A BESTSELLING AUTHOR.
A MOTHER.
A MURDERER.

LOVE, MOM



ILIANA XANDER

PENGUIN BOOKS

LOVE, MOM

Iliana Xander is the author of the psychological thriller *Love, Mom*. She's been writing stories since she was a teen and has published over twenty novels in various genres under different pen names. Secrets, heartbreaks, love, envy, and twisty twists—you'll find it all in her books. When she's not writing, she is traveling the world or making crazy art.

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PROLOGUE

I've never hurt a single person. But right now, I want to punch the face staring at me from the national newspaper's front page. A picture of *her*, with that signature red lipstick and long raven hair. The pretty face of a monster.

BESTSELLING AUTHOR FOUND DEAD

Elizabeth Casper, 43, better known around the world as E. V. Renge, the author of gritty thrillers, was found dead in what appears to be a "freak accident."

She is survived by her beloved husband, Ben Casper, and their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Mackenzie Casper.

The world is in shock at the tragic loss of the talented soul gone too early. Fans all around the world gather for a massive tribute to the literary genius.

Oh, the lies…

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The cold smile taunts me from the newspaper in my trembling hands, and I have the urge to carve it out and wipe it from my memory.

She had it coming.

She deserved to die.

I just wish it had happened sooner.

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PART 1

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1

MACKENZIE

You'll probably never see another memorial service like this one—without a single tear shed.

My mom's memorial service is the grandest performance of the year or, perhaps, her entire life.

The mob of fans outside Saint John's Memorial Center doesn't know that. They think that their mass gathering is organic. They don't know about the money being poured into publicity, influencers, gossip columns, and book bloggers.

Since Mom's passing, her novels have topped the book charts again.

Look, Mom! You are dead, and everyone is still cashing in.

The newspaper headlines have been going crazy in the last week, proposing all sorts of wild theories.

E. V. RENGE, 43, DIES TRAGICALLY AT THE PEAK OF HER CAREER. ACCIDENT OR...

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That's why that guy standing at the back of the room is here. Middle-aged, with a funny mustache, dressed in a suit and tie.

"This is a private event. Please leave," Grandma says to him curtly in a hushed whisper.

As soon as she walks off, her smile disappears.

You don't need to be super observant to spot a gun holster under his suit jacket—he is a detective. He came to our house two days ago. I opened the door, and he started asking me about Mom until Grandma flew up toward us like a furious hen.

"Mackenzie, leave us, please," she ordered, blocking me from him. Then, when I walked around the corner, she told the detective in a clipped tone, "You should be ashamed of yourself—talking to a child who just lost her mother."

Now, the man is forced to leave again.

The newspapers and bloggers have been suggesting all sorts of crazy theories about my mom's death for days. The truth, as per investigators, was more banal—Mom slipped, fell, and cracked her head on a rock while taking her usual morning walk in the woods adjacent to our house.

"Misadventure" is what they called it. Coincidentally, Mom's bestsellers are full of misadventures.

Don't get me wrong, some people might be sad.

That bitch, Laima Roth, who is talking to the publisher right now like this is a regular business meeting? For sure. She has been my mother's agent for over twenty years. She can now forget about the future book releases they were planning. Though, I'm sure she'll capitalize on special editions, sprayed edges, book boxes, and whatnot. This enterprise will never dry out.

We cremated Mom several days ago in a private arrangement

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attended only by a dozen or so people. Still, there were no tears.

This memorial service is for publicity. For "friends," they say. To pay their respects. Respect was pretty high on Mom's list, but friends? Not sure she had any true ones, though the eloquent speeches they've been giving in her honor for the last two hours made it sound like she was Shakespeare, no less.

The streets outside the building are mobbed, but the crowded memorial hall is eerily quiet, whispers ricocheting between the walls.

On one side of the room is a giant author portrait of Mom in a lacy high-collar blouse and red roses in the background. It says *E. V. Renge* under it. The middle-aged quirky photographer hired by the publishing house is snapping pictures of it from every angle. With the publisher, the agents, and Dad. He asked me to pose too, but I refused.

Screw them.

On the other side of the hall is a picture of Mom in her office. She has full makeup and her hair done, but she looks somewhat dreamy sitting in front of a bookshelf. Her real name, Elizabeth Casper, is under her informal picture. This version is for other sources, like the local newspaper, the church Grandma goes to, and the charities Mom used to donate to.

I prefer to stand at the back of the room, away from this spectacle, next to my grandpa who doesn't give a crap—and never did—about my mom. Or my looks, for that matter.

Grandma does. Earlier at the house, she asked me not to put on my usual black lipstick and heavy eyeliner.

"And wear something appropriate."

I almost always wear black. Coincidentally, that's very

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appropriate for a memorial service. Just like my black eyeliner and the lipstick I put on anyway.

Grandma, of course, is dressed in Dior and expensive jewelry. She makes sure she talks to every attendee.

Dad is dressed in a slick black suit, and he looks dashing. He is somewhat sulking, but that might be because of the withdrawal. His parents live only four hours away, but they have been staying at our house since Mom's passing. Grandma controls Dad's too-early-in-the-day intake of booze. With Mom gone, she proudly took over the household.

Me? I want to cry, I really do, but the reality hasn't hit me yet. I want to be sad, but I always felt like Mom never cared enough about me. That made me very bitter in recent years, and we grew apart.

My best friend, EJ, says I have delayed grief. Maybe I'm just heartless. I asked EJ not to come, because I didn't want my best friend to see how screwed up my life has been, well, pretty much as far back as I remember.

I'll see him at the house where we are having a catered party tonight for the "close circle." I'm sure it will be a party, though they call it a celebration of life.

I look around the room and cringe when I see the familiar figure approach Dad and shake his hand. That's the dean of the university I go to. I look away and roll my eyes. Mom used to rub shoulders with him. "For your future's sake," she said once. She even did a lecture at my university and donated money, in fact. I wouldn't be surprised if they set up a monument in her honor.

Mom's therapist is here too. Two of her editors. Her three assistants. Our family lawyer. Most of her "friends" are simply people she worked closely with.

For the last week, since the accident and while I was

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staying home instead of at my studio apartment in town, I constantly thought about her, what we had, our little screwed-up family. I felt sad, just not overwhelmingly sad like I am supposed to be, I guess.

Dad checks his phone and hurriedly walks away from everyone and toward the door. There, I notice another man in a baseball hat who turns around and walks away. Dad follows.

This would be a good time to tell Dad that I have a headache and am about to have a mental breakdown—lies, of course—and I need to leave. Emotions bubble up inside me, but I can't figure them out. Mostly, I want to be away from these people.

I walk out into the empty hall connecting to another small hallway and see Dad talking to the stranger at the very end.

I start walking toward them and slow down when I hear a hushed whisper. "You scumbag."

The hell?

I step to the side, behind the doorway, where I can't see them but can clearly hear them.

"Not here," he hisses. "How *dare* you?"

"How dare I? I have the right to be here."

"Get out. Now."

The man chuckles quietly. "Does she suspect anything?"

"Who?"

"Mackenzie."

My heart gives an uneasy beat at the sound of my name.

"Don't you dare mention my daughter."

"Oh, she doesn't? Well played, Benny-boy."

Benny-boy? My father? Who the hell calls him that?

"I said, leave," Dad adds more desperately. "Just…go. We'll talk later."

I step closer to the doorway to peek around, and the hardwood flooring under the carpet squeaks, it freaking squeaks.

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Dammit.

I stand still like a deer caught in the headlights. I hear muffled footsteps, and Dad appears in the doorway. As soon as he sees me, a panicky look crosses his face.

"What was that about?" I ask and peek around the doorway, but the mysterious man is gone.

Dad wipes his face with both hands. "Nothing."

"Were you arguing with someone?"

"No, kiddo, just talking." He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a flask.

"Do you know that man?"

Dad takes a nervous gulp and exhales slowly. "I've never seen him before."

That's a clear lie.

He hides the flask back in his jacket, then winks at me. "You okay?"

"I can't be here. These people—" I don't finish and, rolling my eyes, motion toward the main hall.

"I know. I know." Dad closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"*You* okay?"

Dad and Mom weren't exactly a perfect couple. Especially lately. They fought more than ever before, and that's only what I saw during the weekends with them, because for the last two years, I've been renting a small studio in town, close to the university.

Dad inhales loudly and exhales through puffed lips, then manages a fake smile. "Yeah, kiddo." He gently pats my shoulder. "It'll all be fine. You can get out of here if you want."

"See you at the house," I say and turn into the hallway that leads to the back entrance.

The biggest performance will be outside as soon as

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everyone exits the building. The fans from all corners of the country are the ones actually grieving. The publishing house already brought an in-house PR team to navigate the event. Yes, they call it an event. A hired group of actors will cause havoc and scream obscenities and desecrate one of Mom's portraits, proclaiming E. V. Renge a devil. Because, you know, there is no bad publicity. I know that because I was informed beforehand. Right after I signed an NDA, a non-disclosure agreement. This stunt secretly conjured by the PR firm is supposed to rake up insane sales for the books.

I definitely don't want to exit through the main entrance and right into a pack of paparazzi and crazy fans.

I exhale in relief when I step outside the back door of the building and, making sure there's no one in the parking lot, walk to my car.

My phone rings.

"Thank god," I blurt when I answer. "I'm out of there."

"Hey, Snarky, it's almost over." EJ's reassuring voice is like a balm for my soul.

"You are coming over, right?"

"Already on my way. Might be there before you."

"Watch out for the paparazzi in front of the main gate, okay?" I unlock my car door to get in. "I'm sure there will… Hold up."

There's an envelope on the driver's seat, and I frown in confusion, picking it up.

"EJ, hold on." I put him on speaker, get in the car, then study the envelope. "What the hell…"

"You okay?" he asks.

"Not sure," I say, my heartbeat spiking as I read the words on the envelope.

From #1 fan. XOXO

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2

Fame, even in the literary world, comes with praise, fan mail, stalkers, and occasionally, a random vial of urine or bloodied underwear. Yes, there are crazies out there. I won't talk about the more morbid stuff. There's plenty of that too.

Nervously, I peer out through my car's windows. The parking lot is packed with cars but not a single person in sight.

"Kenz, what's up?" EJ asks worriedly on speaker.

"Fan mail," I reply, turning my attention back to the envelope.

"Something crazy?"

"What's crazy is that it was inside my car."

"Did you forget to lock it?"

"Tsk, dude, I know better. I hope it's not ricin or something. I should just toss it."

"Open it! It might be entertaining."

EJ is always excited about Mom's fan stories.

"Okay, okay!" I rip the envelope open.

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Carefully, I spread it open with the tips of my black-polished nails and peek inside. You can never be too careful with fans. Stranger things have happened. People send all sorts of stuff to my mom. Love letters, threats, their own manuscripts, toys, cookies, locks of their hair. A bottle of urine—that was nasty. Some guy sent her a photoshopped picture of him and her, covered in his semen.

"Come on, spill. What is it?" EJ asks impatiently.

"There are papers inside. Someone's teary letters, probably."

"Read them."

EJ loves that kind of creepy stuff. He graduated from my university a year ago and does various freelance IT jobs. He might be a brilliant programmer now, making more money from coding jobs online at twenty-three than an average adult, but when I met him several years ago, he was a nerd. He told me he had stayed for a second year in junior high because he had skipped classes and spent all his time on the computer at home. He is still a nerd, but he just found a gang of like-minded people. Sometimes, that makes all the difference in life.

I pull out the papers from the envelope and unfold them.

The letter is handwritten and consists of three pages, one side of them fringed, like they've been ripped out of a notebook.

"Come on!" EJ urges me impatiently.

"Hold on! Jeez. Patience is a virtue, you know."

The first page only has a couple of lines that I slowly read out loud:

Want to know a secret?

Love, Mom

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3

"What the hell," I say, then angrily look at the second page and feel my hair stand on end.

I can see the familiar names on the paper, a date from twenty-two years ago in the top left corner. Location: *Old Bow, Nebraska.*

If that's someone's sick joke, it's an elaborate one, because I know that place. My parents went to college there, more than twenty years ago.

"Snarky, you there?" EJ asks.

"Listen, I'll call you back."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'll call you."

"You'd better."

For the next five minutes, I don't move. I read the three pages from the envelope and feel my insides twist. I reread them and turn the pages to make sure there is nothing else I missed.

I don't know much about my parents' past, but I know

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where they come from. The story on the pages seems personal, intimate. Mom never cared to tell me much about her past. Why would she now?

"Complicated," she used to say.

Knowing her novels, I would say it was screwed up. The critics called her imagination "brilliant." I personally think it's batshit crazy with its roots obviously in the past. And what parent tells their kid about their screwed-up past?

My first reflex is to shove the pages into a giant chest full of the similar stuff written to my mom over the twenty years of her publishing career. She keeps the chest in her office at home. It's an old Gothic thing, the size of a tomb, dedicated to her fan mail.

But I'm curious. What if these letters are really from Mom?

There is one thing I can do to check the authenticity.

I start my car and drive to my parents' home.

Our house is an hour outside town. I insisted I didn't want to stay home while getting my BA, considering Mom didn't let me move anywhere out of state for college. So, at least I got some freedom by moving into town.

I visit my parents often, every other weekend. After Mom's passing, I've stayed at home. Of course, it was Grandma's idea so that "we could bond through grief." That's her wording. Though I'm pretty sure none of us are grieving.

An hour later, I pull into the private road that leads to my parents' estate. It's a seven-thousand-square-foot house on five acres, with an additional guest house, a pool, and a natural pond next to a lake surrounded by forests.

A security guy, hired by the PR firm, nods to me. But I should've expected that one wasn't enough, because two hundred feet up the road, here they are—several men darting

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out of the thick woods with cameras, flashing pictures of me as I approach the main gate.

"Mackenzie, do you think your mother's death was an accident?"

"Mackenzie, will you be finishing her current novel?"

"Miss Casper!"

"This is private property!" I yell at them through the glass. But they know that. They don't care. At least, when the metal gates slowly open and I drive in, they don't dare follow.

A minute later, I'm walking into the house.

An overwhelming sweet scent wafts into my face—hundreds of flowers sent from friends, colleagues, and fans. The house is crowded with catering staff preparing for the evening reception.

I make a beeline straight to Mom's office, the envelope in my hand.

The office is locked. Mom was the only one with the key, or so she thought. We could only go in when she was there. But I know where Dad keeps the spare. I caught him sneaking in months ago. Mom never knew about it, and the fact that this was even happening shows how screwed-up my parents' relationship was.

Right now, I really need to get inside that office.

I walk to the small tribal mask by the guest bathroom and sink my hand into the mane of its thick fake hair. In the soft rubbery base of the skull is the office key.

"Bingo," I murmur. Dad still keeps it there, which is a relief.

I hurry to the end of the hall and unlock Mom's office, then lock the door behind me.

I've never been here on my own, only with her. The only reason I was ever curious is because she always locked this room. That was her writing haven, she said. Not anymore.

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I'm waiting for the grief to strike me suddenly, sneak up on me here, of all places, but it's not happening. Not a tear. Not even sadness really, just bitterness.

Mom and I were never close. I was told that a small trust fund she set up for me would cover my entire education, but that's about it. Nothing extra. No inheritance. Everything goes to my dad. I would like to be a hypocrite and say that we don't love our parents for their money, but Mom made millions and didn't leave me a penny besides the college fund. I'd be lying if I said that this fact doesn't piss me off or at least rub me the wrong way. So, yeah, I wasn't Mom's fan. Her trying to teach me a lesson? Whatever. I'll be fine on my own.

Right now, I'd like to learn what the purpose of this anonymous letter is. Maybe, the lesson is still coming. If this little prank turns out not to be a prank but a farewell letter from Mom, I could do better research later.

The only thing I need to check its authenticity is the small frame on the giant mahogany desk. That frame was—wait, drum roll, please—Mom's reminder of how much she'd achieved. Right. Typical pat on her shoulder. Inside the glass frame is the first page of the original manuscript of *Lies, Lies, and Revenge*, Mom's first novel and the internationally acclaimed bestseller that sold millions of copies and put E. V. Renge on the map.

This first page could probably sell for thousands of dollars right now. It's handwritten on some old page from a journal Mom wrote as a teenager. Yes, that page is that old, almost thirty years or so. My mom started writing her bestseller at the age of sixteen. Talk about genius, right?

But I need this little piece of memorabilia to compare with the pages I got from an anonymous fan.

I sit down right on top of the desk—Mom would've

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killed me—set the framed page down flat on its surface, then flatten the pages from the envelope and study them.

Obviously, I'm not a graphologist or a forensic examiner, but I lean close to both samples and inspect every letter. The way the *I*s are wavy on top. The way the *B* in Ben, my father's name, curls at the bottom. The commas, the quotation marks, the way one word is underlined twice in the letter and identical in the framed first page, right under the *Prologue*.

Five minutes later, my neck hurts from leaning down, my eyes sting from squinting, and an uneasy feeling is gathering in the pit of my stomach. The handwriting on both the framed page and the letters is identical.

"Huh," I muse to myself.

Still, that doesn't prove that the letter came from Mom.

But that's not what makes me curious.

It's what she has written at the end of it:

This secret will now be yours.

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Letter #1

When you are young, you don't fall for the sweet guys. You fall for the wrong ones.

First love can be toxic. Occasionally, you choose to stick with it. Ben Casper was exactly that.

Why did I even fall for him? Ah, that's the question. Our present is often a collage of our past deeds. I wouldn't call my past a mistake. A despicable chain of events, more likely. But I'll get to that in time.

What's more important is that everyone in my past was a taker. Ben? Ben had the gift of making those around him feel special. He was the first guy who paid attention to me in a way that made a girl swoon.

So, I swooned.

I was in my senior year of creative writing. I lived in a small college town, Old Bow, Nebraska. The town stretched for two miles along Main Street and was surrounded by lush forests. It felt secluded. It suited me. My past would not catch up with me in a place like this, or so I thought.

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I first saw Ben at the campus café. I stood by the vending machine, and he locked eyes with me.

"Cool lipstick," he said with a nod. "Red, like a strawberry."

Not blood, like everyone else remarked, but strawberry. Can a guy get more romantic than that?

He grinned with that boyish smile that felt like a fresh breeze wafted into a stuffy room. It promised easy laughter and walking hand in hand and a possible heartbreak. But you don't think about heartbreaks or the fact that the boy is way out of your league or that his friends at the far-end table snicker about you and give you condescending once-overs. You don't care, because when that boy walks over to that table, he looks over his shoulder and grins at you again and winks, and there is no stopping the hard beating of your heart and the flutter in your stomach and the thoughts spinning a mile a second with the images of what would've happened if he only took time to get to know you.

But then he did.

A week later, I saw Ben at the seminar hall. This time, he was alone, no friends around to steal his attention.

"Oh, hey, Strawberry!" he called out to me.

My legs felt weak, and that treacherous flutter in my stomach was back when he approached.

"You took the first prize in the short story competition, huh?"

I couldn't stop myself from blushing. "Yes."

"Congrats!"

"Thank you."

"You gonna be the next Sylvia Plath."

My heart gave out an excited thud—he liked

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literature. Never mind the fact that it was Sylvia Plath tribute week; it said so right on the award board next to us.

"Rock on, Miss Elizabeth Dunn."

My name! My name never sounded so cool coming out of anyone else's mouth! My heart wanted to leap out of my chest and plant itself at his feet—he knew my name! Never mind that it was on the award board with my picture right next to us.

"It's Lizzy," I murmured.

"Lizzy?"

"Lizzy," I echoed.

"Lizzy." He grinned. "I'm Ben."

I know. "Hi, Ben."

"Hi, Lizzy. Have you written any other cool stories?"

"You like to read?"

"Of course! I love a good story."

Ben didn't care about reading and almost failed English II in the first year. But I would only learn about it later. As well as other things. That he barely passed most classes. That his uppity parents paid his way into graduation. That he already had a drinking problem. That he didn't get accepted into any internships. That his friends, a popular crew, made fun of me. That I was his little secret for months, until everything in our lives started spinning out of control and became a train wreck.

No, that would come later.

But that day, as I stood before him, my starving heart begged for him to talk to me for one more minute.

There was something about Ben that made people want to gaze at him. His laughter was the most wonderful sound in the world. His dimpled grin made my knees weak. And when he casually asked for my pager number,

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"Would love to hear more of your stories," I fumbled and blushed in embarrassment. I didn't have one, only the house phone.

I would write about it later, about our first time, and the second, and the third, about the happy days and sleepless nights, coy smiles and bitter tears, cheerful dates and a nasty betrayal.

But later that very day, he picked me up from the house, took me for dinner at his favorite place, then out to a movie. Then we got a bottle of wine and minis of booze and went to my place, a shabby studio above the convenience store in town. He didn't seem a bit baffled by the miserable size of it. I wanted him to see it, knew this might be a one-time thing and was all right with it. This would be the night I would write about for months, I thought.

We drank and laughed, and he pulled me against him.

"Do they taste like strawberries, too?" he murmured against my strawberry-colored lips and kissed me and whispered, "We are not going to do anything you don't want to."

An hour later, we were naked, and he was doing everything I wanted him to do.

Late into the night, he was sprawled on my bed as I sat next to him and read him excerpts of the novel I had been writing for years. He gazed at me with those luminous blue eyes full of awe that made me feel on top of the world.

I grew up in a group home, a loner, and was thrown out into the big world with nothing but the clothes on my back and social housing. But I was a smart girl. I worked three jobs. I got a college grant and full scholarship. I was determined to make my way out of my crappy life.

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I wanted to impress Ben so badly that night that I told him the one thing that made me dream. "A literary agent is interested in my novel."

He instantly lit up. "Really? Cool! Will it actually get published?"

I shrugged shyly. "I hope so. The agent is talking to several publishing houses. She says my novel is brilliant."

He pulled me closer, kissing, kissing, kissing me everywhere, making me giggle and swoon and feel like finally, finally, after the horrible events at the group home, life was working out.

"You are"—he pulled back and looked at me like I was the biggest treasure he'd ever seen—"amazing, Lizzy Dunn."

He gazed at me for the longest time, that intense gaze I couldn't quite figure out then, though I did later.

To my surprise, Ben returned the next week, and every week since then. Usually, late into the night. Slightly tipsy, always happy, with that dreamy smile and soft, "Hey, Lizzy, baby," and we would have sex and he would make me read to him and praise me. Praise is the greatest trick with women.

He loved my long black hair with straight bangs. And my strawberry lipstick. "So Kat Von D." He loved my stories and dark twists I always tried to impress him with.

Ben and I were from opposite sides of the track. I didn't have friends besides John, the guy who worked at the local coffee shop.

Ben, on the other hand, was happy-go-lucky, a party head. I knew I would never click with his crew. I hung out with them a couple of times until one of the girls got drunk and said to me, "The only reason Ben keeps you is for

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your talent. Otherwise, he'd never look twice at someone like you."

But I knew that, you see. Some have attractive looks. Others have talents. I didn't want Ben's friends. I wanted Ben, someone who could be only mine. And I didn't want to be out there, attracting attention. I knew what it could do. Like it did once. I was comfortable living in the shadows.

I never told anyone about the three boys at the group home back at Brimmville, what they did to me. No one needed to know my past. Definitely not Ben.

But you should.

As always, I'm getting ahead of myself, my beautiful girl.

You see, the thing with Ben is, he came from money but had zero merits. His only talent was his smile—dazzling, charming, cute, or apologetic if needed. Whichever way it shined, it made people's heads turn. It was his gift. That was about the only gift he had. So, he surrounded himself with popular people, and on occasion, the talented ones, making up for his own lack of personality.

I only realized that later. But by then, I was already in love and found out what he was doing behind my back. Then came the first heartbreak, but I was determined to work things out.

It all was great until she came into our lives, twisting her sharp claws into his heart and into my mind, dragging my past into the daylight.

She made me do things I'd never done. She brought out the worst in me. She dug up my old sins.

But then, she made me write the best stories.

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So, here we are.

This secret will now be yours.

Someone might tell you lies. Someone might spread awful gossip about my past. But this—this diary—is the truth.

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4

"You think this is legit?" EJ asks, passing the pages back to me. He takes the joint out of his pocket and lights it.

We sit in the gazebo by the pond that's tucked away into the woods only a short walk from my parents' house. We stayed at the party at the house for exactly one hour. That was one hour too long, and no one cared when we snuck out.

"The handwriting matches, I told you."

EJ takes a drag and passes me the joint.

"Plus, it sounds just like them," I add. "My parents."

It's nighttime. The dim solar lanterns in the gazebo's corners light EJ's chiseled cheekbones and puckered lips as he exhales a cloud of smoke. He leans back on the bench, his hands locked behind his head. He has a handsome profile. Somehow, he's a far cry from the awkward nerd I met only several years ago. He's wearing Converse sneakers, jeans, and a black hoodie, the same type of hoodie that used to look like a potato sack on him and now looks sexy. Though I should probably not use that word in reference to my best friend.

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"You got some strange mail, sure," he says thoughtfully. "Leave it. It might be nothing."

"What if it's some sort of clue?"

EJ turns to look at me. "To what? Your parents' love story started with a one-night stand, Snarky. It's not the story of the century."

"Oh my god." I cringe. "That's all you got from it? I'm talking about the woman."

"What woman?" EJ shrugs. "There is no name. What are you supposed to get out of it? Ask your dad."

True, I could try to coax some stories out of Dad, now that Mom is gone. It always felt like Mom watched him like a hawk, curated every word he said, even when he drank too much.

"Ask him what, though?" I wonder out loud.

"Exactly my point. This letter is vague. It's just some preamble to—"

"What?"

"I don't know what."

I have so many questions. When did she write this to me? Months ago? Right before she died?

"Why do I only get this? This!" I shake the papers in the air. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Maybe there's nothing else."

"She was talking about some boys who did something to her."

"Maybe she started writing this story and then…you know…"

He doesn't say it, but I know he means the accident. People are so sensitive about words. She died, and that's that.

Yet, my chest tightens, and I try to focus on the suspicious letter to make the grim thought go away.

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I feel EJ staring at me. I turn to meet his thoughtful stare. "What?"

His gaze softens. "Kenz, I think you are substituting grief with some mystery you are trying to milk out of this random fan letter. Maybe someone is just messing with you."

Disheartened, I don't answer. Instead, I pull the hood over my head, lie down on the bench, and take a hit off the joint.

I like these moments with EJ. I like when he calls me Kenzie or Kenz. That's when I know he is serious or concerned. Snarky was what he called me when we first became friends. The nickname stuck. I don't blame him. I'm not the easiest person to get along with. Dad says I got it from Mom.

"What does it feel like?" EJ asks after some time.

"What does *what* feel like?"

"This new reality, with her gone."

I shrug. He knows Mom and I were never close. Our family wasn't a happy one, and that's because of Mom.

My mom was 1) "A bitch," as per Dad's side of the family, 2) "Complicated," as per my father, 3) "Brilliant genius," as per the literary world, and 4) "Queen," as per her fans. She spent hours a day in her social media groups. She donated signed copies to charities all over the world. She was nicer to her fans than she was ever to me. And definitely way more generous with moral support for them.

I'm not yet a great writer, but I try. I love writing. When I decided to submit a piece for the college writing competition, Mom was the first to read it.

She shrugged. "You have a long way to go, sweetie." Always that "sweetie." I hated it. No help from her, no pointers. She just handed my story back to me like it was beneath her to help me work on it.

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I won first place, thank you very much, and celebrated by getting shitfaced with EJ. Professor Salma of my creative writing class, who said I had a future.

Mom only gave me a condescending smile, a cold "congrats," then wrote in her social media post that she was proud of me and hoped that one day, I would follow in her footsteps. Emphasis on "follow." Like I will always be in second place.

Whatever.

So, Mom? Yeah, she is a complicated bitch with a brilliant talent and a sweet personality in public. *Was.* I should've written a beautiful eulogy to impress the literary world, but I was speechless for days after they found her body. Still am. I don't know how to process the fact that I miss her, or how to deal with the sudden void in my life. Yet I am not grieving, I don't think. And there is no one besides EJ I can tell that I miss her presence yet I don't grieve her. It's bad. You shouldn't say that about your mom.

"My dad had a fight with some dude at the memorial service today," I tell EJ as I pass the joint back to him.

"Like a fist fight?"

"No. Like a conversation gone wrong. Dad called him a scumbag. The guy called him Benny-boy."

EJ chuckles. "Called *your* dad that?"

"I know, right? There was something off about that convo."

"There's something off about your whole family, Snarky. No offense."

He's not wrong.

The worst part is that there's this nasty feeling inside me that there are a lot worse things to come. And they have something to do with the letter I received.

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5

A loud laugh and a curse from behind the gazebo make me sit up.

"Hi, sorry! Sorry! Hey!" A drunk couple stumbles toward us.

The dude puts his palms up as if in surrender. Next to him is a hot brunette in a mini dress and a man's suit jacket over her shoulders.

He sniffs the air. "Looks like you have all the right stuff."

The brunette giggles, wobbling on high heels that sink into the soft ground.

The joint is gone, and I motion with my eyes to EJ to get up.

"The place is all yours," I say as I walk off the gazebo steps, EJ following.

"Sharing is caring!" the guy shouts at our backs, then laughs in unison with his date. "Come on, guys. You have the good stuff."

"I'm pretty sure they've snorted plenty of good stuff already," EJ says under his breath with a soft chuckle.

"All these people make tons of money," I say bitterly

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as we walk toward the house, "and they still want to score something for free whenever they can."

"Yeah. Listen, your folks' house is killer, but not when that whole circus is here," EJ says apologetically. "I'm gonna bounce."

"Yeah."

"Yeah," he mimics me. "Hey, Snarky."

I don't look at him but feel his fingers approach my face, about to pinch my nose.

It irritates me when he does that. I react in time and slap his hand away before it reaches me, tripping as I walk.

He grins at me. "You'll be all right?"

"I don't need a babysitter, EJ, if that's what you're asking."

"Okay. Come back to town, yeah? We'll hang out, get takeout, play some video games, talk."

"I will."

He is leaving, and I already feel sad. EJ is my best friend. I really don't care for anyone else. He says I'm like my mom—a recluse, a loner, sometimes strange.

He is just being cocky, of course.

EJ is only a few years older than me. We met at some lame party when I was a freshman in my first year at university. That was when I was still trying to fit in. He was a nerd. I was a rebel. Neither of us was popular by any definition. We clicked. He helped me set up my online writing platform, and in no time, we became best friends.

He already had a place of his own, much bigger than mine, where we started hanging out until I got my own little studio.

EJ's parents are scientists who relocated to the West Coast several years ago. EJ visits them often, but since we met, EJ ended up at many of my family's holiday dinners. Calling

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those gatherings "family dinners" is an overstatement, considering they are big affairs with dozens of guests. They usually include Mom's latest protégé, some industry professionals, and of course, her agent, Laima Roth, who I can't stand.

Anyway, while EJ and I both appreciate personal space, he's become part of an online community for programmers who do all sorts of jobs in cybersecurity and coding. While I still nerd out by writing on online platforms and making pennies, he attends all sorts of conferences and conventions across the country and makes good money.

I'm surprised he didn't drop me as a friend. But then, he wouldn't. Trends come and go, but friends stay. EJ is a sweet person.

His Dodge Charger speeds away from the house, and as I watch the taillights disappear in the dark, I feel bummed out. I like being by myself. Unless it's with EJ. But lately, we spend less and less time together. He dates now and then, whereas my dating life leaves much to be desired.

I walk back into the house that's now quiet. *Quieter*, to be exact. Most guests have moved outside to the pool deck. I can hear a small group of Dad's friends down in the billiard room.

Laima is in the living room, pretty wasted, talking to some rising star in literature who apparently was Mom's protégé, like many others before him. And he might be talented, sure, but that's not why Laima's hand is on his thigh, the wine in her glass about to spill onto his pants because she's distracted and leaning into him with her double Ds—or triple, I'm not an expert. He's not too enthusiastic about it by the looks of it. Considering that he is barely over my age and Laima is old enough to be his grandma.

I walk to the kitchen and look around at the neatly stacked

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bottles of booze left after the caterers cleaned up. If EJ stayed longer, we could've had shots. But I don't drink much, and definitely not by myself—that would be going down Dad's path. If what I read in the letter is true, Dad's indulgences into booze started around my age. *No, thank you.*

I spy a small tray with Italian pastries and decide that would be a smarter choice. Grandma always taunts me about how skinny I am. I've told her many times that the almost exclusively black clothes I wear make me look skinnier. I'm five foot four and a hundred pounds. That's called small. But she's convinced in her head that I am bulimic.

"Just like your mom used to be," she often says.

Fingers crossed, the references to my mom will now decrease to avoid potential triggers.

With a tray of pastries in my hand, I walk toward the staircase.

Suddenly, a rustle in the hallway catches my attention. I walk over to check, but it turns out it's not a rustle. Voices are coming from Mom's office.

Well, isn't that a surprise? As soon as Mom is gone, her office becomes public domain.

I press my ear to the closed door and hear Dad's voice.

"What did you want me to do, Mom? She was the one who had it under control. He was *her* problem."

"He was everyone's problem, Ben. She just figured out how to benefit from it. Right in front of your nose."

"Oh, cut it out!"

"I'm sure she justified it by calling it stress relief."

The sound that follows is Grandma's chuckle. Grandma knows how to push buttons. Especially my dad's.

This conversation is odd, just like the one Dad had with the mystery man at the service.

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"We need to figure this out," she says.

"Figure what out? I thought it was all figured out a long time ago."

"Does it look that way? Elizabeth wouldn't agree, would she?"

"She is dead."

"Exactly my point, Ben. Are you really that stupid?"

"Oh, what are you talking about?" Dad asks, almost shouting.

"Shh. No need to drag the whole party in here," Grandma says in a hushed whisper. "Do you know who came talking to me again today? Right after the service? That detective."

"About?"

"Saying that they still have a reason to believe that it wasn't an accident."

My jaw drops. That's the first time I'm hearing about this from my family members.

"I'm not surprised," says Dad, and there comes a sound I can't discern.

"Keep it together, Ben," Grandma hisses.

A chill runs down my spine because I realize what that sound is—it's Dad's drunk chuckle, a nasty little sound that grows louder and turns sinister in the span of several seconds. It's cut off abruptly with his sharp words:

"She had it coming. For years."

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