to spill any precious granules, she opened her hoard of capsules, emptying them into a ladle, then slowly dipping the contents into the roiling water.

It didn't take much for the contents to dissolve, but still she kept the liquid simmering, hoping to condense the potion into something potent. She'd saved a bag of the cocktail mixture of pain killers the medical people concocted when one ingredient alone no longer brought Hubert relief.

After letting the pot on the stove cool, she used a syringe to suck up the liquid, then injected it into the IV bag, one she'd removed from the stand before it was quite emptied. It took three tries before she'd gotten all the contents from the pot into the bag. She shook it, trying to ensure that all the ingredients were well mixed.

Back in the living room, she removed the current IV bag from the rolling stand, hooking up her doctored one. The lines were etched deeply into Hubert's face, his movements restless underneath the crisp sheet, his breaths harsh and shallow.

She pushed the button, waiting to see the effect; usually within a few minutes, her husband got some relief. It took longer this time. She pressed the button again, holding it for a count of ten. His fists unclenched. She pressed again. Slowly, his grimace smoothed out, his jaw unclenching. She pushed again. And again, and again. His body relaxed. Her husband was out of pain. She pushed another time. And another. His breathing slowed, then stilled. He was at peace.

That last part was all the kids needed to know.

---

None of this moved Brody. "So, when's the reading of the will, Ma?"

"There isn't a reading."

"No? Keeping everything for yourself, like usual?"

"Brody, there is nothing to keep. What Hubert left is what you see here." Irma swept her arm around the kitchen. This house and farmland around us is all we owned." She emphasized the 'we' slightly. "It was registered in both your father's name and my name, so when he passed, it became just mine."

"Oh, I have no doubt it became just yours. Like everything else."

"Brody!"

He paid no heed to his sister. "What about the rest? As his offspring, aren't Hilary and I entitled to something? Shouldn't we share in his estate?"

Hilary tried again. "Brody, there is nothing else."

He looked at his sister with disdain. "She really has you brainwashed, hasn't she?"

"You have it all wrong, Brody. Let's sit down and discuss this. Mom, can I get you more coffee?"

Brody slumped in a chair.

"Mom," Hilary started, "I read more of Dad's journal last night. He talked about how Owen died."

Irma flinched.

Brody laughed.

Not taking her eyes from her mother's, Hilary said, "I know you didn't kill our brother. Dad did. Or rather, he didn't kill him, but he didn't save him when he could have."

Irma swallowed.

Brody sat forward, getting in his mother's face. "You're blaming a dead man for what you did, someone who can no longer defend himself."

Hilary put a restraining hand on her brother's arm. "You don't understand. *Dad* wrote about this. It has nothing to do with Mom."

"Everything has something to do with Mom. She's the center we all dance around. Always have."

His mug slammed down on the table. "Looks like you've chosen your side, Hilary. Don't say I didn't warn you." His footsteps thundered up the stairs. Seconds later he came back down, his boots heavy on the stairs. Then the back door opened, the one rarely ever used. They didn't hear it shut.

After several seconds of silence, Hilary got up and closed the door, preventing any more cold wind from entering the house. "Imbecile," she muttered.

## Chapter Sixty-Three

---

Jim browsed Abe's Hardware store. In all his plans yesterday, he'd forgotten one thing. He'd installed lights, locks, cameras, and a security system, but omitted one protective measure every home should have. Fire extinguishers. He chose carefully, keeping in mind what a woman could heft. In his ideal world, he'd be there to do the heavy lifting for her, but that wasn't his call to make. An assortment of light-weight extinguishers, plus a fiberglass blanket to throw over any erupting fire, should do it.

He took his purchases to the counter, a young man taking his place behind him.

"Hi, Abe."

"Good day to you," Abe said. "You're looking might spiffy these days."

"A guy's got to clean up some time."

"I'd do it a lot less frequently if the wife'd let me get away with it."

They both laughed. "A woman will do that to ya."

Abe eyed him. "Did you get that furnace fixed up for the Willoughby women?"

Behind him, Jim felt the young man focus in on their conversation. Irma was a private woman; he didn't want to say too much. "They have heat, or at least the last I heard they did." No need to say that he'd been there only yesterday.

“Nice that Hilary came home to help her momma.”

“Hilary?”

The voice came from behind him. Jim turned slightly, not wanting to include the guy in their conversation, but the guy’d mentioned his daughter’s name.

Abe had no such reservations. “Yeah, Hilary. You know her?” He answered his own question. “Ah, I remember now. You two were sort of a thing in high school, weren’t you? Everyone in town talked about it, thought you’d end up together. Shame she left town.” His brows drew down. “Did you have something to do with her leaving? I always liked that girl.”

“No, no, sir. I didn’t want her to leave.”

That only slightly appeased Abe.

“Do you think she’s back to stay?”

Neither man missed the appeal in the younger fellow’s eyes.

Abe grinned. “You never know. Maybe someone could help influence her to stick around.”

“I’ll just leave these things here while I pull my truck up to the front door so I can load them easier,” Jim said, hoping to escape the conversation. Spending years almost like a hermit made him uncomfortable with people knowing his business. And, he was positive Irma would not like being talked about.

When he re-entered the store, the young man waited by the door, his arms full of fire extinguishers, *his* fire extinguishers.

“I thought I’d give you a hand with these, sir.”

“I can manage...” Jim’s phone beeped, a tone he’d programmed in signaling something happening on Irma’s security system. Pulling out his phone, his thumb pulled up the program, showing real-time feed.

Irma had forgotten to unarm the system when she got up this morning. Good thing. Outside, a hooded figure tilted a jerry can, spilling liquid onto the ground about 20 feet away from the house. He’d only taken a few steps toward the house when the alarm sounded. The man stood frozen for a few seconds, and the front door opened, Hilary’s scared face showing.

“That’s Hilary!”

Jim hadn’t noticed the young man looking over his shoulder at what the feed showed.

“What’s that guy doing?” Each word increased in alarm.

Now it looked like Hilary was yelling as the figure's hood fell back and he dropped the can and turned towards the woods. Then, wearing only her night clothes and socks, she was out the door speeding after the man.

"What is she *doing*?" His voice rose. "No, Hilary! Get back inside and lock yourself in!"

There'd be time later to think about the panic in the young man's voice.

Time ceased as they watched Hilary race after the man, grasping his arm to slow him. They stopped, their expressions hazy as they faced one another, but one thing was clear, they were arguing.

"Get in," Jim told the young man beside him. "And bring all those extinguishers with you."

Before the words left his mouth, the younger fellow was already in the passenger seat.

What in blazes possessed Irma to live so far out of town? He made the 15-minute trip in 10 this time, not caring what the potholes did to his truck. He dialed Irma's number. "Get out of the house!"

She didn't reply.

"Irma, get Hilary and run to your car. Lock yourselves in and start to town. I'm on my way and we'll meet you partway."

"No."

"What do you mean, no? Irma, I think someone plans to torch your house."

"I'm not leaving my home. No one is going to scare me off. Besides, Hilary says he's gone and won't be back."

"Who's gone?"

"Brody."

"Lock up. Stay inside and turn the alarm system back on. Keep Hilary with you."

By then the yard was in view. There out front, trudging back and forth was Hilary, bundled in her winter coat and boots. Did these women never listen?

The young man who'd said his name was William leaped from the truck before it came to a stop. He gathered Hilary in his arms, cradling her head to his chest, as if he had the right to do so.

And she let him.

No time for that. "Go, go! Get in the house! Where's Irma?"

“I’m here, Jim.” The door stood open, with Irma in the entryway, a jacket thrown over her housecoat. “I have to make sure my girl’s all right.”

“Our girl,” he reminded her.

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## Chapter Sixty-Four

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Irma, Jim, Hilary and William gathered around the kitchen table, feasting on Irma's waffles, bacon, sausages, and warm maple syrup. Some of the tension diffused, but tendrils lingered now that Hilary spilled about why she'd shown up here, and the plans she and Brody set in motion.

"We didn't understand," Hilary explained. "We thought Mom was the bad guy all along. Dad knew, and he let us believe that. We weren't nice to her when we were teenagers." She grew quiet for a while as Jim refilled their coffee mugs. "I didn't know Brody would go as far as he did. I thought a few pranks, scare Mom a bit, but I didn't know what he'd do." She lifted her eyes to her mother's. "Mom, I'm sorry. I thought that as soon as he had the facts, he'd see it like I do, he'd realize what really happened. But it didn't matter; he wouldn't listen." Her voice faltered. "Brody, he seems unhinged."

"He's gone now. Do you think he'll be back?" William asked. Unlike Brody, William didn't look like he was going anywhere, anytime soon.

Hilary shook her head. "I made it clear to him to never come back, that this was over."

Jim and William shared a look. William inched closer to Hilary and draped an arm over her chair. "This was attempted arson. That's a felony. We need to report it."



“No.” For the first time since they sat down, Irma spoke. “He’s my son. I raised that boy and know him. He wouldn’t really harm us.”

Jim’s mind sorted through the list of other precautions he needed to take around this house. He had a feeling William would be willing to help.

“So, have you two known each other long?” Jim asked Hilary and William. If this guy meant something to his daughter, he’d better get to know him, make sure he was suitable.

“We were friends in high school,” Hilary said.

William pulled back. “Friends? I’d say we were more than that.”

Hilary blushed.

“Would have become a lot more than that if you hadn’t run off.” William spoke directly to Hilary.

“I know.”

The older couple watched the interaction.

“And now?” William asked. “Are you sticking around this time? Or am I going to have to chase after you?”

Hilary’s face burned, but holding her shoulders stiffly away from the back of her chair, she carried on. “I was talking to Mom last night. My job allows me to work from anywhere, as long as I have my laptop and the internet. We’re going to upgrade her connection, so it’s more reliable, and Mom agreed to let me stay with her. We have lost time to make up for.”

The two women smiled at each other.

William took a chance, and moved his arm from Hilary’s chair to her shoulders. This time, she didn’t pull away.

---

As much as she hated dealing in the messy weeds of emotions, Irma had to admit, that feelings weren’t all bad. Once you opened a Pandora’s box, you never knew what repercussions might result. And definitely, the fallout from these last few weeks brought turmoil.

But blessings, as well. Brody was still a worry, and no doubt there would be more to come. On the plus side though, she had her daughter back, maybe better than ever before, as a friend and ally.

Allies. For so very long she'd been alone, accepting that that was the way it would always be.

She'd told herself she was content to be alone, convinced herself that was her lot in life, the price she needed to pay.

Maybe she'd been wrong. She had Hilary now, and maybe, just maybe...

No, she would not let her mind go there.

Jim was a part of her life she'd let go, had to let go. That was in the past and needed to remain where she had tucked the memories into a sealed box on a high shelf, only to be torn open on those oh-so-rare occasions when she selfishly indulged, allowing herself to dream about what-ifs.

---

Last night's sleep was fitful. Even though Jim had set up different tones on his phone to let him know if there was activity outside Irma's house during the night, he didn't trust them, getting up frequently to check the monitors in his living room that showed images from the acreage where the two women slept. *His* two women.

His phone rang as he took his first sip of steaming coffee. He scanned the monitors, but all looked peaceful at Irma's.

"Jim?" Irma's voice asked.

"Yes, Irma, I'm here. Always."

## Chapter Sixty-Five

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Three miles away on a dirt road, a silver, high-end Dodge Ram idled, growling like a slumbering beast. Hitched behind it was a spotless Atlas Touring Coach, Air Stream's newest and most luxurious travel trailer.

The passenger door opened, and Brody hopped in.

"Finally. Let's get going." Willow snapped her gum and put the massive truck in gear.

"We're done here, then?" he asked.

"For now."

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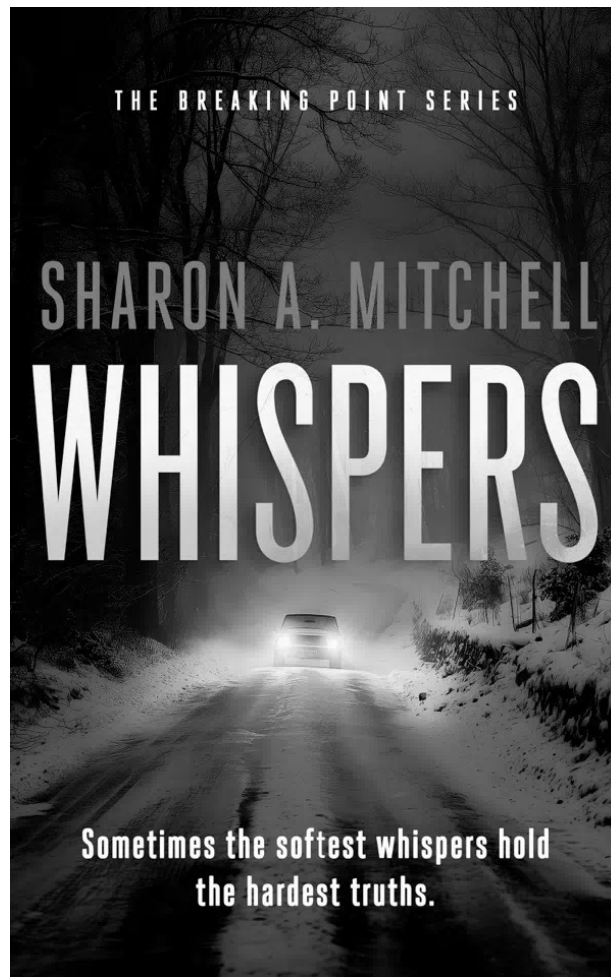
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## Whispers: Chapter One

---

Rain peppered the RV's roof, each drop a tiny accusation. Searching through the desk drawers for the spare phone charger, the back of Brody Willoughby's fingers brushed against something metal. A key taped to the underside of the drawer above. Strange, he'd never known Willow to hide things from him.

The two of them had grown closer this last while. There was no choice when they were forced to live in such quarters, the estranged mother and the son who had been cruelly torn from her before his third birthday. They needed to stay near his adoptive mother, Irma, and his traitorous sister, Hilary, if he and Willow had any hope of getting what was theirs and giving payback for all those wrongs.

That key. Leave it alone, he told himself, but curiosity gnawed at him. Outside, dusk crept in, painting the interior in shades of gray that matched his mood, while wind-whipped branches scratched against the tinted windows like skeletal fingers seeking entry.

The recreation vehicle might be top-of-the-line, but the interior now told a different story. Takeout containers cluttered the small counter space, and clothes spilled from his duffel onto the leather seats. His mother's designer briefcase perched atop a stack of newspapers, its perfect leather at odds with the surrounding chaos. Like everything about Willow, appearances

mattered more than substance. The smell of old Chinese food mingled with the metallic scent of lingering rain seeping through weather stripping that already needed replacing.

The rain's intensity picked up. Thunder rumbled, closer now. Glancing at his phone, Brody calculated. Twenty minutes. Willow would be back in twenty minutes with more groceries they wouldn't cook. His eyes drifted to the locked bottom drawer.

Hilary's accusations from their last fight rang in his ears: "You're wrong about her, Brody. We were both wrong." But Hilary was letting sentiment cloud her judgment. She might have forgotten what it was like after their brother, Owen, died, how everything changed, but he hadn't. The way their lives shattered, forcing them to leave everything they knew behind.

The key weighed heavily on his palm. One turn, a soft click, and the drawer glided open on expensive bearings.

Manila folders filled the space, arranged with military precision, so at odds with the way Willow kept the rest of their living space. Each tab bore a name, a date, locations, his eyes skimming, then freezing as he recognized some of them from his years growing up in the town of Milbrook. The Hendersons. The Pratts. The Jacobsons. All elderly couples, all...

Pulling out the nearest folder, photos spilled onto his lap. Mr. Henderson tending his apple orchard, Mrs. Henderson at their farm stand. The same farm stand where he and Hilary used to buy penny candy and crisp apples after school. His hands stilled. The Hendersons had disappeared right before he finished school, hadn't they? Something about retiring to Florida, but no one had seen or heard from them since.

More photos. The Pratts walking their dog, that mean old collie that used to chase kids off their property. The Jacobsons at church; he remembered Mrs. Jacobson's flower arrangements on the altar every Sunday. All of them gone now, their properties sold off cheap, their families scattered.

The dates stretched back years, long before he and Willow returned to town, before they'd set their sights on Irma's property. His mother had called their current plan "perfected through experience." But these weren't research, these were...

He shoved the thought away. Hilary's voice echoed in his head: "Think about it, Brody. Really think." But she was wrong. Had to be wrong. These were just investment opportunities, like his mother explained. And Irma,

she was different. She deserved what was coming after what she'd done to Owen, after hoarding all that money while claiming poverty.

A car door slammed outside.

His heart stuttered. Shoving the contents back, his hands turned clumsy with panic, not from guilt, he told himself, but from being caught. The drawer wouldn't close. A receipt caught in the track, crumpling, refusing to cooperate. Her heels clicked on the walkway outside, accompanied by that same damn tune she hummed.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the mess he'd made. In that brief, stark moment, old memories surfaced of the Hendersons' empty house, the Pratts' collie running loose and whimpering, Mrs. Jacobson's flower arrangement wilting on the altar.

The door handle turned.

Brody lunged for the receipt, yanking it free. The drawer slid shut with a soft snick just as Willow swept in, bringing with her the smells of rain and expensive perfume. She carried no groceries.

"Darling," she said, shaking water from her perfectly styled hair, "why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Just thinking." Brody flicked on a lamp, hoping the tremor in his voice wasn't obvious. "Storm's getting worse. Good thing you're back."

Willow's eyes swept the room, landing briefly on the drawer before moving on. "No groceries today. I ran into someone at the store who knows your sister." Draping her wet coat over a chair, she settled onto the sofa, crossing her legs with practiced grace. "It seems Hilary's decided to stay permanently. How...convenient."

The edge in her voice made his skin crawl. Keeping his face neutral, Brody shrugged. "She's freelance. Can work from anywhere."

"Mm." Willow's smile reminded him of a cat watching a wounded bird. "Playing the devoted daughter now, is she? Such a touching reunion." She paused, tapping one manicured nail against her knee. "This complicates matters."

Thunder cracked overhead, rattling the windows. Brody's fingers brushed the drawer handle behind him. "Complicates what?"

"Our timeline, of course." Standing, Willow moved to the small kitchen area, her heels clicking on the laminate floor. "Pour me a drink, would you? The good bourbon."

Forcing himself to move normally, Brody retrieved the crystal decanter. Yet another incongruous piece of luxury in their mobile home. The bottle shook as he poured, amber liquid sloshing against the sides. Behind him, phantom images of the Hendersons' empty orchard flickered with each lightning strike.

"Having Hilary around changes everything," Willow continued, accepting the glass. "I'd planned on Irma being alone. We'll need to adjust our approach."

Lightning illuminated her face, casting harsh shadows that revealed something beneath her polished exterior. Something that reminded him, inexplicably, of Mrs. Henderson's abandoned farm stand, windows dark and shuttered.

"Mom..." The word stuck in his throat.

"Don't call me that!" She hated anyone thinking she was old enough to be his mother. Softening her tone, she said, "I'm Willow. Don't worry, darling." She touched his cheek, her fingers cold despite the warmth of the RV. "Trust me. We just need to be patient. After all..." Her smile widened as another peal of thunder shook the RV. "We have all the time in the world."

Brody forced himself to smile back, feeling the weight of memories pressing against his chest, looping like a movie in his brain. The Hendersons. The Pratts. The Jacobsons. All those empty houses, all those disappeared lives. He pushed the thoughts down deep where they belonged. Some questions weren't safe to ask.

Outside, the storm raged on, and miles away in the darkness, Irma Willoughby's farm waited.



## Whispers: Chapter Two

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Steam curled from three mugs on the kitchen table, mingling with the aroma of fresh-baked muffins and wood smoke from the fireplace. Irma watched Hilary typing furiously on her laptop, absorbed in whatever story she was chasing. Strange how quickly this had become normal, her daughter working from the same table where she'd done her homework twenty years ago.

A thump and muttered curse drifted up from the basement.

Irma went to the basement door, calling out, "Everything okay down there?"

"Fine!" Jim's voice echoed up the stairs. "Just checking the new heat pump connections. Previous installation was a mess."

Hilary glanced up from her screen, a knowing smile playing at her lips. "That's the third time he's 'checked' the heating system this week."

"He's being thorough," Irma said, but felt warmth creep into her cheeks. The kitchen timer, digital now, a gift from Jim, beeped softly. She busied herself with the muffins, sliding them onto a cooling rack.

"Mom." Hilary's tone was gentle. "He's not here for the heating system."

Before Irma could respond, heavy footsteps announced Jim's return. He emerged from the basement, wiping his hands on a rag. His presence filled

the kitchen doorway, solid and reassuring, like the new support beams he'd insisted on installing in the root cellar.

"Everything's shipshape down there," he announced, reaching for a muffin. "Though I should probably check the connections again next week, just to be sure."

"Of course you should," Hilary murmured into her coffee cup.

Ignoring that, Jim reached for his hat and jacket.

"Are you leaving?" Irma asked. Observing, Hilary hid her smile at her mother's effort to keep her voice nonchalant.

"This storm has the potential to be bad. I want to secure any loose items in the yard and ensure the basement windows and door are properly sealed. You never know how heavy this rain will get or the snow that might follow it."

Hilary shivered. "I'm just glad to be inside. I never thought about it much as a kid when winter storms came, but now I get just how treacherous the roads might be when they ice over." She smiled at this man, still coming to terms with Jim as her father, her mother's lover. "I don't relish the thought of any of us out on those roads tonight."

The late fall wind rattled the windows, but instead of the usual anxiety about drafts and fuel costs, Irma now felt only the comfort of warm air circulating through properly sealed vents, mimicking how she felt with Hilary back in her life and Jim, too, like her emotional vents had been unblocked too. The farmhouse creaked and settled around them, no longer a burden too heavy for one person to bear, but a home coming back to life.

Jim settled into what had become his usual chair, the one that used to be Hubert's. The thought didn't sting like it used to. "These are good," he said, reaching for another muffin. "Different recipe?"

"Added apple butter. Found a jar in the back of the pantry while organizing." Irma didn't mention it was the last jar she'd made with Hubert, last summer before his diagnosis. Some things could stay private without being secrets.

Thunder growled in the distance. Hilary closed her laptop, stretching. "This storm feels ominous. Glad I'm not out chasing down leads in this weather."

"Could get nasty," Jim said, moving to peer out the window at the already darkening sky. "Weather service is calling for freezing rain turning

to snow overnight. Eight to ten inches by morning, with wind gusts up to forty miles an hour.” He turned back to them, his expression serious. “These early winter storms can be tricky. Temperature’s hovering right at freezing, so we might get ice before the snow hits. Supposed to be a big one.”

“Power lines won’t like that combination,” Irma said, remembering too many winters of downed lines and cold, dark days. But this year was different. The old furnace chugged away nicely, the fireplace insert would keep them warm, and Jim had insisted on installing that generator after the last ice storm had left half the county dark for days.

The wind picked up, whistling through the old maples that lined the driveway. From the kitchen window, Irma watched their bare branches swayed against the steel-gray sky.

“Mind if I stick around?” Jim asked. “Just to make sure the generator kicks in if we need it?” His German Shepherd dog, Kaiser, perked up, looking almost as hopeful as Jim.

“The generator you insisted on installing last month?” Hilary’s eyes danced with amusement. “The one you’ve tested weekly since then?” Since finding out Jim was her birth father, they’d developed an easy relationship, and she couldn’t resist teasing this man.

“Can’t be too careful,” Jim replied seriously, but he gave Hilary a wink.

“You’re welcome to stay,” Irma found herself saying to Jim. “I’ll make up the guest room.” The words came easily now, without the old fear of appearing weak or needy. Truthfully, she felt better with Jim around. Over the last months they’d taken to calling the third bedroom the guest room, rather than Brody’s old room. Although she and Hilary had made strides toward openness, some things were still too painful to say out loud, especially about how their family of four had dwindled to just the two of them. The old habit of secrets well ingrained.

Lightning flickered, illuminating the kitchen. In that brief flash, Irma saw them all clearly, her daughter home again, Jim’s quiet devotion, the warmth these two brought back into the old rooms. The farm had sustained her through the dark years after Owen’s death, through their struggles, Hubert’s illness, and through the lonely aftermath. But maybe it was never meant to sustain her alone.

Outside, the first sleet pellets pinged against the windows, a sound like scattered gravel that would soon morph into the steady whisper of snow. For over a century this farmhouse had weathered countless storms. It could

weather this one too, especially now that it sheltered not just one stubborn survivor, but a family slowly knitting itself back together.

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## Whispers: Chapter Three

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The back door banged shut behind Jim, letting in a blast of frigid air. He winced, knowing Irma hated her doors slamming. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Hilary’s phone buzzed. William’s name lit up the screen, bringing an involuntary smile to her face.

“Hey,” she answered, wandering toward the living room for privacy. “I was just thinking about you.”

“You watching the radar?” His voice carried that familiar mix of warmth and worry. “This system’s intensifying and I wondered if I wanted to drive out there to see how you and your mom are doing. Dad and I just finished securing the Jenson’s chimney cap, but we’re calling off the rest of today’s appointments.”

Through the window, she could see Jim making his way around the house, checking shutters and drain spouts. The sleet was coming down harder now, coating everything in a treacherous glaze.

“We’re battening down the hatches here too. We’re prepared. Jim’s staying over. He’s worried about the generator if the power goes.”

A pause on William’s end. “Good. That’s... That’s good. These roads are already getting slick, so we’re shutting down early here.”

“William Gormley, are you actually suggesting skipping work in bad weather? Who are you and what have you done with my risk-taking

chimney sweep?” She colored slightly at the word “my,” hoping it had slipped William’s notice. Little did, though.

His laugh warmed her despite the chill seeping through the old windowpanes. “Maybe I’ve got more reason to be careful these days.”

The unspoken weight of that statement hung between them. They’d been taking things slowly this time around, both carrying too many scars from their teenage romance to rush back in. A delicate dance neither was willing to exceed. But moments like this...

A crash from the kitchen interrupted her thoughts. “Hold on,” she said, hurrying back. “Mom? Everything okay?”

Irma stood amid a scatter of metal bowls, looking flustered. “Just getting things ready in case we lose power. We should fill the bathtub, and I thought I’d bake some bread while we still have electricity...”

“Mom.” Hilary put her hand over Irma’s where she clutched a mixing bowl. “We have the generator. We have plenty of food. And we have Jim and each other. It’s okay.”

Back on the phone, she could hear William’s soft chuckle. “Your mom still trying to single-handedly prepare for the apocalypse?”

“Some things never change. Though now she’s got company for that apocalypse, at least.”

Thunder cracked overhead, making them both jump. The kitchen lights flickered.

“Listen,” William said, his voice turning serious. “If anything happens, if the generator fails or you need anything, I don’t care what the roads are like. I’ll find a way out there.”

“I know you will.” The simple truth of that settled something in her chest. “But we’ll be fine. Jim’s thorough, you know that.”

“Yeah, I do.” Another pause. “Speaking of Jim...has he finally admitted he’s courting your mother, or is he still pretending to inspect the heating system three times a week?”

Hilary snorted, glancing toward the front door where Jim was stomping snow from his boots. “Still firmly in the inspection phase. Though he’s staying over tonight, so...”

“Progress,” William said. “Dad will be thrilled. He’s been trying to nudge Jim in that direction for months.”

The lights flickered again, longer this time. Outside, the sleet had given way to heavy, wet snow that clung to everything it touched. Irma made her

way to the fireplace, adding another log to the insert.

"I should go," William said reluctantly. "Got to check on Mrs. Peterson. I know how her chimney draws in bad weather. But Hilary..." He hesitated. "Be careful, okay? Something about this storm...I don't know. Just keep the doors locked."

The worry in his voice stirred something in her memory, a flutter of unease she'd been trying to ignore. "William? What aren't you telling me?"

"Probably nothing. Just...Dad mentioned seeing an RV parked out by Miller's Creek the last few days. Fancy one, looks out of place. Probably just travelers waiting out the weather, but..."

But Miller's Creek was less than two miles from the farm. Close enough to watch. Close enough to wait.

"Thanks for the heads up," she said, keeping her voice steady. "I'll make sure everything's secure."

After they hung up, Hilary stood at the window, watching the snow erase the familiar contours of the farm. Somewhere out there in the gathering dark, a storm was coming, maybe more than one kind. But this time, they weren't facing it alone.

Jim made one final circuit of the property, flashlight beam cutting through the thickening snow. The beam caught the fresh deadbolts on the storm cellar doors, heavy-duty hardware he'd insisted on after finding muddy footprints inside the basement last month. Irma hadn't said anything and maybe hadn't been aware, but he'd noticed how the canning jars in the root cellar kept shifting position, how the old tools would be slightly rearranged.

The motion sensors flicked on as he passed, flooding the yard with harsh light. Three new cameras monitored the blind spots around the house, their red recording lights steady against the storm. After that kid Brody's attempt to torch the place, Jim wasn't taking chances. If William hadn't spotted the figure with the gas can that night, his girls would have been asleep, most likely would have burned to death. He'd grown accustomed to their faces and liked that they relied on him. Jim shuddered, and checked things one more time. The threat was still out there somewhere. Just because they hadn't seen evidence of Brody in three weeks didn't mean he wasn't out there. Irma refused to allow them to report the attempted arson to the sheriff, saying her son would never have gone through with it.

Jim had less faith in the young man's intentions. If Brody had succeeded that night, Irma and Hilary might not be waiting for him in that cozy, the one that now felt like a second home. Maybe one day he'd be invited to share it permanently with them. But he was getting ahead of himself. For now, he'd take whatever Irma offered him.

Wind whipped snow against his face as he checked the generator's housing. The machine hummed steadily, ready to kick in if needed. He'd positioned it where he could see it from the kitchen window, close enough to monitor, far enough from the house to be safe. Just like he tried to position himself with Irma.

The basement windows were secure, new locks gleaming. Some nights he lay awake thinking about those footprints, about someone testing the house's vulnerabilities while Irma slept upstairs alone. Not anymore. Not on his watch.

His phone buzzed. A motion alert from the driveway camera. Just a deer, moving through the swirling snow like a ghost. But he studied the footage carefully before continuing his rounds.

His thoughts drifted to his conversation with William at Abe's Hardware yesterday. "Dad spied a fancy RV parked out on Miller's Creek Road the past few days," William had said while they loaded up supplies for the coming storm. "He said something didn't feel right about it." Jim trusted Chad's instincts. The man had grown up in these hills, knew every back road and hollow. If something felt off to Chad...tourists didn't linger at Miller's Creek in winter.

The wind howled now, driving particles of ice that stung his exposed skin. Time to head in. He made one final check of the attached garage door, then trudged back to the kitchen entrance.

Inside, warmth and light wrapped around him like a blanket. Irma stood at the counter, pretending to be absorbed in her baking, but he caught her quick glance as he stamped the snow from his boots.

"Everything's battened down tight," he said, shrugging off his coat. "Generator's good, cameras are working. We're as ready as we can be." If only a storm was all they had to worry about. Brody was still out there, a loose canon, and how could you prepare for that?

She nodded, still not looking up from her mixing bowl. But when he moved to check the fireplace insert, she spoke softly: "There's hot coffee. And I just pulled out a fresh batch of rolls."



Coming from Irma, it was practically a brass band welcome. Jim felt warmth spread through his chest that had nothing to do with the fire's glow.

"Don't mind if I do," he said, and settled into what they both pretended wasn't becoming his chair.

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## Whispers: Chapter Four

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Willow huddled under a blanket, glaring at the frost creeping up the corners of the windows, as the RV's heater struggled against the dropping temperature. Even with the generator running, cold seeped through every seam of their expensive travel trailer. Her laptop displayed multiple property listings, other farms in the area she should be showing to clients instead of freezing here.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered, watching Brody layer up in weatherproof gear. "Why didn't we get a cabin somewhere? Or at least park closer to town? I'm missing appointments for this. Do you know how many commissions I'm losing?"

Brody bit back a retort. It had been her brilliant plan to camp here, out of sight but close enough to watch the farm. Her plan to wait until winter when fewer people might notice them. *Her* obsession with timing everything just right. He'd watched her professional facade crack over the months, her carefully cultivated real estate agent smile giving way to something harder, more desperate.

"You're the one who wants to know if they're alone up there," he said instead, pulling on thick boots. The thermometer outside read twenty-eight degrees, and dropping. "Could've done this surveillance back in December when I suggested."

“December was too soon. We needed them to feel safe first.” Willow’s voice took on that edge he’d learned to dread. She closed the property listings with a sharp click. “Now go check. And be careful. That local handyman’s been hanging around too much lately.”

Brody zipped his coat with more force than necessary. Two miles each way in this weather, trudging through deepening snow, just to peer at a farmhouse from the woods. While she sat here in relative comfort, plotting and planning and pushing him to do her dirty work.

“Take the binoculars,” she said, not looking up from her laptop where she obsessively refreshed weather reports. “And stay out of sight. If that old woman spots you...”

“I know how to stay hidden,” he snapped. “Been doing it long enough, haven’t I?” Yes, he’d do as she asked. Willow was his mother, after all, and he owed it to her to be the dutiful son, especially since they’d been derived of each other most of his life. But this reunion with his mother wasn’t turning out quite as he’d expected. Nope, can’t think that way. Willow has her reasons, as do I. On this we are united. Irma is the cause of our pain.

The wind nearly knocked him off his feet when he stepped outside. Snow plastered against his face, wet, white mounds already accumulating in drifts around the RV’s wheels. They’d need to move it soon or risk getting stuck here.

But Willow wouldn’t listen to practical concerns, not when she was fixated on her target. Sometimes he wondered if she even remembered why they started this, the original plan that had seemed so simple, so lucrative. Now it felt like they were trapped in her web of complications and obsessions, as surely as they were trapped here by the storm.

He pulled his scarf higher and started walking. The sooner he checked on the farmhouse, the sooner he could get back. Though he already knew what he’d find. Lights in the windows, smoke from the chimney, and probably that handyman’s truck in the drive. They would not catch Irma alone, not tonight.

But he’d learned better than to return with news Willow didn’t want to hear.

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## About the Author

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Sharon A. Mitchell lives on a farm, with her nearest neighbor several miles away. Does that seem like a setting to spark the imagination? It does for her.

When she's not writing her numerous thriller series, she can be found taking long walks with her hundred-pound German Shepherd dogs, Pickles and Dill. (She didn't name them - don't blame her.)

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