

# 1. Shattered Reflections

The crash rips through the night like a gunshot.

I jolt upright, heart thudding so loud it swallows the quiet that follows. For a second, I'm tangled in sheets, breath steaming in the cold. I hear it again—the soft tinkle of something settling, like shattered glass skimming.

I'm out of bed before I think, bare feet hitting freezing boards. The air bites. I get to the window, one hand on the wall for balance, the other clamping my sweater closed.

The lake lies black and glassy under the moon. Wind worries the eaves, but that isn't what woke me.

There—a figure.

I freeze, breath fogging the pane. A girl stands at the water's edge just beyond the trees, arms loose at her sides, hair lifting in the breeze. The shape of her is so familiar it hurts.

Emma.

My throat closes. I blink hard. No. Not possible.

She's older than I remember—taller, thinner—but the tilt of her head is the same. Her dress clings like it's wet. I press my palm to the glass. "Emma?" She doesn't move. Doesn't wave. She only watches. Hope and dread knot in my chest. I wrench the window up. Cold air slaps my face.

"Emma!"

No answer. No flinch. And then—she's gone.

Between one breath and the next, the shoreline is only trees and frost again. Wind slams the sash; I yank it shut and stumble back, breath rasping. She was there. I saw her. I swear—

The silence returns, too clean, like the world has smoothed its footprints. Stairs creak behind me.

"Elise?" Greg's voice is soft and careful.

He fills the doorway, wrapped in his robe, calm already in place. "I heard something," I say. "Downstairs. Glass."

"I checked," he says, crossing the room. "The wind knocked a planter off the porch." He drapes a blanket over my shoulders, hands resting a second too long. "Come back to bed."

"There was someone outside," I whispered. "By the lake. A girl."

Something flickers behind his eyes, but his face holds. "There's no one out there."

"I saw her."

"You're exhausted." His tone is gentle, reasonable. "You haven't been sleeping. It makes tricks of things. Maybe a deer—"

"It looked like Emma."

His hand pauses in my hair. The air changes for a second. Then he smiles, soft, as if I've said something that might break. "I know you miss her; I do too."

He doesn't look out of the window. Doesn't ask where. Doesn't go to see.

"I'm not hallucinating," I say, thinner now.

"Of course not," he murmurs, kissing my temple. "You're tired." He turns me away from the glass with careful hands, like I'm sleepwalking. As he guides me across the room, I glance back once more. The lake is empty, but my chest aches like something was there and took part of me with it.

He sits me on the bed. "You've been under a lot of pressure," he says.

"I know what I saw. She was standing by the lake. Not a deer. Not a shadow."

"I believe you saw something," he says precisely. "That doesn't make it real. The mind fills gaps—especially in the dark."

There it is—logic, his favorite blade. "You think I imagined her."

"I think your grief is real. Grief makes us see what we wish were true." Smooth words that don't cut on the surface but sting anyway.

"Maybe you're right," I say, because it's easier.

He smiles like we've solved it. "Try to rest. I'll make tea." He leaves the door slightly open, an exhibit of the ordinary. It should calm me. It doesn't.

I lie still without closing my eyes. His footsteps retreat. The house should sleep again, but the quiet has a pulse—a presence that waits.

The image of the girl won't leave. Not a blur. Not a trick. It sits behind my eyelids. I felt her watching me. The sheets feel damp, like they remember something I don't. My skin prickles. I sit up, slower now, listening for a creak that doesn't come. I cross the room on careful feet.

Something draws me to the dresser.

The top is as I left it—almost. Jewelry tray. Tissue box. A mug with a brown ring of tea. One thing is wrong. A photo frame lies facedown.

My stomach turns. That picture is always upright, beside the lamp. My favorite of Emma—freckles starry, the sideways smile she kept for me. I reach. Finger pads tingle. I lift the frame.

Her face meets me—summer light in her hair—and my heart twists. The glass is cold. Smudged.

I angle it toward the lamp. Black streaks jump into view. Ink. Thick and brutal. Slashed across her face. Not random. Not an accident. Purposeful. Violent. Her eyes are gouged out. Her mouth is crossed through.

I stagger back, clutching the frame. I want to drop it, but can't. No one would do this. Not to her. Not here. Except someone did.

Those marks weren't there. I've looked at this photo a hundred times because it's the only one I keep out. The rest are boxed; they hurt too much. This one feels safe.

Until now.

The hall beyond the open door is empty. I stare at the ruin, willing it to reverse. It doesn't. The ink looks fresh, like it's still thinking. The corner of the frame bites my palm. Something is very wrong. Not just with the house.

With Greg.

I turn. He's in the doorway, shoulder to the jamb as if he's been there, watching. His face is mild. His hand matters more. He's holding a black Sharpie.

The cap glints in the lamplight, small and undeniable. He sees me see it. One brow rises. "What's wrong?" My throat is dry. The photo trembles in my hands. He steps in, measured. "Did something happen?" His eyes dip to the frame and back. "What's that?"

I don't give it to him. I don't move.

"Did you do this?" I asked.

He frowns, gentle confusion. "Do what?"

I tilt the ruined glass toward him. "This."

He studies it, then exhales a soft, amused sound. "You think I did that?"

"You're holding the marker."

He lifts it. "I was labeling bins in the basement. Half of them are blank. You can check." A shrug, the obviousness of his world. Silence pools.

"You're sure it wasn't already like that?" he asks.

"Of course, I am sure."

"Maybe it happened before. Or maybe..." His gaze searches my face, almost tenderly.

"Maybe you did it in your sleep."

"What?"

"You've been restless. Up at night. Last week, you found the porch door open and didn't remember unlocking it."

"I didn't do this."

"I'm not saying you did," he says evenly. "I'm saying maybe you don't remember."

The frame feels heavier, like it wants me to drop my hands.

"You've been through so much," he adds softly. "It would make sense for your mind to blur things. That isn't weakness, Elise. It's trauma."

He closes the distance and sets a warm hand on my shoulder. "You're not crazy. You're grieving." His voice is low, soothing. The pen is still in his hand.

I sit on the bed, the photo in my lap, and a thread in my mind pulls loose. Could I have done this? The thought is absurd—and it lands with cold weight.

There have been gaps. Nights lost. Waking on the couch with the TV hissing. Bathroom light left on. Once, the porch swing, a blanket I don't remember getting. Greg always had an answer. You forgot. You were tired. Your brain was protecting you.

It was easier to agree. But the absence feels dangerous now.

"Have I ever sleepwalked?" I ask without looking up.

He pours water into cups. "Once or twice. Nothing serious. Why?"

I shake my head. The truth gets louder: I don't know what's real. What's memory, and what's suggestion? What's mine—and what's been handed to me like a script.

He returns with a white pill in his palm. "You haven't been sleeping," he says, neutral as the weather.

"What is it?"

“Same as always. To help you rest.”

I take it and keep it cupped instead of swallowing. He kisses my forehead. “Everything’s okay. Try not to worry.” He leaves humming a tune I don’t know. I open the drawer and let the pill fall in with a few others. I close it, fingers trembling.

The ink on the photo hasn’t faded. If anything, it’s darker. I touch the glass; my fingertip comes away smeared. Still tacky. That shouldn’t be possible.

I listen for him. He’s nearby, out of sight. The house holds its breath, waiting. If I can’t trust what I see, or what I remember, or what he says—what can I trust?

I lift the photo again, half hoping I imagined it. It’s worse. The scratches look deeper, deliberate. The black has bled into the paper like rot. I rub the glass with my sleeve. The damage isn’t on the surface. It’s underneath, etched.

A floorboard murmurs in the hall. I freeze. It goes quiet. Greg speaks softly to no one—or to himself. The lamp’s angle makes the ink gleam tacky.

How is that possible unless it was done after he left—unless—I stand with the frame and step to the doorway. Down the hall, Greg moves toward the kitchen, unhurried. He rinses mugs at the sink like this is an ordinary night with ordinary tea. He turns just enough for me to see it again.

The Sharpie is still tucked in his shirt pocket. Not on the table. Not in the basement. Right there against his heart. My breath catches. My fingers tighten around the frame until the glass creaks. He senses me and glances over, the easy smile he wears for neighbors in place. “Feeling any better?”

I don’t answer. He knows I saw it. He’s letting me see it.

My daughter is gone.

And something in this house is lying to me.

## 2. The Perfect Daughter

By morning, the house pretends to be normal. I don't wake Greg; I slip out and head for Emma's room.

A thin blade of hall light stops at the trim, a border I'm not sure I can cross. I find the switch and don't flick it.

Pear shampoo and dust linger—sweet gone stale. I step onto the runner, placing my feet as if my steps might bruise the floor.

Everything is just as I left it: the duvet tucked perfectly, pillows stacked high, and fairy lights dim but still shining in memory. The desk holds its breath—pencils aligned, notebook edges squared to the grain.

By the window, trophies shine too clean for a house that lives in wind and grit. I drag a thumb over one brass plate and leave a clear arc in the dust; the curve aches.

It should feel like a sanctuary. It feels like a shrine. Every surface preaches who she was, and each sermon asks the question I can't answer. Touching anything feels like erasing her; not touching feels like abandoning her to dust. I pick up her brush anyway. The weight is ordinary. My hand isn't.

A pale sliver of lake light kisses the blotter. Emma's green-cloth journal sits square to the edge, elastic looped twice for the tidiness she only performed when I watched. "One thing at a time," I whisper, sliding the band off. I set it back, not ready, and let my hands wander instead.

The brush's teeth are webbed with brown strands that catch a shy glint even in the dim. I rake a finger along the bristles and feel the snag, a small, mean thrill of contact that makes me ashamed. The perfume bottle leans to one side. A gentle press releases a burst of pear and leaves. The room breathes it in and then forgets.

On the mirror, her hair ties loop like small halos. A faded swim pass dangles from a pin, that laminated smile caught between a little girl and almost grown.

I move through it all like an intruder with a key. Every object warms and wounds in the same breath. I'm curating a story I can't finish, pretending order might summon her back. My reflection looks older than I feel. "I'm here," I tell the room. It doesn't answer.

I slide the journal closer. The elastic snaps gently on my wrist as I pull it back. For a moment, I picture her—knees tucked in the chair, pen clicking nervously. I open to the middle and hit torn paper. Not clean tears. Ragged, white teeth left behind like a snarl.

I thumb forward, then back. Whole sections are missing—rips starting near the spine, yanked fast. The remaining pages shiver when I turn them, as if they remember being taken. On one edge, a sliver of ink survives, the tail of a letter trailing into nothing. A date in the

corner—two weeks before she disappeared—ends where the paper ends. Why tear out pages and leave the book?

I lean closer. Faint pressure marks dent the next sheet—lines without words. I tilt the lamp until the shallow grooves catch. A list? No—short bursts, stacked like messages. I shade lightly with a pencil from her cup. The ridges bloom into fragments: a name, half a sentence, and a single word that dries my mouth.

*tonight*

The ragged paper pulls me backward so fast I forget to breathe. I'm in the kitchen again—late, the lake a black pane beyond the window, lemon cleaner in the air. Emma stands by the island with her backpack on both shoulders like armor. "You don't trust me," she says. Not a plea—an indictment.

"I do," I answer too quickly. "But I need to know where you're going." My voice goes carefully, reasonably, the tone that turns questions into fences. "Text me when you get there, and—"

"And what?" She laughs without smiling. "And if I don't, you'll call every mom until someone says I was a good girl?" Swim practice has left her damp; a strand clings to her temple. Angles where softness used to be.

"I'm not punishing you," I say. "I'm trying to keep you safe."

"From what? From the world, or from you not knowing?" She yanks the zipper; metal teeth rasp. I reach for her strap, and she jerks back like my fingers burn. "Talk to me, Emmy."

"Stop calling me that." Quiet, deadly, then louder: "You never listen. You ask and then you don't hear the answer." She moves past me. Cold air knives in as the door opens; the porch light cuts her into shadow. The latch clicks, and the house swallows the rest.

The kitchen snaps shut, and I'm back at the desk with my heart doing a smaller, meaner throb. I set the journal down and let my gaze drift, not hunting—letting the room choose me.

It picks a photo from the corkboard. It shows Emma at the public dock in August. Her chin is up, as if she's daring the sun. It's crooked. Barely. A tilt that wasn't there when I straightened everything last week.

The pin bites my fingertip as I nudge the corner. The gloss lifts, and another edge peeks from behind it—paper thinner, more worn. Someone tucked something back there. Not me.

I ease the dock photo out and find a smaller, sun-faded snapshot. Emma is in it, hair wet, shoulders wrapped in the striped towel that never came home. She's laughing at whoever holds the camera. Beside her, half in shadow, stands someone I don't recognize. Taller. Hoodie up despite summer. Face turned just enough that the eyes are a blur.

The background isn't our dock. It's the old boathouse across the cove, the one the council chained after the accident. My pulse misfires. I flip the photo for a date, a note, a name. Only a crease and a fingerprint smudge stare back.

The boathouse needle won't stop, so I turn to the dresser, telling myself I'm only straightening. Socks sit in fat white fists. Under them, swim caps and goggles with a snapped strap. I lift the bundle and feel a weight knock against wood—a phone, flat and black, face down.

Not the new one she carried everywhere; the older backup. Dust rims the edges; the charging port is fuzzed with lint. I should leave it alone. I don't. I wipe it on my sleeve and press the side button. Nothing—then a pale apple blooms.

Charged means recent. Recent means that someone has used it.

The lock screen is the lake at dusk, water banded silver and slate. I know the code by muscle memory; I set it when she was twelve and never changed it after I "promised not to snoop." My thumb hesitates over the numbers. A cabinet whispers shut downstairs. The room smells of pear and dust and something faintly electrical, as if the phone has warmed the air. "Sorry, Emmy," I whisper and key it in.

The home screen blooms into bubbles so normal it hurts. Group chats with inside jokes I don't recognize. Hearts and dolphin emojis from the swim girls. Teachers' reminders: quiz Friday, bring goggles, permission slip overdue. I scroll through memes at midnight, cafeteria pizza too orange to be food, and complaints about chlorine hair. Relief pricks, then something darker. If this is all there is, what am I doing rifling through her pockets after she's gone?

A thread called Dock Crew chats happily about rides, playlists, and if the boathouse is really haunted like the older kids claim. Someone sends a grainy picture of the cove at dusk; Emma replies with a laughing face and a wave. I try to hear fear in her punctuation and can't.

In "Mom"—my name, plain—old check-ins I hardly recall sending get one-word replies that used to bother me: Here. *Late*. *Home*. The ordinariness makes me feel foolish, like I've mistaken dust for fingerprints. I swipe to search, type her name, then "boathouse," then nothing at all. The keyboard blinks, patient, offering only what I already know.

Without thinking, I open Messages → Drafts. There shouldn't be anything here; she hated leaving things unfinished. One thread waits. I tap it.

**He knows. I can't...**

Three words blink, gray, and unsent; the cursor pulsing like a held breath. The timestamp is from the week she disappeared. Same night as the torn journal pages. I look past the cut. I open the keyboard and check. But the draft has no addressee, just that line and a blinking cursor. "Can't what, Emmy?" I whisper. The cursor keeps breathing.



I try to picture who *he* is and get a reel of me instead, nodding at answers that weren't answers. That night, she came home late and said, "It was fine," smiling. But her smile didn't reach her eyes. I took that smile as proof, not just a mask. A bruise shaped like a thumbprint under her elbow that I let the pool explain.

Parent night: the coach talked while Emma stared at her shoelaces. I reminded myself to focus. Quiet felt like calm. She wanted a different shampoo "because everyone uses it." I sensed vanity instead of camouflage. She traded the bright parka for the gray one with the deep hood. I said she was growing up. I said she was colder.

Greg told me not to hover. "She needs room," he said, and I translated *room* as safety. When I straightened her desk, I called it love. When I didn't ask a second time, I called it respect. The unfinished draft accuses me more cleanly than words. If she were telling me in negative space, I would iron the space flat. I kept the house neat. I left the mess inside her alone.

The cursor blinks like a metronome—and the phone pings. A banner slides down from the top: **Unknown:**. I don't touch it. Another arrives before my brain catches up. The old phone must have jumped onto our Wi-Fi the second it woke; of course, it did. I open the thread.

"You left her."

Two words, gray in a bubble, cold as a hand on the back of my neck. I type "*Who is this?*" and don't send it. A second message lands while my thumb hovers.

"You're next."

The room shrinks. I set the phone on the blotter. My hands won't stop trembling. I pull it back; the distance feels like a dare. The thread is empty before tonight, a white corridor with only these footprints. The number is masked or something I don't understand. My pulse drums until the dead fairy lights seem to breathe.

Downstairs, a cabinet shuts; water runs; Greg moves like a person in an ordinary house. I tell myself it's a prank, a bored kid with a text app. The next tone is softer somehow, almost polite, and a third message arrives.

"Check the window."

I don't want to, but I cross to the glass. The phone is a small animal in my palm, warm and nervous. I cup my other hand to kill the reflection. The lake smears into bands of ink and pewter; the boathouse is only a darker dark.

At first, I see nothing. Then the lamplight behind me snags a shape on the outside pane—an oval print at my chest, fingers splayed. Not mine. Too small. Dried damp leaves a salt crust, the ridges mapped in grit. A second print sits lower—kid-height—the heel of a palm, the drag of a wrist.

My breath fogs, erases, clears. The print returns, persistent as a bruise. I unhook the latch and stop. A faded elastic hair tie loops around it now. It's sun-bleached pink, stretched twice and knotted once, just like Emma did when she snapped.

The phone pings in my hand. Another **Unknown**: "See?"

Downstairs, water shuts off. A cabinet closes. I hold the tie like it might burn and stare at the prints until the room tilts. I back away, and the phone vibrates again—one more **Unknown**: "*Don't scream.*" My throat closes on reflex. I set the elastic on the sill, like it might go off if I hold it too tightly.

The room feels smaller, the air too used. I lock the window, slide the latch twice even though it only goes once, and press my palm to the glass until the cold bites. The prints look fresh again, like someone just lifted a hand. "Greg?" I call, low. Water runs for a second, then stops. He doesn't answer. Only the hum of the house returns.

I lift the phone to take a photo—proof for later, for sanity—but the screen goes black. Battery icon, red and thin. When it blinks back, a new text waits without a tone, as if it arrived by breath alone.

*Behind you.*

I turn too fast. The hallway shadow is suddenly taller than a doorframe. The bed sighs as if someone stood up from it a moment ago. I don't scream. I can't.

Because I can see the Sharpie cap on the floor.

### 3. Unwelcome News

I wake already braced, like I've been holding a note in my lungs all night. Gray light, empty carpet—the Sharpie cap is gone. The space where it should be prickles my skin.

The old phone lies on the nightstand, face dark, battery a sliver. I don't touch it. On the sill, the hair tie sits exactly where I placed it, sun-bleached pink looped on the latch like a tag.

Last night's four messages hit hard: the accusation, the threat, the window, the warning. The empty carpet feels like their punchline. I kneel, check the shadows along the bed. I find the Sharpie cap by the bedskirt, not where I saw it last night.

For a moment, I just stare at it, stupidly certain it should still be by the wall. I try to rewind the scene—me backing toward the bed, the cap glinting in my periphery—but the film jumps. Did I kick it in my sleep? Did he come in after I locked the door? Every version feels wrong.

I close my fist around it and tuck it into the top-left drawer with the pills I don't take. Greg's side is empty; below, the house hums in that careful way he moves when he thinks I'm sleeping. The kettle starts and stops; the silence after sounds posed, like a stage before the actors come out.

Today I will be ordinary. Tea, shower, calls. Jenna's name slips in sideways and thins the light.

The knock is careful but decisive, three measured taps that don't belong to the neighbors. I slide the drawer shut on the cap, cross the hall, and take the stairs. I open the door to Detective Dana Hart in a charcoal coat that drinks in the light.

"Ms. Monroe," she says. "May I come in for a moment?"

I step aside because the script says to. She walks like a person who knows where she is in a room, whose shoulders remember other doorways, other mothers. She doesn't take off her coat. "I'm sorry to drop by unannounced," she says. "It's... time-sensitive."

"Jenna Price," she adds, standing near the threshold like the news might stain the furniture. Emma's friend-not-friend, orbiting close, then far, then close again. "She didn't come home last night. Parents reported at two. We confirmed she left practice, was seen at the bus stop, and then... nothing definitive after eight forty."

"How long before late becomes missing?"

"This long." Her voice doesn't offer numbers. "Her phone went dark around nine. The last useful ping was within half a mile of the cove. Near the boathouse path." She watches my face, not unkindly.

"Jenna wouldn't vanish," I say, and the lie is obvious because girls do. "Was she with anyone?"

"Don't know. We're pulling cameras, canvassing the bus line, checking friends." A pause. "I wanted to tell you before you heard it somewhere careless."

The boathouse sits between their names like a hinge. I grip the counter to keep the room from sliding. Patterns line up whether I invite them or not: a phone gone dark, a last ping near water, a path I told Emma not to take after dusk. "Does her mother know about the cove?"

"We're speaking with everyone," she says carefully, which means *yes* and *not enough*.

I see Emma's green journal, the torn teeth of paper, *tonight* pressed into the page. The hair tie looped on my latch. The small handprints in the grit. The Sharpie cap I hid like contraband. The parallels don't sit; they stack.

"This is the same," I say. "Or close enough to be the same." She doesn't argue. Her not saying is the loudest thing in the room.

Dana studies the wood grain, like answers might be tucked between boards. "Some elements feel... familiar." A neutral word for a sharp truth. Night. Water. Phone gone dark. Last seen near the cove. The way parents say *she wouldn't*, and towns nod because they want to be kind.

"Like Emma," I say, giving the outline its face.

She doesn't nod, doesn't contradict, only lets a small breath out, which is answer enough. Details stack in my head, neat as the pencils I lined on Emma's desk: torn pages, *tonight*, a hidden photo, a draft that read "*He knows. I can't...*" The stack wobbles.

"Then we don't wait," I say. "If it's familiar, we don't pretend it's nothing. Not again."

"That's why I'm here."

I fetch the old phone like I'm carrying a live thing. "This isn't her current one. Backup. It woke on our Wi-Fi." I thumb the code. The thread from **Unknown:** waits like a mouth: "*You left her.*" "*You're next.*" "*Check the window.*" "*See?*" "*Don't scream.*" "*Behind you.*"

Dana doesn't flinch. With a pen cap, she taps through, careful not to smudge anything. "No contact name, masked number. May I photograph these?" I say yes. She frames the whole screen, the status bar, and the time. "We'll want the device," she adds, softer. "Chain of custody matters."

I show her **Drafts:** "*He knows. I can't...*" The cursor blinks even in the photo, like the phone breathes under glass. "Who has access to the house?" she asks. "Keys, passcodes?"

"Greg. Me." I tell her about the hair tie on the latch and the handprints crusted in grit. She looks at the window, then back at me, and for a second the detective falls away and there's only the woman. "Thank you," she says. "This helps."

"There's something else," she adds. "Anonymous report: a car pulled off the service road near the cove, close to the boathouse path."

"What kind of car?"

"Silver mid-size with a roof rack. Older body style." She doesn't look at the driveway. "The caller thought the plate started with a G. Not sure. Do you and Greg still have the one registered here?"

"Yes." Too quickly. Our car is silver. It has a rack. I picture the shallow dent by the rear lamp. "Lots of cars look like ours."

"They do. And anonymous tips aren't gospel. But we check them." Her gaze stays level. "Was Greg home around nine?"

Noise isn't an alibi. I replayed the kettle, cabinet, and water shutting off. "He was here," I said, then hesitated. "I think."

"If you remember specifics later, call me."

The question she didn't ask sits between us like a third person. The silver car in my mind turns into a slideshow of Greg's excuses—late inventory, a supplier call, and coming home smelling like rain and old wood. He always had a practiced apology about losing track. I used to accept the details because they arrived calmly, evenly spaced, like reason could be a lullaby. Now I hear only the spaces.

His phone was facedown. The pills in my drawer are for when I "can't shut off." The Sharpie cap is on our floor. The hair tie is looped on my latch like a small, pink dare. The anonymous message knew which window to choose.

"He was here," I repeat, softer. The words feel like furniture I'm no longer sure belong to us.

Dana doesn't press. "We're early in this," she says, lowering her voice a notch. "People get scared. Scared people say helpful things and unhelpful things. Just... be careful whom you trust."

"You mean don't talk to anyone," I joke without a joke.

"I mean, don't hand your certainty to the first calm voice that asks for it." Her look flicks from the old phone to the window latch and back. "Call me first. For anything that feels off. Even if you think it's nothing." She slides a card across the table; its corners are rounded from other kitchens. My name is already written on the back.

"I can't promise I'll be brave," I say.

"Brave is optional," she answers. "Careful, isn't it?" When I nod, she buttons her coat and steps into the cold.

The door closes on Dana's coat and opens on Greg's boots almost in the same breath. The cold rides in on him; the wind tries to rearrange his hair and fails. His eyes inventory the table, the old phone between the mugs, the card I slip into the dish towel drawer.

He smiles, small and practiced. "Everything okay?" Warm words. Measuring gaze. He sets a paper bag on the counter. "Got scones. Fig and something."

"Detective Hart stopped by," I say, flat. "About Jenna." His mouth tightens a fraction. He turns to the kettle and pours water as if this were any morning.

"What about Jenna?" Not quite idle. Steam curls between us and makes the kitchen smell briefly clean. I take the mug he hands me so I don't have to answer too quickly; the heat gives my shaking somewhere to hide.

"What did she want?" he asks, light as steam. He straightens my mug a fraction, as if the handle's angle matters.

"Routine. Checking on people." The lie wobbles on new legs.

"Huh. Must be making the rounds." He leans a hip against the counter and sips without a wince. "Did she say why here first?"

"I don't know that she was here first." I aim for a shrug; it lands like a flinch.

His gaze slides to the old phone. "That's the antique? I didn't know it still turns on." He reaches as if to flip it, stops an inch short—an almost touch more intimate than contact. "Fun little fossil."

"Wi-Fi woke it. I was going through some things." True, and not useful.

"Going through things is good." He smiles the practiced smile that looks like fairness. "As long as we're not inventing them." He sets his cup exactly on the ring it left, precision masquerading as care. "Jenna's parents must be out of their minds," he adds, sympathy like cloth over glass. "You told Dana we were home last night, I hope."

"I said what I know," I answer, which is almost nothing. He tips his head, patient, as if waiting for me to start making sense.

He steps closer, fingers light on my shoulder, then firmer, like setting a cup on its ring. "You're not dragging us back into this, Elise. Not again." Soft enough to sound like care, solid enough to feel like a wall.

"I'm trying to help," I say. "Jenna—"

"We are helping," he says, smiling with only half his mouth. "By not feeding rumors. By being sensible." He untwists the scone bag; fig blooms too sweet. His keys clatter onto the counter. A flake of pale mud breaks off a tooth on the ring and dusts the laminate—chalky, fine, the service road after rain.

The old phone buzzes by the mugs. Greg doesn't look at it. I do. A banner slides down—**Unknown:**—polite gray, the same as last night.

*Ask him where he was at nine.*

I don't breathe. He wipes the mud fleck away with his thumb and watches me the way you watch a match to see if it will take. "Elise," he says patiently, "be careful."

The phone pings again, almost like a whisper.

*And check the trunk.*

