

A Crack in the Pedestal

Dedication

This book is for everyone who ever believed in someone—
only to find out they weren't who you thought they were.
For the ones who trusted too much,
hurt too deeply,
and still found the strength to rise.

You didn't come out bitter.
You came out wiser.

And you're still standing.



Prologue: The Lesson That Lasted

Claire Whitmore was seven years old the day the kitchen faucet broke.

She remembered it vividly, the way the water kept sputtering, then shooting out sideways like it was angry. It shot across the countertop, soaking the pile of unopened mail her mother had just brought in. The entire household felt tense and irritated, like the faucet's tantrum had thrown everything off balance.

The house itself was old—two stories with creaky wood floors and drafty windows that always rattled during storms. But her dad loved it. He called it “a work in progress,” and he said it with the kind of pride some people reserved for talking about their kids. Every loose doorknob, squeaky hinge, or dented wall was just another project on

his list, another thing he could make right.

Mom had already thrown her hands in the air and muttered something about calling a plumber for the faucet, but a moment later, her father was digging through his old red toolbox. The one with the peeling paint and the broken clasp that never quite stayed shut. Then he just rolled up his sleeves and knelt beside the cabinet under the sink.

Her mother stood nearby with her arms crossed angrily. "Just call the plumber, John," she said again. "When you say you'll fix things they end up worse than when they started."

Her parents exchanged a pointed look Claire didn't understand.

"I said I've got it, Margaret," John replied quietly, without looking away. His voice was even. Calm. Like it always was.

"That's what you said about the garage door," his wife snapped. "And the ceiling fan. And the dryer."

"It's just a leaky pipe. I can handle it."

Margaret rolled her eyes and grabbed a dish towel to mop up the mess on the counter. "Fine. Just don't flood the place."

Claire wasn't sure who to root for. Her mother always seemed tired lately—tired and sharp in ways she hadn't been before. She used to laugh more. Bake cookies just because. Sit beside Claire in the evenings and braid her long auburn hair while they watched old cartoons. Now she moved around like she was always in a hurry, even when there was nowhere to go.

But her father... he was different. He didn't yell. He didn't slam doors. He was steady, like the North Star. Like gravity.

Claire sat cross-legged on the floor, chin in her hands, watching him

work. There was something about the way he moved—calm, steady, sure.

“Can I help?” she asked.

He glanced at her, then handed her a flashlight. “Point it right here,” he said, motioning to the shadowy area under the sink. “Hold it real still for me.”

She held it as still as she could, proud to be included.

He didn't even flinch when the wrench slipped and his knuckles scraped against the pipe. He just wiped the blood on his jeans and kept going.

"Does it hurt, Daddy?" she asked.

"A little," he said with a smile. "But a man does what's right, even when it's hard."

He said it like it was truth. Like it was a compass she could live her whole life by.

He reached over and ruffled her hair with his non-bloody hand. “You’re gonna remember that someday.”

Behind them, her mother huffed loudly and left the room, dish towel still in hand. Claire heard her footsteps retreat down the hallway, but she didn’t follow her.

She stayed by her dad's side and nodded solemnly, storing his words like treasure. She didn’t know much about the world yet, but she knew this: her daddy could fix anything. Broken pipes. Broken toys. Broken days. He didn’t quit. And he never, ever lied.

She believed in him with everything she had.

It would be years before she understood that some things can't be fixed with a wrench.

Years before she'd hear a different version of the past, one where her mother wasn't the villain, and her father wasn't the hero she had imagined.

But that day, sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor, Claire Whitmore believed in her father with all her heart.

And he let her.



Chapter 1: Before The Fall

Claire Whitmore wasn't unhappy in her job—not really. She had a corner office, a solid reputation, and a boss who respected her even if he rarely said so aloud. She managed media and messaging for a mid-sized nonprofit with a meaningful mission and a decent budget. In the world of communications, that was about as rare as it got.

Still, when the email appeared in her inbox that morning—subject line: Director of Strategic Communications – Crosswell Foundation—something stirred in her that hadn't moved in a long time. Not restlessness exactly, but something more urgent. Something closer to recognition. Like the version of herself she dreamed of becoming was finally waving from the other side of the glass.

She clicked the link, read the description, and felt her pulse quicken. It was everything she'd been working toward—bigger stage, broader reach, more responsibility. And it wasn't just ambition tugging at her. It was vision. The sense that her voice, her skills, could actually shape something real.

By the time she hit “Apply,” her coffee had gone cold.

She texted Naomi first.

Claire: Guess who just applied for the Director of Strategic Comms at Crosswell??

Naomi: SHUT. UP.

Naomi: You better get that job. It’s perfect for you!

Claire smiled. Naomi always hyped her up—ever since college, where they’d bonded over ad copy and heartbreak in the same week. They were both in communications, but Naomi had chosen the corporate side—sleeker titles, shinier events. Claire had gone the nonprofit route, drawn to work that felt like it mattered, even if the paychecks didn’t sparkle.

Different lanes, different companies, same support. That was their rhythm.

She could almost hear Naomi’s voice in her head: “If you don’t get it, it’s their loss. Not yours.”

Later that afternoon, she called and told her father.

“You’re really going for it?” he asked, and Claire could hear the smile in his voice.

“I am,” she said, pacing the hallway between her office and the conference room. “It’s a huge step up—more strategic leadership, more autonomy. I’d have a team of eight. I wouldn’t just be writing statements—I’d be directing campaigns, overseeing partnerships.”

“That’s my girl. I’m so proud of you. You’ve got the brains and the grit,” he bragged.

Claire felt her chest warm. Her father had always made her believe she could do anything she set her mind to—fixing problems, leading teams, standing up for herself. He was the voice in her head when things got hard. The steady hand on her shoulder, especially now.

“And it feels right,” she added. “Like... this is the job I’ve been working toward since before I knew what the title would be.”

“Well then,” he said, “go get it.”

“I’ll let you know if I get an interview,” she assured him.

“You’ll get it. They’d be crazy not to want you.”

She hung up feeling taller.

That evening, she attended a networking mixer for young professionals—half social, half strategic. She wore her favorite dress and her confident-but-not-aggressive heels. The wine was mediocre and the appetizers were sparse, but Claire worked the room like she’d trained for it, because in a way, she had.

She made small talk with a pair of former colleagues, caught up with a mentor from a previous campaign, and exchanged business cards with someone launching a new social impact startup. She listened more than she spoke—an underrated skill in a room like this—and offered the kind of sharp, thoughtful observations that always made people stop and say, “Oh, I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

And that’s when she met him.

He was standing near the back wall, reading the panel list like he was actually interested. Tall, well-dressed, with that casual kind of confidence that didn’t have to prove anything. His eyes caught hers just as she was reaching for a paper-thin slice of cheese.

“Not bad, right?” he asked, nodding toward the panel flyer.

“I don’t know,” Claire said, glancing at it. “I’ve heard two of them speak before. One’s a decent moderator, the other just likes to hear himself talk.”

He laughed—genuine, surprised. “Honesty. I like that.”

“Sorry. That was probably too much,” she said, brushing a crumb from her napkin.

“Not at all.” He extended a hand. “Evan Corbin.”

“Claire Whitmore.”

His handshake was firm. His smile was easy. His presence was... composed. Not the overly polished type you sometimes saw at mixers like this. More like he didn’t need to try hard because he already knew who he was.

They made small talk about the nonprofit sector, shared some mutual skepticism about marketing jargon, and discovered they had three LinkedIn connections in common. He didn’t name-drop—but when he mentioned a few cities he’d lived in, Claire got the sense he was used to rooms like this. Possibly even above them.

“Communications?” he asked.

She nodded. “Currently at Reaching Together. But I just applied for something bigger at Crosswell Foundation.”

His brow lifted. “Now that’s a good move.”

“You know it?”

“Sure. I worked with them on a donor engagement project two years ago. Smart organization. Big impact.”

Claire tilted her head. “So you’re in consulting?”

“Kind of. I work with foundations and nonprofits on strategic growth—mostly behind the scenes.”

“Sounds vague and impressive.”

He grinned. “It’s intentionally vague and hopefully impressive.”

She laughed. “Well, I’m hoping they find me impressive too.”

“I know a few people there,” he said casually. “You’ll be a great fit.”

Something about the way he said it gave her pause—like he meant it. Like he already knew she had the job.

“Thanks,” she said carefully. “I hope you’re right.”

They didn’t talk much longer—someone interrupted with a name drop and a handshake—but Claire walked away feeling like something had shifted. Like maybe this wasn’t just a night for mingling and lukewarm wine.

Maybe it was the start of something bigger.



Chapter 2: Unbreakable Bonds

Claire didn’t have a sister, but Naomi Bradford had always come close. From the moment they met in Mrs. Wilkins’s ninth grade English class—both of them raising their hands at the exact same time to answer a question about persuasive language—they’d been inseparable.

They were different in a hundred ways: Claire was quiet and methodical, Naomi was bold and impulsive. Claire liked order and color-coded folders. Naomi carried her homework in a leather tote bag with gum wrappers and lip gloss floating around inside. But somehow, the contrast worked. They balanced each other.

In college, they'd been roommates from their freshman year—an experiment that should have gone badly but didn't. Claire remembered late nights editing papers side by side, coffee-fueled breakdowns before presentations, and pep talks through heartbreaks. Naomi was the first person who made Claire feel like she didn't have to explain herself. She could just be.

They'd laughed until they cried more times than Claire could count. Naomi knew her favorite movie, her favorite kind of tea, and the exact moment in Claire's favorite sad song when she'd always tear up. She was the person Claire texted without thinking. The one who showed up with takeout after a bad day or sent her links to ridiculous cat videos just to make her laugh.

She wasn't family by blood, but she'd been the most consistent part of Claire's adult life.

Now, sitting at her kitchen counter with her laptop open and a half-empty glass of cabernet beside her, Claire reread Naomi's text and smiled.

Naomi: You better get that job. It's perfect for you!

She knew Naomi meant it. There was no reason to doubt her—not after everything they'd shared. Sure, they worked at different companies, but their paths had always run parallel. Naomi had climbed the ranks at a flashy PR firm downtown, while Claire had leaned into the nonprofit world, building her experience in storytelling and advocacy. They had their own lanes, but they cheered each other on from the sidelines like sisters running the same race.

Claire sipped her wine, then clicked back over to her email inbox, rereading the confirmation that her application had been received. It was exciting. Terrifying. The Crosswell Foundation was a game-changer.

She thought about texting Evan. The idea flashed through her mind and then quickly retreated.

Too soon, she told herself. It had only been a few days since the networking event, and while their conversation had left an impression, it wasn't enough to warrant a casual message—yet.

Still, he lingered in her thoughts.

The next morning, Claire walked into her office and found a message waiting in her LinkedIn inbox.

Evan Corbin: Great meeting you the other night, Claire. Hope our paths cross again soon.

Simple. Professional. Just enough.

Claire's fingers hovered over the keyboard while she tried to find the right words. She finally settled on:

Claire Whitmore: Likewise! It was great talking shop with someone who actually gets it. And I appreciated the Crosswell insights.

He replied within minutes.

Evan Corbin: Happy to share what I know. If you ever want to talk through strategy or prep for interviews, I'm around.

Claire smiled. She didn't respond right away. Let it breathe. But the spark was there.

That evening, she called Naomi.

“You think they’ve started reviewing applications yet?” Claire asked.

Naomi scoffed. “They better have. If not, they’re wasting their own time.”

Claire laughed. “You always make me feel better.”

“It’s because you’re brilliant and they’d be lucky to have you.” Naomi paused. “What’s your backup plan if you don’t get it?”

Claire hesitated. “I don’t know. Stay put, maybe. Keep building what I’ve got.”

“I get it,” Naomi said. “But Crosswell’s the right move. You know it.”

Claire nodded, even though Naomi couldn’t see her. “I know.”

They talked for another half hour about everything and nothing—weekend plans, a weird client Naomi had to babysit, and a podcast episode Claire had loved. It was easy. Familiar. Naomi had a way of anchoring Claire when her thoughts got tangled.

After they hung up, Claire pulled out an old photo album she kept in the cabinet below her TV. Inside were snapshots from college—fuzzy Polaroids, ticket stubs from concerts, handwritten notes passed during lectures. One picture showed Naomi in sunglasses and a sweatshirt, both of which were three sizes too big. Her arms were thrown around Claire’s shoulders as they laughed uncontrollably on the quad lawn.

Claire traced the edge of the photo with her thumb.

People like Naomi didn’t come around twice. She was the friend you kept forever.

The next day, Evan texted again.

Evan: Coffee sometime next week? No pressure—just caffeine and comms talk.

Claire read it three times before responding.

Finally she typed: Sure. I'd like that. Then she deleted it.

She typed again: Absolutely. I'm always up for caffeine and comms.

Then she deleted that, too.

Finally, she sent: Coffee sounds great. Just let me know when.

He responded instantly.

Evan: Thursday? 9:30? Midtown Roasters?

Claire: See you there.

She felt ridiculous for how giddy she was, but she let herself have it. After all, it had been a while since someone genuinely interested her. Evan was intriguing—funny without trying too hard, knowledgeable without being condescending. And he didn't flinch when she said things bluntly. That counted for a lot.

Thursday couldn't come fast enough.

And somewhere, in the back of her mind, Claire told herself not to read into it. Not to overthink. Not to get her hopes up.

But hope, once stirred, rarely goes quiet again.



Chapter 3: The Voice of Reason

Claire waited until the end of the day to stop by Miles Donovan's office. Most of the team had already trickled out, the usual hum of chatter in the hallway quieted to an occasional door creak or the soft hiss of the coffee machine winding down for the night.

She stood in his doorway for a moment, one hand resting against the frame.

Miles had been her mentor from the very beginning. When Claire first joined Reaching Together as a junior communications coordinator, wide-eyed and eager to prove herself, he'd been the one who showed her how to navigate the complexities of nonprofit messaging—and office politics. He'd taught her how to write with clarity, how to frame a story that moved people to act, and how to hold her ground in meetings without raising her voice.

In the years since, he'd become more than just a mentor. He was a sounding board, a trusted ally, someone whose opinion she actually valued more than her supervisor's. They grabbed lunch at least twice a month, caught up after big events, and celebrated each other's wins. He was the kind of colleague who asked how you were doing and actually waited for the answer.

She trusted him.

And that's why she was nervous.

"You busy?" she finally asked.

Miles looked up from his laptop and smiled. "Only pretending to be. Come in."

Claire stepped inside and closed the door behind her. He gestured to the chair across from his desk.

She sat down, smoothing her skirt over her knees. “So, I wanted to run something by you. But it’s... kind of sensitive.”

Miles closed the lid of his laptop and leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Color me intrigued.”

Claire hesitated. “I don’t want this to go beyond this room.”

He nodded. “You have my word.”

She took a deep breath. “I applied for the Director of Strategic Communications position at the Crosswell Foundation.”

Miles raised his eyebrows, then let out a slow whistle. “Wow. That IS intriguing.”

“I wasn’t planning to jump ship,” Claire said quickly. “I’m not unhappy here, I swear. I just... when the listing came through, it felt like the right next step.”

“You don’t have to justify it,” he said, holding up a hand. “Claire, you’ve been here how long?”

“Five years.”

“Exactly. You’ve built strong campaigns, mentored junior staff, elevated the messaging strategy across departments. You’ve outgrown this place—and that’s not a bad thing. It’s what’s supposed to happen when people do their jobs well.”

Claire’s shoulders loosened. “I was worried it might seem disloyal.”

“To want to grow?” Miles shook his head. “No, it’s smart. Crosswell’s

a big leap, but you've got the resume for it. And the presence."

Claire felt a small spark of confidence reignite inside her. "I don't know if they'll even call for an interview. It's a national-level foundation. Competitive."

"Sure," Miles said. "But don't talk yourself out of the room before you're even in it."

She laughed. "That sounds like something you've said to every intern that's come through here."

"Because it's true for every one of them. And even moreso for you."

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "If they do call... I want to be ready. Any advice?"

Miles tilted his head. "Be bold. Not arrogant, not defensive—but bold. Speak from what you know, and don't shrink to fit the frame they're offering. Make them see what they could have with you that they won't get with anyone else."

Claire nodded slowly, turning the words over in her mind. "Be bold."

"And don't tiptoe around your impact," he added. "Own it."

"I can do that," she said.

"I know you can."

He looked at her for a moment longer, like he was seeing more than just a colleague—like he was remembering who she was when she started, and who she'd become.

"You know," he said, his voice softening, "I remember the first campaign brief you ever wrote. You brought it to me with this little apologetic smile and said, 'It's probably terrible, but here it is.'"

Claire groaned. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“Of course I do. Because even then, I knew you had something. You didn’t just write the words—you understood the people. That’s not teachable.”

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

They sat in silence for a few moments, the weight of the conversation settling between them. Claire stood to go, then paused.

“Thanks for not making me feel like I was betraying anything by applying.”

Miles gave her a warm smile. “Claire, you’ve done right by this place. Wherever you go next, they’ll be lucky to have you. Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“When you’re leading your own department, don’t forget how it felt to sit across the desk from someone who believed in you.”

Claire swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. “I won’t.”

As she stepped into the hallway, she felt lighter—not because she had all the answers, but because she’d taken one more step toward them.

And for now, that was enough.



Chapter 4: No Room for Rivals

Claire met Naomi for lunch at their usual spot downtown—a cozy cafe with brick walls, local artwork, and a menu that hadn’t changed in years. It was their go-to for comfort food and catch-up sessions, the kind of place where you could talk through anything and leave with at least two shared inside jokes.

Naomi was already there when Claire arrived, seated at a small table near the window, thumbing through her phone and sipping an iced tea. She looked up with a grin as Claire approached.

“Well, if it isn’t the soon-to-be queen of Crosswell,” she said.

Claire laughed as she slid into the chair opposite her. “Hardly. I haven’t even heard back yet.”

“You will,” Naomi said confidently. “They’d be stupid not to call you in. Have you seen your resume?”

Claire smiled, grateful as always for Naomi’s cheerleading. “I appreciate that. I’ve been refreshing my inbox like a lunatic.”

Naomi waved a hand. “It’s only been a few days. Give them time to realize how much they need you.”

Their server arrived to take their order—two grilled chicken salads with extra avocado, their usual—and Claire hesitated for a moment after he walked away.

“I kind of thought you might apply for the position, too,” she said, picking up her glass of water. “It’s a great fit for you, too, you know. High visibility. Big team. Strong national voice.”

Naomi shrugged. “I saw it, sure. But I’m good where I am. Things are finally stabilizing at my firm, and I don’t really want to start over again right now.”

Claire nodded slowly. “That makes sense. I just figured it might’ve

been tempting for you.”

“Oh, it was,” Naomi said with a laugh. “But the timing’s off for me. Besides, I don’t want to compete with you. I’ll leave the world-changing to you for now.”

Claire smiled, relieved. There was something reassuring in hearing it from Naomi directly. They’d always supported each other, but hearing her say she wasn’t interested in the job made Claire feel like she wasn’t stepping on any toes.

Still, something in Naomi’s tone had a flicker of hesitation. Claire couldn’t quite place it, but she pushed the thought aside.

“You’ve been doing amazing work though,” Claire said. “The sustainability campaign you launched last quarter? I saw the numbers. It’s blowing up.”

Naomi beamed. “Thanks. It’s been wild. We landed two new clients because of it. I’ve been slammed, but in a good way.”

Claire leaned back in her chair. “That’s what I love about you. You dive in headfirst and somehow make chaos look stylish.”

Naomi raised her glass. “And you make strategy look like art. Together we’ll rule the world.”

They clinked glasses and laughed. It was easy to fall into their usual rhythm—the teasing, the praise, the familiar shorthand built over years of shared growth. But under the surface, Claire couldn’t shake the subtle dissonance she’d felt when Naomi mentioned the job.

Maybe she was imagining it.

They shifted topics, talking about Naomi’s upcoming trip to Asheville and Claire’s plans to meet her friend Tasha for a girls’ night. Naomi offered some dating commentary on Claire’s latest Tinder misadven-

ture—"You've got to stop entertaining men who put 'sarcastic' as a personality trait"—and Claire gave her a knowing look in return.

"You're not wrong," Claire said. "But I'm cautiously optimistic about someone I met at that mixer last week."

Naomi raised an eyebrow. "Ooh, do tell."

"His name's Evan Corbin."

Naomi looked up from her salad suddenly with an odd expression. Recognition? She didn't say anything and Claire continued.

"We only talked for a little while, but he was... smart. Grounded. He actually listens, which is not a skill most men have mastered."

Naomi smirked. "You've got a full name and a compliment. This is serious."

Claire chuckled. "He messaged me on LinkedIn, and we're grabbing coffee Thursday. It might be nothing, but it's nice to feel something again, you know?"

"I do," Naomi said, her expression softer now. "And I love that for you."

They lingered a bit longer over lunch, chatting about everything from Naomi's sister's upcoming baby shower to the state of modern journalism. Eventually, they gathered their things and walked out into the early afternoon sun, hugging briefly before parting ways.

Claire headed back to her office feeling steady, affirmed.

It wasn't until later that night, curled up on her couch with her laptop open and her favorite playlist humming low in the background, that the flicker of doubt returned.

Naomi's laugh had been just a touch too quick when she said she wasn't interested in the job. Her choice of words had felt odd... right now... timing's off... for now. And Claire, who knew her better than anyone, had sensed the shift.

But then again—maybe it was just nerves. Maybe she was reading too much into it.

She closed her laptop and leaned her head against the back of the couch.

Naomi said she wasn't going for it. And Claire had no reason not to believe her.



Chapter 5: A Voice From the Past

The voicemail came in the middle of Claire's Tuesday morning status meeting. She didn't even hear it buzz—just saw the notification pop up later, a missed call from an unfamiliar number followed by a message that made her stomach tighten.

“Hi, Claire. It's... it's your mother. Margaret. I was hoping we could talk.”

She hit delete before the message even finished playing.

The rest of the day she went through the motions—emails, back-to-back calls, a hasty salad at her desk—but the message replayed itself in her mind over and over. Her mother's voice had that same tentative tone she remembered from childhood, always choosing words carefully like she was stepping through a minefield.

Claire didn't have the energy for it.

That evening, she vented to Tasha while they walked their dogs around the park.

Tasha had been in her life longer than anyone except family. They'd met in third grade when Tasha's family moved into town, and Claire was the first kid who offered to sit with her at lunch. Their friendship had always been steady—no big dramatic moments, no falling outs, just years of quiet loyalty and occasional sleepovers, shared birthday parties, and a comforting sense of familiarity.

They didn't talk every day like Claire did with Naomi, but Tasha was a constant. The kind of friend you could go months without seeing and still pick up right where you left off. She had a practical way of seeing the world, of listening without offering cliché advice, and she knew Claire's history well enough to read between the lines.

"She thinks she can just call me like nothing ever happened," Claire said, tightening her grip on the leash. "It's been years. Years."

Tasha didn't say anything right away, just gave her a look that said she was listening.

Claire continued, "She left. She walked away from everything. From me. And now what—she wants to catch up over coffee? Like we're strangers trying to make small talk?"

"People change," Tasha said gently. "Sometimes they grow."

Claire shook her head. "She had plenty of time to grow. She chose not to be a part of my life when it mattered most."

Tasha gave a small nod, not pushing. That was one of the things Claire appreciated most about her—she didn't try to fix what couldn't be fixed.

Claire took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "You know what still gets

me? I never even got an explanation. One day she was packing a suitcase, and the next she was gone. No big blowout, no warning. She just... left.”

“She didn’t write or call?”

“Not once. Not until now. It was always Dad I stayed with. He said she wasn’t cut out for the responsibility. Said she got tired of the routine and wanted something different. I believed him.”

Tasha looked at her, brow furrowed. “Do you still believe him?”

Claire hesitated. That part she didn’t have an answer for. “I don’t know. But even if it wasn’t all true... she didn’t fight for me. She didn’t try. And that silence—that’s what hurt the most.”

They walked a few more steps before Claire added, “And how did she even get my number? It’s not like I’m listed anywhere.”

Tasha shrugged. “Maybe someone gave it to her. Or maybe she’s been trying all this time and finally worked up the nerve and asked for it.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” Claire said quietly. “If she’s been around this whole time and just never said anything, that’s almost worse.”

That night, Claire curled up with her laptop and half a glass of wine. She had spent most of her life holding up one parent and blaming the other. Her dad had been the one who stayed, who patched things up, who told her bedtime stories and taught her how to change a tire. Margaret had been the one who walked out. At least, that was the version Claire had always believed.

The truth? She’d never really asked for more details. She didn’t want

them. She didn't need them. The version she'd held onto was clean and simple. Black and white.

And it made ignoring her mother easier.

Claire stared at her phone for a long moment. The deleted message was gone. The number still waiting.

She could call back.

She didn't.

Instead, she closed her phone, set it face down on the coffee table, and opened a blank document. She had thank-you emails to draft and social media posts to schedule. Tasks with clear start points and end results. Things that made sense.

Things that didn't leave room for maybe.

She told herself she wasn't angry—just indifferent.

But deep down, she knew the truth.

She wasn't ready to hear what her mother had to say.



Chapter 6: First Impressions

Claire arrived at Midtown Roasters five minutes early, more nervous than she cared to admit. The place was warm and rustic, filled with the scent of espresso and baked cinnamon, the soft hum of indie music in the background. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, smoothed the sleeve of her blouse, and tried to act like this was just coffee.

But it didn't feel like just coffee.

Evan walked in right on time. He spotted her immediately, smiled, and made his way over.

"Claire," he said warmly. "Glad you came."

"Wouldn't miss it."

They ordered their drinks—black coffee for him, a chai latte for her—and found a quiet table in the back corner. The conversation started light: favorite books, podcasts, overused industry buzzwords that made them both cringe. He was sharp, funny, and surprisingly sincere. He didn't try to dominate the conversation, didn't fill silence with noise. He just... listened.

Really listened.

At one point, Claire was telling him about her first major campaign at Reaching Together—the one where she'd rewritten an entire donor pitch overnight because the original messaging felt flat—and she caught herself rambling.

"Sorry," she said, laughing. "I'm talking way too much."

"Not at all," Evan said. "You're passionate. That's a rare thing to find—and even more rare to hear so clearly."

Claire blinked, a little stunned. It had been a long time since someone made her feel heard like that. Like her thoughts weren't just tolerated, but valued.

He asked thoughtful follow-up questions. He remembered small details from their first conversation. He spoke about his own work in ways that were honest and grounded, never self-important. It wasn't flashy, it just felt real.

And Claire found herself leaning in, drawn to the steadiness in his voice, the warmth behind his eyes.

“So what about outside of work?” Evan asked at one point. “What does Claire Whitmore do when she’s not saving the world with communications strategy?”

Claire smiled. “Honestly? I hang out with my dogs, drink too much tea, binge documentaries, and read thrillers I never see the twist coming in. Not very glamorous.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Sounds pretty perfect to me.”

She smirked. “You’re just saying that because it makes me sound grounded. Admit it, you were hoping I’d say skydiving or mountain climbing.”

Evan leaned back with a laugh. “Okay, maybe a little. But you had me at documentaries and tea. What kind of thrillers?”

“Psychological ones, mostly. The kind where everyone’s lying and nothing is what it seems.”

“Ah, so you like puzzles.”

“I like seeing if I can figure them out before the characters do. Spoiler: I never can.”

Evan grinned. “Then it sounds like you appreciate complexity. That explains a lot.”

Claire arched a brow. “Explains what, exactly?”

He held up his hands. “Just that you seem like someone who notices the details. Which is great, unless I accidentally say something you’ll quote back to me three months from now.”

She laughed. “I plead the fifth.”

They talked for over an hour—about family dynamics, favorite travel spots, and the worst job interviews they’d ever had. Claire told him about the time she’d gotten stuck in a revolving door on the way into a pitch meeting, and Evan shared how he once mispronounced the client’s name three times before realizing she was sitting in the front row.

“You’re kidding,” Claire said, covering her mouth as she laughed.

“I wish. I still cringe when I hear the name ‘Charlotte.’”

Claire shook her head. “That actually makes me feel better.”

“Good. It was meant to.”

Finally, Claire glanced at her watch.

“I didn’t realize it was this late,” she said. “I was supposed to text my friend Naomi after this. She always checks in on first dates—even if it’s technically not a date.”

“Naomi?” Evan asked casually, but there was a faint flicker in his eyes. Brief. Almost imperceptible.

“Yeah, we’ve been best friends since college,” Claire said, smiling. “She’s in PR now—works with a corporate firm downtown. Brilliant. Competitive. She’s always five steps ahead of everyone else.”

Evan nodded slowly, his expression carefully neutral. “Sounds like a force.”

“She is,” Claire said. “She’s also fiercely loyal. If she thinks someone’s wasting my time, she won’t hesitate to tell me.”

Evan chuckled. "I'll try not to make the list."

Claire laughed too, brushing it off, not noticing the slight shift in his tone. Not noticing the way he avoided her gaze for just a second too long.

After they finished their drinks, they walked out together. The air was crisp, the sidewalk buzzing with the usual early evening energy. Evan walked her to her car, hands in his pockets, and when they reached it, he paused.

"I really enjoyed this," he said.

"Me too."

He hesitated, then leaned in and kissed her cheek—just enough to leave her smiling as she opened the door.

"Drive safe, Claire."

"You too."

"Oh, and Claire?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes?"

"We can call it a date."

She watched him walk away, a flutter of something new stirring in her chest.

And for the first time in a long time, she let herself feel it.

Hope.



Chapter 7: The First Yes

The email came in just before noon.

Subject: Interview Invitation – Crosswell Foundation

Claire stared at it for a full five seconds before she clicked it open. Her heart did a somersault in her chest as she read the first line: “We’d love to invite you for an initial interview...”

She let out a squeal and slapped a hand over her mouth, glancing around her office to make sure no one had heard. She leaned back in her chair, heart racing, joy bubbling to the surface.

She’d made it to the next round.

For a long moment, she just sat there grinning at the screen. This wasn’t a courtesy call. It wasn’t a brush-off. It was a real opportunity. And she’d earned it.

Immediately, she began firing off texts.

Claire: I GOT THE INTERVIEW!!!!

Naomi responded a few minutes later.

Naomi: YESSS. Told you they’d be crazy not to. When is it?

Claire: Thursday. Virtual. With their Communications Director.

Naomi: You’ve got this. Start polishing that portfolio.

Claire smiled. That was just like the Naomi she knew. Encouraging. Direct. Task-focused.

But even with Naomi's familiar confidence echoing in her phone, Claire noticed the reply lacked a little warmth. Maybe she was just distracted. Maybe she hadn't had time to process the news. Claire pushed the thought aside.

Next, she texted her dad.

Claire: Just got invited to interview with Crosswell! First round's Thursday.

Dad: Knew it. Go get 'em, kiddo. Want me to run some mock questions with you?

Claire's eyes warmed. Her dad always offered to help prep her for big moments—whether it was a school presentation or her first-ever salary negotiation.

She quickly responded.

Claire: Maybe later this week. Just needed to tell you first.

Dad: Proud of you already. But no harm in making them see why they should be too.

Claire smiled down at her phone, heart swelling.

Then she messaged Tasha.

Claire: Guess who's got an interview??

Tasha: YESSSSS. You in your power heels yet or still doing the happy dance in slippers?

Claire: I'm 100% slipper dancing right now.

Tasha: Don't forget to eat. You always forget to eat when you get excited.

Claire: Already two cups of coffee in. Lunch is a future me problem.

Tasha: Future you better pack a protein bar. I'm not coming to scrape you off the floor.

Claire laughed and looked up from her screen, the wave of encouragement steadying her in all the best ways.

By the end of the workday, she'd printed out her resume three times, cleaned off her desk, and organized the notes she'd already started keeping on Crosswell's top projects. She told herself she wasn't obsessing—just preparing.

Later that night, she curled up in bed with her laptop propped on a pillow. The glow of the screen reflected off her glasses as she combed through the Crosswell Foundation's press coverage, blog posts, and annual reports. She even found a recent podcast interview with Tanya Kim, the woman she'd be meeting.

She hit play and listened intently as Tanya spoke about messaging alignment, rapid-response communications, and the importance of empathy in branding. Claire jotted down phrases and patterns, noting what resonated.

She paused midway through and pulled out a notepad, sketching out a list:

Revisit campaign metrics from Reaching Together

Prep STAR-format examples (crisis, innovation, teamwork)

Rehearse opening answer to: "Tell me about yourself."

Draft two insightful questions to ask at the end

Afterward, she stood in front of her bathroom mirror and practiced

introducing herself.

“Hi, I’m Claire Whitmore, and I’ve spent the last five years helping organizations find the heart in their messaging...”

“Hi, I’m Claire Whitmore, and I believe storytelling should serve both the mission and the moment...”

She tried each version a few times, adjusting her posture, her tone, her cadence.

This wasn’t about pretending to be someone she wasn’t. This was about showing who she already was.

And for the first time in a long time, she believed she could win.

Not because someone said so.

Because she was ready.



Chapter 8: Owning the Room

Thursday arrived much faster than Claire had expected. The entire week had been a blur of focused preparation, late-night research, and rehearsed answers whispered to herself during commutes and coffee breaks. She’d spent Tuesday evening on a video call with her dad, running through mock questions while he took exaggerated notes and challenged her to dig deeper on one of her campaign stories. He’d been particularly insistent about one scenario where she managed to flip a stalled fundraising effort in the final week. “Don’t downplay that one,” he told her. “You turned a loss into momentum. That’s what leaders do.”

Wednesday, she fine-tuned her wardrobe. She chose her favorite skirt and a soft navy blouse with just enough structure to feel professional and just enough color to feel like herself. She also rechecked her tech setup at least three times to be sure there would be no technical issues. Camera angle, sound check, lighting—everything had to be right. No surprises.

By the time the morning of the interview arrived, Claire had only slept maybe four hours. Not because of nerves exactly, but because her mind wouldn't stop running through bullet points and backup plans. She spent the morning in near-silence, sipping green tea and glancing over her notes one last time. Even her dogs seemed to sense the gravity of the day, curling up quietly by the couch as she paced the living room reciting opening lines aloud.

Still, when she opened her laptop and logged into the virtual meeting room, she was ready. As ready as she'd ever been.

Her palms were slightly damp as she waited, but she steadied her breathing and resisted the urge to fidget. When the screen flickered and Tanya Kim's face appeared—poised, confident, and already smiling—Claire clicked into focus like a switch had been flipped.

The next forty-five minutes passed in a blur of energy, poise, and pitch-perfect delivery. Claire was ready. She knew her resume inside out, anticipated the questions before they were asked, and spun stories from her past projects like a pro. When Tanya asked how she'd handle a communications crisis, Claire didn't flinch—she walked her through a real example, complete with outcomes and reflection. When asked about leadership style, Claire didn't reach for clichés. She spoke about listening first, staying flexible, and creating a culture where people felt both empowered and accountable.

They even shared a laugh when Tanya asked what Claire's coworkers would say about her.

"They'd probably say I ask too many questions," Claire admitted

with a smile, “but they’d also say I never let a message go out that doesn’t feel like it matters.”

Tanya nodded appreciatively. “That’s not a bad thing in this work.”

By the time they wrapped up, Tanya smiled and said, “You’ve clearly done your homework, Claire. We’ll be in touch very soon.”

Claire closed her laptop and sat back with a breathless kind of joy. Not arrogance. Just the deep, quiet satisfaction of knowing she’d shown up as her best self. She let out a long breath, smiling to herself. The adrenaline hadn’t worn off, but something deeper had settled in its place.

Before she could even get up, she grabbed her phone and texted Naomi.

Claire: Interview went great. I think I actually nailed it!

She waited a few minutes, watching the three little dots appear, then disappear.

Naomi: That’s awesome. I’m glad it went well.

Claire’s smile faltered. The reply was short. No emojis. No “Knew you would!” or “YESSSSS!” or anything else that sounded like her best friend.

She hesitated, then hit the call button.

Naomi picked up on the second ring. “Hey.”

“You sound weird.”

“What? Oh, I’m just... tired. Work’s been insane this week. We’ve got a pitch coming up that’s going to make or break this quarter.”

Claire nodded slowly, shifting her weight. “Got it. You sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah,” Naomi said quickly. “I’m glad your interview went well. Really. You deserve this.”

Claire smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thanks. I’ll keep you posted when I hear something.”

“Do that,” Naomi said. “Fingers crossed.”

They hung up a few minutes later, and Claire sat on her couch, phone resting loosely in her hand.

It was probably just stress. Naomi’s job was demanding. Competitive. And Claire knew she could get short tempered when she was under pressure. Claire had seen her like this before—flat, clipped, distracted.

Still, something about the call left her feeling unsettled. There was a tightness in Naomi’s voice that hadn’t been there before. A pause before she responded. A lack of questions. Naomi always asked questions—what did she wear, what was Tanya like, what were the hardest questions, how did she answer them? But this time, nothing.

Claire tried to shake the feeling. Maybe she was overanalyzing. Maybe she was reading into a bad day.

She knew she’d nailed the interview. That’s what mattered.

She opened her notebook and started to jot down follow-up ideas—names to mention in her thank-you email, a few more questions she could ask if called back for a second round.

She let herself hold onto that.

Hold onto the version of the day that made sense.

Because this time, she hadn't just hoped.

She had delivered.



Chapter 9: All Is Not As It Seems

The Saturday after her interview Claire and Tasha met up for coffee at their usual spot—a low-key bakery with exactly four tables, a humming espresso machine, and a cinnamon roll that made up for every stressful thing that had ever happened at work. Claire needed the break. Her mind had been cycling nonstop since the interview, alternating between cautious optimism and analyzing Naomi's odd tone on the phone.

"I'm guessing you still haven't heard anything yet?" Tasha asked as they sat down, sliding a ceramic plate with the warm pastry across the table to Claire.

"Nope." Claire reached for the cinnamon roll gratefully. "But it's only been a couple of days. They said I'd hear back soon. I just..." She shrugged. "I don't want to get ahead of myself. But I also don't want to downplay it. I really do think I nailed it."

"Of course you did," Tasha said without missing a beat. "I could tell just from your texts. You weren't second-guessing anything. You came out of that interview like a woman who knew she had the job."

Claire smiled and took a sip of her latte. "Thanks. I needed to hear that again."

They chatted for a few minutes about work—Tasha's new client was apparently allergic to email and only communicated in five-minute

phone calls—and then the conversation circled back around.

“So,” Tasha said casually, “anything new with Evan?”

Claire looked down at her cup, swirling it slightly. “We’ve texted a little. Nothing major. Just light stuff. He’s good at keeping things... breezy.”

Tasha gave her a look. “Breezy like polite, or breezy like keeping you in the maybe-zone?”

Claire hesitated. “I don’t know. Both, I guess. I mean, he was really great at the coffee shop. Thoughtful, asked good questions. And it’s not like he disappeared afterward. He checked in about the interview, wished me luck. But since then... it’s like he’s there, but not there. We’ve only been out one other time.”

“Hmm.” Tasha leaned back, tapping her fingernails against her cup. “Can I say something you’re not gonna love?”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to anyway.”

“I don’t like that you’ve mentioned Naomi around him twice now and he reacted strangely. And I don’t like that Naomi acted weird about your interview. And I really don’t like that both of them suddenly feel... filtered.”

Claire stiffened. “Filtered how?”

“Like they’re showing you the version of themselves they want you to see, instead of just being real. And maybe that’s nothing. But maybe it’s not.”

Claire tried to laugh it off. “Tasha, you don’t even know them.”

“I don’t need to. I know you. And I’ve been listening to the way you talk about them. Claire, you’re a gut-feelings person. You usually

notice when something's off, even when you don't want to. But this time, it's like you're explaining away every red flag you're seeing from both of them."

Claire opened her mouth to argue, but no words came out. Because somewhere inside, she knew Tasha was right.

Still, she shook her head. "Naomi's probably just tired. She has a million things going on at work. And Evan... I don't know, I mean, I'm still getting to know him. Maybe he's just private. Or cautious. That doesn't mean either one of them are hiding anything."

Tasha didn't push, but she didn't drop it either. "I'm not saying they're plotting against you or something. I'm just saying... don't ignore your instincts because you care about them. You can think you know someone and still admit when something feels off."

Claire ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. "Why does this feel so complicated all of a sudden?"

"Because it is," Tasha said gently. "And because you've always seen people for who they should be, not necessarily for who they are."

They sat in silence for a minute, both sipping their drinks, the hum of the espresso machine filling the space.

"Can I ask you something?" Claire said finally. "Are you saying you think I'm making a mistake?"

Tasha met her eyes. "No. I think you're walking through something real, and you're doing it the best way you know how. But I also think you need to protect your peace. If something doesn't sit right, it's smart to press pause and ask why."

Claire nodded, her throat tightening. "You always know how to say the thing I don't want to hear, and make me listen."

“That’s my job,” Tasha said with a smile. “I’m not here to tell you everyone’s perfect. I’m here to remind you you’re not crazy for asking questions.”

Later that night, Claire curled up on her couch, scrolling through her messages with Evan. Nothing suspicious. Nothing dramatic. Just... surface-level. She opened a thread with Naomi and saw the same thing. A slow fading. A shift from their usual openness.

And for the first time, she let herself wonder: What if Tasha was right?

As Claire stared at her phone, uncertain and alone, Naomi sat in her high-rise apartment on the other side of town, a glass of wine in her hand, her phone resting on the armrest beside her.

And in her recent calls list—right beneath Claire’s name—was Evan Corbin.

They’d spoken at length just that morning.



Chapter 10: Daddy Dearest

Sunday afternoon found Claire in her father’s garage, the scent of motor oil and sawdust clinging to the air like memory. She perched on the edge of the old workbench, watching him tighten something under the hood of a car he’d been tinkering with for months. The radio played faintly in the background—classic rock, as always—and every now and then, John Whitmore muttered something under his breath about a stripped bolt or missing socket.

Claire smiled. Some things never changed. She had done this many times in her life, and it never got old.

“You always seem more relaxed when you’ve got a wrench in your hand,” she said.

Her father looked up with a grin. “Machines make more sense than people. You fix what’s broken, and it stays fixed.”

Claire tilted her head. “Is that always true?”

He wiped his hands on a rag, then straightened up, squinting at her. “Most of the time. If you know what you’re doing.”

There was a beat of silence. Claire studied him—the way the lines on his face deepened when he smiled, the familiar oil-stained hands, the scuffed boots that had been the same for years.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” she said. “For always being there. For always believing in me.”

He looked slightly uncomfortable, as if the compliment had caught him off guard. “Well, that’s what dads are supposed to do.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “But not all of them do.”

John cleared his throat and went back to fiddling with the engine. “You’ve always made it easy. You’re smart. Independent. You don’t need a lot of hand-holding.”

Claire gave a soft laugh. “You’re the voice I hear in my head when things get hard. That whole ‘do what’s right, even when it’s hard’ thing. It stuck with me.”

He glanced up briefly, then nodded. “That’s good.”

“But sometimes...” she hesitated. “Sometimes I wonder where that

version of you came from. Because growing up, I saw you as the guy who fixed everything. Who always knew the right answer. But lately, I've been wondering if maybe... well, if maybe that's not the whole story."

Her father didn't respond right away. His hands kept moving, tightening something that didn't really need it, like the motion gave him cover.

Finally he stopped and asked, "You're not talking about the interview, are you?"

"No," Claire said. "I'm asking about Mom."

He stopped. Just for a second. Then set the wrench down gently.

"That was a long time ago, Claire," he said quietly.

"I know. But it still affects me. The version of her I've carried around in my head... I think it might not be the truth. Or at least, not the whole truth." Claire looked at her dad, searching for some kind of response in his face. She found nothing definitive.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sometimes people just aren't ready to be parents. She wasn't. And I couldn't make her stay."

Claire's stomach twisted. "But you made it sound like she didn't try. Like she just left and never looked back."

"She walked out, Claire. That's a fact," he insisted.

"Did she try to come back?"

John looked away. "What does it matter now?"

Claire hesitated. Then she said, quietly, "She called me."

That got his attention. He turned toward her, his expression still unreadable. “When?”

“A few days ago. I didn't answer. She left a voicemail. Said she wanted to talk.”

“Did you call her back?” he asked cautiously.

Claire shook her head. “No. I deleted it. But... it got under my skin. Made me start wondering about things I hadn't let myself think about in a long time.”

He said nothing.

“I'm not saying I suddenly trust her or that I'm ready to talk,” Claire added. “But it made me realize how much of my understanding of her has come from you. And maybe that's only part of the story.”

John exhaled through his nose, a slow, measured breath. “I never lied to you, Claire.”

“I believe that,” she said. “But maybe you didn't tell me everything either.”

He didn't argue.

“It matters,” she said. “It matters because it shaped everything I believed about her. About you. About what love is supposed to look like.”

Her father still didn't answer. Just picked up a rag and started wiping down his tools.

Claire stood and stepped closer, her voice gentler. “I'm not accusing you of anything, Dad. I just... I want to understand. That's all.”

He finally met her eyes. “Sometimes the truth isn't clean. Sometimes

people do the best they can, and it's still not good enough. And talking about it now won't change anything."

Claire nodded slowly, her chest tight. She hasn't meant to upset him. She finally said, "Okay."

But even as she said it, she knew that it wasn't true.

Because for the first time, it didn't feel like her father was telling her the whole story.

He felt like a chapter.

One she knew she needed to read again—with new eyes.



Chapter 11: The Lie

Claire was scrolling through her LinkedIn feed on a gray, restless Tuesday morning when she saw it.

It was a polished post from Naomi's professional page, complete with a bright headshot and an update that nearly knocked the wind out of her:

"Honored to be in final-stage interviews with the Crosswell Foundation. Excited about the possibilities ahead."

Claire blinked. Reread it. Read it again. And again.

Her heart dropped. Then stopped.

She sat frozen at her desk, coffee cooling beside her, hand hovering over her mouse. Surely she was misreading. Or misinterpreting.

There had to be some other explanation.

But there wasn't. It was crystal clear.

Naomi had applied for the same job. The job Claire had told her all about. The one she'd opened up about, helped her prepare for, celebrated with her. Naomi had known all of that—and never once mentioned she was applying too. Even when Claire point blank asked her if she was interested in it, Naomi denied it.

Claire clicked out of the app and grabbed her phone, her thumb hovering over Naomi's name. She considered texting, then thought better of it. This wasn't a conversation to have through emojis and punctuation. She hit call, trying to ignore the knots in her stomach.

Naomi answered on the third ring. "Hey, girl. What's up?"

Claire skipped the small talk. "You've interviewed with Crosswell?"

A beat of silence.

Then Naomi's voice, slightly more guarded. "Oh. You saw the post."

"You never said you applied. In fact, you told me you weren't interested." Claire tried to steady her voice.

"I didn't know it mattered." Naomi sounded almost flippant.

Claire felt like she'd been slapped. "Of course you knew it mattered! We talked about that job. I told you how much it meant to me. You cheered me on."

Naomi sighed. "Claire, I wasn't trying to be shady. I just... I didn't think you were serious about it at first."

Claire's breath caught. "What?"

“You’d been saying for months that you weren’t planning to leave Reaching Together. You were happy there. When you mentioned Crosswell, I figured it was just a curiosity.”

Claire stood up from her chair, pacing. “A curiosity? Naomi, I poured my heart into that application. I called you right after I hit submit. You said it was perfect for me. You told me to polish my portfolio.”

“I was supporting you,” Naomi said weakly.

“You were competing with me.”

Naomi’s voice dropped. “It’s not like I sabotaged anything, Claire.”

“You didn’t have to,” Claire said. “You let me believe you weren’t in the running. You encouraged me while hiding the fact that you were going for the exact same thing. That’s not friendship. That’s betrayal.”

Naomi didn’t speak for a moment.

“I didn’t tell you,” she said finally, “because I didn’t want to make it a thing. We’re both qualified. We both deserve a shot.”

“You didn’t want to make it a thing?” Claire repeated. “You made it a thing the second you decided to apply and not to tell me.”

Naomi exhaled slowly, then said, “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I just... needed this. You have Reaching Together. You’re established there. You have Miles. You have your reputation. I’ve been floating for the last year trying to find the right fit.”

“So you thought I could afford to lose?” Claire asked.

“I thought you weren’t really in the game,” Naomi said flatly.

Claire fell silent. Her throat felt tight. Her hands were cold.

“You know me better than anyone,” she said finally. “Or at least I thought you did. How could you think I wasn’t serious?”

Naomi didn’t answer.

“I would’ve celebrated with you,” Claire said quietly. “If you’d gotten the job and told me about it, I would’ve been proud of you. I just can’t believe you didn’t trust me enough to be honest.”

“I didn’t want to lose you as a friend.” Naomi was saying the right words, but it came out as a hollow excuse.

Claire blinked back the sting in her eyes. “Then you shouldn’t have lied.”

She ended the call after that. No resolution. No healing words. Just silence and distance.

Claire sat back down at her desk, the full weight of it crashing down. Naomi—her closest friend—had gone after the same opportunity and never said a word. All those pep talks, all those shared dreams... they suddenly felt hollow.

The betrayal wasn’t just professional. It was personal. Naomi had been the one person Claire never thought she’d have to question.

And now she didn’t know what was real.

She opened her email and stared at the draft thank-you note to Tanya Kim. She had meant to send it this morning. Now, she closed the tab.

Her hands trembled slightly as she pulled up her notes and tried to reread her talking points for a potential second interview. They blurred together.

The trust was cracked now. Not just in Naomi—but in herself.

She hadn't seen it coming.

And the pedestal she'd built for her best friend?

It had just split straight down the middle.



Chapter 12: The Gray Area

Claire hadn't seen Evan in over a week, but he finally reached out and suggested dinner on Friday. They agreed to meet at a casual place with dim lighting and a patio out back where the sound of traffic melted into soft music and murmured conversation. She agreed, grateful for the distraction.

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

They met just after seven. Evan greeted her with a hug and a smile, the same warm, slightly mysterious energy that had drawn her in from the beginning. He asked about her week, and Claire kept things surface-level at first. Work had been steady. Her team was gearing up for a fundraising campaign. She was waiting to hear back from Crosswell. Standard answers. All true, and none of it complete. He didn't say much about himself at all.

They ordered dinner—he got the steak, she chose a citrusy salmon—and the conversation meandered through safe topics. But Claire felt it building, the pressure behind her ribs. She didn't want to pretend everything was fine. Not tonight.

So midway through her second glass of wine, she took a breath and said, “Can I ask you something a little... complicated?”

Evan glanced up, his expression unreadable but attentive. “Of course.”

She hesitated. “Have you ever had someone you trusted completely... disappoint you? Like, not just a mistake, but in a way that rewrote how you see them?”

He paused for a second. “That’s a big question.”

“I know. I’m just—my dad’s been acting weird. I asked him about something from the past and he shut down. It’s like... the more I try to understand, the less I recognize him.”

Evan nodded slowly, resting his forearms on the table. “Sometimes people build their identity around being dependable. When that identity’s threatened—even by a question—they double down instead of opening up.”

Claire blinked. “That’s... actually really insightful.”

He gave her a faint smile. “I’ve been there.”

She looked at him carefully. “What happened?”

Evan took a long sip of water and shrugged. “Family stuff. Years ago. Not really worth dragging into tonight.”

The way he said it was casual, but too practiced. Claire recognized the deflection.

She nodded, letting it go—for now.

After a few bites in silence, she tried again. “And then there’s Naomi, too.”

Evan’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “What about her?”

“She applied for the same job I did. Never told me. And now she’s in the final interview stages while I’m still waiting to hear back.”

“Wow,” he said. “That’s... unexpected.”

“Right?” Claire leaned back. “I asked her directly a few weeks ago if she was applying. She said no. Flat out. Then I find out the truth through a post she made on LinkedIn.”

Evan raised his eyebrows. “Did you give her a chance to explain why?”

“She said she didn’t think I was serious about it.”

He winced. “That’s rough.”

“Yeah. And now I keep thinking... If she lied about that, what else has she lied to me about?”

Evan nodded slowly but didn’t offer much more. Claire waited, hoping he’d say something—anything—that felt like real engagement. But he just chewed his food and kept his gaze steady and neutral.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she said.

“I just don’t want to make assumptions,” he said calmly. “It’s between the two of you. And I don’t know the full picture.”

Claire studied him. “But you’ve met her, right? You said you’d worked on projects with Crosswell before. She’s done some PR consulting for them.”

Evan’s face didn’t change. “We may have overlapped. But I don’t know her personally.”

There was something too smooth about the way he said it. She

couldn't quite put her finger on it. Like a wall carefully constructed.

Claire offered a strained smile. "I guess I'm just realizing there's a lot I don't know about the people closest to me."

Evan reached for her hand across the table. "I get that. But maybe don't assume the worst. Sometimes people act out of fear, not malice."

She nodded, appreciating the sentiment. But the distance between them still felt very real. He hadn't answered her question about his family. He hadn't acknowledged the strangeness of Naomi's silence. And he hadn't looked her in the eye since she mentioned their possible overlap.

After dinner, they walked together to her car. He kissed her cheek again, like he had after their first date. Gentle. Noncommittal.

Claire smiled, said goodnight, and drove home in silence.

She didn't feel comforted.

She felt alone with too many questions and not enough answers.

And reluctantly, she had to admit to herself that Evan lived in the same gray area as everyone else.

Not a villain. Not a hero.

Just... not clear.

And that might be the most dangerous area of all.



Chapter 13: The Winner Takes It All

It started with an email Claire wasn't supposed to see.

A mutual acquaintance—someone Claire had worked with briefly on a citywide nonprofit campaign—sent out a congratulatory blast.

"Huge congrats to Naomi Bradford for securing the Director of Strategic Communications role at the Crosswell Foundation. Well deserved!"

Claire stared at the screen, barely breathing.

There was no official announcement yet. No press release. Nothing from Crosswell. But the message was clear enough: the job was off the table. And it was Naomi's, not hers.

She refreshed her inbox. Nothing from Crosswell. No rejection. No closure. Just silence. And now, this.

For a long moment, she didn't move. The world around her dimmed to a dull hum as the words repeated in her mind: Naomi got the job.

Her phone buzzed on her desk. A text from Naomi.

Naomi: Hey, wanted to tell you before it goes public. I got the position. They just finalized everything this morning.

Claire stared at it for a full minute before her fingers moved.

Claire: Congrats. Just saw the email from Marcus.

Naomi: I didn't expect it to go out that fast. I was going to call you.

Claire didn't reply. She couldn't. Her chest felt tight, her jaw locked.

The betrayal stung differently this time. It wasn't just that Naomi had

applied without telling her. It was that she had won. And now she was acting like it changed nothing.

Claire stepped outside her office and made her way to the parking garage, needing air. Needing space. She climbed into her car and just sat there, gripping the wheel.

She tried to swallow the bitterness, tried to tell herself that Naomi was qualified. That she had probably interviewed well. That this was just how the chips fell.

But underneath it all was the ache. The sharp, hollow pain of knowing that someone you trusted most had not only gone behind your back—but had succeeded at your expense.

She had really wanted this job. She had envisioned her name on that announcement. She had spent so much time and energy preparing, rehearsing, planning.

And now Naomi would be the one in the meetings. Naomi would be the one directing campaigns. Naomi would be sitting in the office Claire had dreamed of.

Claire's phone buzzed again. Another message from Naomi.

Naomi: I hope this doesn't change anything between us. I really do.

Claire closed her eyes. Was she serious? It already had.

—

That night, Claire sat on her balcony, wrapped in a blanket, a cup of tea steaming beside her. The city lights glowed in the distance, indifferent to her heartbreak.

Tasha called just after nine.

"I saw the news," she said gently.

Claire didn't answer right away. Finally, she said, "I didn't even get a rejection email."

"I'm so sorry."

Claire let out a breath. "She beat me. And she lied to me. And now I'm supposed to smile and say I'm happy for her."

"You don't have to do that," Tasha said matter of factly.

"She keeps texting like she wants things to go back to normal. Like nothing's changed."

"Because for her, nothing has," Tasha said. "She got what she wanted."

Claire looked out at the skyline, her voice quieter. "It's not just the job. It's everything. Every conversation we've had the past few weeks—I've been trusting her, leaning on her, not knowing that all along, she was playing a secret game."

"She compartmentalized you."

"Yeah." Claire's voice cracked slightly. "And I had no idea."

Tasha was quiet for a moment, then said, "You didn't do anything wrong, Claire. You were open. Loyal. Honest. That's not a weakness. That's integrity."

Claire nodded, but it didn't bring comfort.

She pulled her knees to her chest, resting her chin there. "I keep wondering if I would've gotten it if she hadn't applied."

"Don't do that to yourself."

“I can't help it. I'll always wonder. But mostly I just can't believe she did this to me. And that's the part that really hurts.”

They talked a little longer—about small things, about nothing. Tasha didn't try to fix it, just stayed on the line until the ache felt less lonely.

After they hung up, Claire stared at her phone.

She opened Naomi's message thread. Her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

Finally, she typed:

Claire: I hope you get everything you want out of that job. I really do. But I'm going to need some time.

She hit send. Then closed the thread.

Not goodbye.

But not forgiveness either.

Not yet.

She had always believed there was enough room for both of them to win.

But today—Naomi had proven otherwise.

And the pedestal? It didn't just crack this time.

It collapsed.



Chapter 14: Trust Shaken

Claire didn't realize how much she needed to talk to someone until she found herself outside Miles Donovan's office the next morning, coffee in one hand and the exhaustion of too many unanswered questions in the other.

His door was half open, as usual. She gave a light knock before stepping inside.

"You got a minute?"

Miles looked up from a spreadsheet and smiled. "For you? Always."

She sank into the chair across from him and exhaled.

"You look like someone who just discovered coffee doesn't actually solve problems," he said.

Claire smirked. "Coffee solves everything. It's people I'm not sure about."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't push. He waited.

"I didn't get the Crosswell job," she said quietly. "Naomi did."

Miles blinked. "Naomi? Your Naomi?"

Claire nodded. "She applied behind my back. Never told me. She let me believe she wasn't going for it. She even gave me interview tips."

Miles leaned back slowly. "Wow."

"Yeah."

There was a long silence, broken only by the low hum of the air

conditioner.

“She said she didn’t think I was serious about it,” Claire continued. “Like I wasn’t really trying. And now she’s trying to act like nothing’s changed.”

Miles tapped a pen against his notepad. “That’s a big betrayal. Especially from someone that close to you.”

“It feels like the floor dropped out from under me. I’m starting to question everything. And it’s not just her—Evan too. And even my dad.”

Miles glanced up. “Your dad?”

Claire nodded. “We had a conversation last weekend. I told him my mom called me. That she wanted to talk. And he completely shut down. I asked him questions I’ve been carrying for years, and he just... dodged them. Said the past didn’t matter anymore.”

Miles was quiet, listening.

“It’s like I’ve been walking around with this carefully built version of everyone in my life, and now all the cracks are starting to show at the same time.” Claire sighed deeply.

“Sometimes that’s how it happens,” Miles said. “Enough little things start to add up that make you question what’s been holding it together.”

Claire nodded. “And Evan... I don’t know what to do with him either. He’s charming. Smooth. Says all the right things. But every time I try to go deeper—ask him something real—he finds a way to deflect. He’s vague about his family. His past. I asked him if he knew Naomi and he said no, but there was something in the way he said it. Like he was trying too hard to sound casual.”

“Have you asked him directly?”

“I’ve asked,” she said. “He answers just enough to look honest, but not enough to actually be transparent.”

Miles leaned forward. “Claire, can I give you some advice you’re probably not going to love?”

She gave a weary smile. “You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

“You’re one of the most insightful communicators I’ve ever worked with. You pick up on things most people miss. You can read a room like nobody’s business. But when it comes to the people closest to you? You assume the best. You give them the benefit of the doubt even when your gut says otherwise. You override your instincts because you want so badly to believe in the people you care about.”

Claire’s chest tightened. “So I shouldn’t trust people?”

“I’m not saying that,” Miles said gently. “But I am saying trust should be earned, not assumed. Especially now. When people start giving you half-answers, that’s when you need to start asking full questions.”

She nodded slowly, then ran a hand through her hair. “I feel like I’m unraveling.”

“You’re not unraveling,” Miles said. “You’re waking up. And it hurts. But it’s also when you find out what’s real.”

Claire looked at him. “So what do I do?”

“Slow down. Pay attention. Don’t ignore the shifts in people just because they’re not convenient. If something feels off—it probably is. You don’t need all the evidence before you can trust your gut.”

Claire sat with that for a long moment. “I don’t want to become cynical.”

“Then don’t,” he said simply. “Be wise. Be discerning. But don’t lose your softness. That’s part of what makes you great at what you do.

You can’t keep giving people the benefit of the doubt when they haven’t earned it,” he added. “You deserve transparency, not tiptoeing. Honesty, not excuses.”

Claire stared down at the coffee in her hands. “It’s just... a lot. All at once. And I don’t know who I can actually trust anymore.”

“You’ve got me,” Miles said simply. “And you’ve got your own instincts. Don’t ignore them just because you may not like where they lead.”

She felt something loosen in her chest. Not relief, exactly, but clarity. “Thanks, Miles.”

He smiled. “Anytime.”

As she stood to leave, Miles said, “Claire?”

“Yeah?”

“Next time you feel like something’s off, don’t wait for proof. Trust the shift. It’s always trying to tell you something.”

Claire nodded.

She walked out feeling no less heartbroken.

But a little more sure of what she needed to do next.

And that was a start.



Chapter 15: A Convention Connection

Claire hadn't planned to go to the nonprofit leadership mixer that evening. After the whirlwind of the past two weeks, she'd planned on skipping it altogether. But Miles had encouraged her to attend, reminding her that even in disappointment, showing up was a sign of resilience.

"Besides," he'd said, "the people who pay attention now are the ones who will remember you later."

So she went. Reluctantly, but she went.

The event was held in the downtown convention center, in one of the upper floors overlooking the city skyline. The room buzzed with low conversation, the clinking of glasses, and the rustle of name tags and business cards. Claire wore a fitted black suit with a soft green blouse, her hair pinned back in a low twist. She looked every bit the poised professional. But inside, she was unraveling.

She moved through the crowd with practiced ease, shaking hands, catching up with colleagues, listening to speeches about innovation and impact. For a while, it was almost easy to forget everything else—until she caught sight of a familiar figure across the room.

Evan.

He was dressed in a slate gray suit, collar open, sleeves pushed up just enough to look deliberate. He was laughing with a woman Claire didn't recognize—a petite redhead with an easy, confident posture and a Crosswell Foundation name tag clipped to her blouse that said "Rachel, Hiring Committee".

Claire didn't interrupt. She waited until their conversation faded and Evan moved toward her at the refreshment table.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” she said as he approached.

Evan smiled, appearing to be pleasantly surprised. “Claire, you look amazing.”

“Thanks.” She paused. “What brings you here?”

He lifted a glass of sparkling water. “Networking. I consult with a few of the organizations involved. Figured I’d make the rounds.”

Claire nodded, watching him closely. “That woman you were just talking to... she’s with Crosswell, isn’t she?”

Evan glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah, that’s Rachel Hanley. She’s on their development team.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Development? Or the hiring committee?”

There was the slightest flicker in his expression—a pause that lasted just long enough to confirm her suspicions that he was being dishonest with her.

“She’s involved with both,” he said finally, tone light. “We were just catching up.”

“Catching up,” Claire repeated. “So do you know her well?”

Evan took a slow sip of his drink. “We met at a communications summit last year. She reached out a few times after for strategy input. Nothing major.”

Claire didn’t look away. “Did she know Naomi was applying for the position at Crosswell?”

Evan hesitated. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Claire crossed her arms. “Did you?”

His gaze sharpened slightly. “Claire—”

“Do you know Naomi?” she asked, voice low. “Really know her?”

Evan shifted his weight. “We’ve met.”

Claire tilted her head. “You told me you didn’t.”

“I said we may have crossed paths. Which we did. Briefly.”

“But did you know she was applying for the job?”

“Claire,” Evan said softly, “I didn’t think it was my place to get involved. You two are friends. I didn’t want to say anything that would make things worse.”

Claire stared at him. “So instead, you lied?”

“I didn’t lie,” he said, but his tone lacked conviction. “I withheld. There’s a difference.”

Claire looked away, her jaw tightening. “It doesn’t feel different.”

Evan reached for her arm, but she took a step back.

“I needed someone to be honest with me,” she said. “Not neutral. Not diplomatic. Honest.”

Evan sighed. “Claire, I was trying to protect your peace.”

She laughed—not cruelly, but with a hollow kind of disbelief. “Don’t say that like it’s noble. You didn’t protect my peace. You just made me feel like I can’t trust anyone.”

They stood in silence, the sound of clinking glasses and distant conversation filling the gap.

“I didn’t want to lose your trust,” Evan said finally.

“You didn’t lose it,” Claire replied. “You gave it away. Bit by bit. With every vague answer. Every time you sidestepped a question. Every time you withheld instead of being real.”

Evan opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Claire stepped back. “I need space, Evan. Real space.”

He nodded slowly. “If that’s what you need.”

She left without saying goodbye.

Outside, the air was cool and damp, the city lights bleeding into a low mist on the streets. Claire walked to her car alone, the heels of her shoes echoing on the pavement like punctuation marks in a conversation she never wanted to have.

Evan had known. Naomi had known. And both of them had chosen to lie.

What hurt most wasn’t the betrayal.

It was how easy they made it look.



Chapter 16: In Plain Sight

The email came late Wednesday night, long after Claire had stopped checking for messages that meant anything.

She was curled up on the couch in her pajamas, with a romcom she'd

seen a dozen times before playing on the tv, when her phone buzzed with the notification.

From: Evan Corbin

Subject: Thought This Might Be Useful

Claire stared at the screen for a moment before opening it. They hadn't spoken since she told him she needed space, and she hadn't expected to hear from him so soon—if at all. The message was short, polite, and carefully distant.

"Claire, I came across this and thought it might be helpful to you or your team. Totally understand if now's not the best time. No pressure either way."

There was an attachment. A PDF labeled simply: Strategic Candidates Overview.

She clicked without thinking, expecting some kind of nonprofit comms resource—maybe a framework or deck template.

What opened instead made her blood run cold.

The document had a Crosswell Foundation header. Internal use only. And right beneath that: Final Round Evaluation Summary.

Claire blinked.

She scrolled, heart hammering, until she found it.

"Candidate: Naomi Bradford

Evaluator: Evan Corbin

Strengths: Strong executive presence, exceptional media training, firm grasp of crisis management strategy. Confident in high-pressure situations. Previous partnerships indicate adaptability and a results-oriented mindset.

Concerns: May come off too polished. Monitor for authenticity in stakeholder engagement.

Additional Notes: Pre-existing rapport with Rachel H. and demonstrated initiative in early outreach. Likely to adapt well to Crosswell's existing culture and bring valuable high-level connections."

Claire stopped breathing.

Evaluator: Evan Corbin.

Evaluator.

He hadn't just known Naomi was applying. He had helped her get the job.

He hadn't just crossed paths with the hiring committee.

He had helped decide.

The screen blurred in front of her. She read it again, hoping she was mistaken. Hoping it said something else. Anything else.

But there it was. His name. His analysis. His fingerprints on the entire process.

Claire set the laptop down like it had burned her.

Every memory from the last two weeks reeled through her mind. His vague answers. His careful silences. The way he deflected when she asked if he knew Naomi. The way he minimized every concern.

He had looked her in the eye—twice now—and said almost nothing at all.

Why? Why had he gotten involved with her in the first place?

Claire stared at the PDF like it might change if she blinked enough. It didn't.

There was her name—second on the list. Her qualifications were summarized in bullet points, most of which felt vague and sterile. “Solid nonprofit background.”

“Strong presentation.”

“Would need further mentorship at this level.”

She felt it like a punch. Cold. Sudden. Final.

She minimized the document and stared blankly at her desktop, the email still open beside it. His message was so casual, so deliberately vague.

"Thought this might be useful." What? Why?

He hadn't warned her. Hadn't explained. Hadn't even pretended to offer context.

Her chest tightened.

He knew she was grieving that job. He knew she was still waiting on a response when he sent her a document that said—quietly but unmistakably—that she had already lost. And worse, that he had played a part in it.

Claire pushed away from her desk and stood in the center of her apartment, arms crossed tightly. She felt dizzy, but her mind was a swarm of clarity. Pieces were falling into place she didn't want to see.

He'd lied about knowing Naomi.

He'd dodged every meaningful question.

He'd given Naomi his endorsement.

And then pursued Claire anyway.

Her thoughts circled back to the beginning—the first night they met, the way his eyes lingered just a little longer than necessary when she'd mentioned the job. The quick, too-easy charm. The way he'd seemed to know exactly what she needed to hear.

How long had he been playing both sides?

How much of his attention had been real?

Why had he played both sides?

The worst part wasn't the betrayal.

It was the quiet implication that maybe she had never really mattered to him at all. Maybe she was a piece on the board—someone to monitor, to keep close. Someone to distract.

Claire sat slowly on the edge of her couch, unable to stop the stream of questions forming in her mind.

Why reach out to her in the first place?

Why pretend to be invested?

Why send this document to her?

It felt like arrogance. Or guilt. Or something more insidious—a breadcrumb trail meant to offer just enough information to make her doubt herself, but not enough to call it outright sabotage.

She didn't reply to the message.

She didn't rage-text him. Didn't call Naomi. Didn't scream.

She just sat, stunned, and let the weight of it settle.

She didn't know how long she stayed there. Long enough for the sun to shift, casting sharper light across the floor. Long enough for her phone to buzz three times without her checking it.

She finally stood and walked to her kitchen, poured herself a glass of water with shaking hands, and took a long sip. It tasted like nothing.

Then she opened a notebook and wrote four words at the top of the page:

What was the motive?

And beneath that, a question she didn't want to admit she was asking:

Was I the plan... or just the distraction?

She closed the notebook and stared at the cover, jaw clenched.

She wasn't ready to confront Evan yet.

Not because she didn't know what she felt.

But because she needed time to understand how deeply she'd been played.

And this time, she wouldn't walk into another conversation unarmed.

Not again.



Chapter 17: Second Chances

It started with a letter.

Claire found it wedged between the envelopes in her mailbox on a rainy Thursday evening. No return address. Just her name in simple handwriting on the front, slightly smudged from the weather. The moment she saw it, her breath caught.

She knew that handwriting.

It was softer than she remembered, shakier around the edges, but it was hers. Margaret Whitmore. Her mother.

Claire hesitated before taking it inside. She stood in her kitchen for ten full minutes just staring at it, the envelope trembling slightly in her hands. Part of her wanted to tear it up without reading a word. Another part—quieter, but persistent—told her to open it. To see what her mother had to say.

She finally sat down and opened it.

The note inside wasn't long, but it wasn't hollow either. It was written in blue ink, carefully composed, as though Margaret had rewritten it several times before settling on this version.

Claire,

I know I don't have the right to ask you for anything. But I'm asking anyway. Not for forgiveness. Not even for understanding. Just a conversation. One honest conversation. I'll be at Glenhaven Park this Sunday at 2pm. If you come, I'll tell you everything. If you don't, I'll understand.

With love, Mom

Claire read it three times. Her hands were still shaking when she folded it and placed it on the counter.

She didn't make her decision right away.

She carried the note in her purse all week, touching it occasionally like it might dissolve if she didn't keep checking. Her mind was already overflowing—Naomi's betrayal, Evan's deception, her father's evasiveness—and now this. One more crack in the story she thought she knew.

By the time Sunday came, Claire still hadn't decided. Not really. But her car seemed to drive itself toward Glenhaven Park, her hands steering through familiar streets she hadn't taken in years.

She found Margaret sitting alone on a bench near the pond, her posture straight despite the weight that hung in the air. She wore a tan coat and held a closed umbrella in her lap, though the rain had stopped hours ago.

Claire approached slowly, heart pounding.

Margaret turned at the sound of her footsteps. Her face had aged, yes, but not in a way that made her unrecognizable. Her eyes were still the same—wide, green, and impossibly sad.

"Claire," she said quietly, standing.

"I got your letter," Claire said, her voice carefully measured.

Margaret nodded. "Thank you for coming."

Claire didn't sit. Not yet. "You said you'd tell me everything."

Margaret gestured to the bench. "Please. Let me try."

Claire sat down and they remained silent for several minutes, neither one knowing where to start.

Margaret was the first to break the silence. "You probably have every

right to hate me.”

Claire didn’t answer.

Margaret began again. “I didn’t leave because I didn’t love you.”

Claire’s throat tightened. “Then why did you leave?”

“Because I didn’t know how to stay,” Margaret said softly. “Your father made sure of that.”

Claire’s eyes flashed. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not here to defend the choices I made. I just want you to know the truth. The real truth—not just the version your father gave you.”

Claire looked at her sharply. “You mean the version where you walked out?”

Margaret nodded, slowly. “I did walk out. But not the way he told you.”

Claire crossed her arms. “So enlighten me.”

Margaret’s voice didn’t waver. “Your father and I... we weren’t happy, Claire. For a long time. We tried to hold it together for you. But somewhere along the way, we stopped being partners. And then I found out he was cheating.”

Claire’s eyes widened. “What?”

“He had an affair. With someone from work. It wasn’t serious, he said. Just a mistake. But it broke something in me. Something I couldn’t unsee. And when I confronted him, he begged me not to tell you. Said it would confuse you. That it would make things harder.”

Claire’s heart pounded. “He said you left because you couldn’t

handle the responsibility. That you didn't want to be a mother anymore."

"I never stopped wanting to be your mother," Margaret whispered. "But I was so angry. And so broken. I begged to take you with me. He threatened to make my life a nightmare if I tried. He had the resources. The connections. I had nothing. I didn't know how to fight for you when I'd already lost so much. And when he made me out to be the villain... I didn't correct the story. I should have. I regret that more than anything."

Claire shook her head. "So you just disappeared?"

"I tried writing. Calling. At first. But he blocked the letters. Changed the number. Told me it was better for you if I stayed away. And maybe I let that excuse keep me away longer than I should have. I was weak. I didn't want to fight your father anymore. I wanted to believe I could rebuild something else. But I never stopped thinking about you. Never."

Claire looked away, her throat burning. "Why didn't you ever come back?"

"I did," Margaret said. "I came to your school once, just to see you from a distance. You looked happy. He had you in his arms. I told myself maybe I was the problem. That maybe he was right."

Tears slipped down Claire's cheeks before she could stop them. "You should have tried harder."

"I know," Margaret whispered. "And I will regret that for the rest of my life."

They sat in silence, the wind rustling the trees around them. Claire didn't know what to believe. But she knew this: Margaret wasn't lying. Not now. Her voice was raw, unguarded. This wasn't manipulation. It was confession.

“I’m not asking you to forget,” Margaret said quietly. “I’m just asking you not to close the door.”

Claire stood slowly. Her hands trembled.

“I don’t know what to do with this,” she said honestly.

Margaret nodded. “You don’t have to know today.”

Claire hesitated, then, “I’m glad you reached out,” she said. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Margaret looked at her gently, her voice trembling, and said, “Thank you for listening.”

Claire turned and walked away. Not fast. Not angry. Just quiet.

The door wasn’t open yet.

But for the first time in years, it wasn’t locked anymore either.

And maybe—just maybe—that was the beginning of something new.



Chapter 18: The Quiet Insider

Claire hadn’t expected to see Vivian Cross in person, much less speak to her.

The founder and namesake of the Crosswell Foundation was something of a legend in the nonprofit sector. Vivian had worked hard to build the organization from the ground up, championing social impact long before it was fashionable. She rarely made public

appearances anymore, letting her board handle the day-to-day, but her presence still lingered like a lighthouse on the horizon—seen even when distant.

So when Claire arrived at a local fundraiser to support housing initiatives and spotted the silver-haired woman standing calmly near a display table, she froze.

"You should go introduce yourself," Miles murmured beside her, noticing her hesitation. "If she showed up, then you can be sure she wants to be seen."

Claire steadied herself, wiped her hands on her cocktail napkin, and crossed the room.

"Ms. Cross?" she asked with a confidence she didn't really feel.

Vivian turned. Her expression was alert and respectful, but not overly warm. "Yes?"

"I'm Claire Whitmore. I wanted to introduce myself." She extended her hand, which Ms. Cross shook politely.

Claire continued. "I applied for the Strategic Communications Director position at Crosswell Foundation recently."

A flicker of recognition passed through Vivian's eyes.

"Yes," she said. "I've heard your name."

Claire blinked. "You have?"

Vivian nodded. "Your reputation at Crosswell is excellent. I especially appreciate your focus on narrative equity."

Claire's stomach twisted. "Thank you. That means a great deal."

Vivian tilted her head slightly, studying her. "I understand the decision didn't go in your favor."

Claire nodded once. "No, it didn't."

Vivian lowered her voice just a touch, her tone almost conspiratorial. "Not all decisions are made by the people you would expect."

Claire looked at her sharply.

Vivian continued, calm but clear. "Sometimes the wrong voices get too much influence in the room. That doesn't mean the rest of us don't notice."

Claire's mouth went dry. She didn't respond.

Vivian took a sip from the glass in her hand. "I believe in giving people the chance to show who they really are over time. Not everyone has the luxury of that lens, but I do."

Claire swallowed. "I'm not sure I understand what you are saying."

Vivian offered a small smile. "I'm saying that in any organization, there are layers. Some of them are messy. Some of them are disappointing."

Claire tried to hold her composure. "And you let it happen anyway?"

Vivian's gaze didn't waver. "Let's just say I observe. I listen. And I don't forget."

Claire felt like she was standing on a wire, suspended over truths she wasn't sure she wanted to acknowledge. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because the story isn't over. And because you carry yourself with the kind of integrity this field desperately needs."

Claire blinked again, unsure whether to feel affirmed or warned. Or both.

Vivian reached into her clutch and handed Claire her card. "If you ever want a second conversation, off the record, I'm easy to find."

Claire took it with trembling fingers.

Vivian turned, her final words floating behind her like a promise.

"Don't let a closed door convince you it was your fault. Sometimes, it's just politics."

Then she was gone.

Claire stood rooted to the floor, heart thudding, fingers still curled around the card.

Vivian Cross had seen it.

She had known.

And said nothing.

Until now.

Claire tucked the card into her coat pocket, her jaw set.

This wasn't over.

Not even close.



Chapter 19: Too Little, Too Late

The rain had stopped, but the air was still heavy with the scent of it. Claire ducked into West End Brew, shaking off the chill and brushing a damp curl from her cheek. She hadn't come looking for anything more than a cup of coffee and a quiet place to think. It had become her refuge again—a place where she could sink into a corner booth and wrestle with her thoughts.

The bell above the door jingled as she stepped inside, and she barely glanced up from the counter. She ordered her usual and turned to find a seat.

Then she saw him.

Evan.

Sitting at a table near the front window, tapping something into his phone, a half-finished latte by his hand.

He looked up—and froze.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Claire's first instinct was to turn around and leave. But something in her chest held her still. Maybe it was the exhaustion of carrying so many questions. Maybe it was the look in his eyes—wide, uncertain, not smug or defensive.

She crossed the room slowly.

"Claire," he said, standing quickly. "I didn't think I'd—"

"See me here?" she finished. "I didn't expect to run into you either."

He gestured toward the chair across from him. "Do you want to sit?"

She hesitated, then lowered herself into the seat.

"I wasn't planning to talk to you yet," she admitted. "But maybe this is the right moment."

Evan nodded, setting his phone aside. "I know I owe you more than just an apology."

Claire's voice was quiet, but steady. "You owe me a LOT more. I know everything, Evan. You lied to me. About Naomi. About Crosswell. You were on the evaluation committee. You knew I was applying. And you didn't tell me."

"I didn't mean for it to go the way it did," he said. "I recused myself from the final vote, yes—but by then it was already messy. Claire, I recommended Naomi before I even knew you were applying. Before I knew what we... what this might become."

"And when you did know? You kept it from me."

Evan leaned forward, his voice low. "Because I admired you. I admired your passion and your ethics and the way you looked at the world. And I was afraid that if you knew the truth, you'd never look at me the same way again."

Claire's jaw tightened. "So you let me go blind into that interview, thinking I had a fair shot. Thinking I could trust you."

"You did have a fair shot," he said. "That's what I told myself. That you didn't need my help. That you were stronger than any shadow I might cast. I thought... if I stepped back, if I let the chips fall, maybe it wouldn't taint anything."

"But it did," Claire said. "Because you weren't just silent. You were involved. And when I asked you directly, you lied."

He closed his eyes briefly. "I panicked. I didn't know how to explain it

without sounding like I had orchestrated the whole thing. But I didn't. I swear I didn't. I didn't ask her to apply. I really didn't think she'd get it over you. I just... froze."

Claire stared at him, the ache in her chest both familiar and raw. "You should have told me the truth, Evan. You had so many chances."

"I know." He sounded sorry, but she couldn't trust him.

"You don't lie to people you respect."

His voice cracked. "I didn't want to lose how you saw me. You made me want to be better. And I already knew I wasn't."

Claire stood. "I don't know what this could have become, but whatever it was—it's not that anymore."

"You're ending this?"

"I'm protecting myself," Claire said. "Something I should've done a long time ago."

Evan stood too, his hands at his sides. "I wish I could go back. Do it all differently."

"You can't," she said. "But I can move forward."

She turned and walked toward the door. This time, she didn't stop.

The air outside felt fresher somehow. Like a page turned. Like a wound, finally exposed to healing.

Claire kept walking.

And didn't look back.



Part III: The Pedestal Shatters

Chapter 20: All Is Lost

The morning Claire decided to confront Naomi was unusually bright. The sun streamed through her bedroom window with a kind of unwelcome cheerfulness, lighting up corners of her apartment that had felt like safe shadows for weeks. It's like it was shining light on the clarity she had finally gained.

She stared at her phone for a long time before sending the text:

"Are you free to talk today? In person."

Naomi replied within minutes.

"Sure. Come by the apartment whenever."

Claire took her time. She wasn't sure if it was because she needed to collect her thoughts or if she was afraid of what she might say when she got there. The anger had cooled from its initial boil, but in its place was something harder. More final.

When she arrived, Naomi greeted her at the door with a nervous smile, wearing yoga pants and an oversized sweater. The apartment smelled like cinnamon tea, warm and misleading.

"Hey," Naomi said, stepping aside. "You want something to drink?"

"No," Claire said simply. "I won't be here that long."

Naomi's smile faltered. She gestured toward the couch, and they both sat at opposite ends, a chasm stretching silently between them.

Claire didn't ease into it. She couldn't. She didn't have the patience.

"I know everything, Naomi. About Evan. About Crosswell. About the job."

Naomi blinked, mouth slightly open. "Claire, I—"

"Don't," Claire said, holding up a hand. "I know Evan was on the evaluation committee. You knew that he and I were seeing each other. I know he recommended you for the job."

Naomi closed her mouth, then opened it again. "I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

Claire laughed, a hollow sound. "You didn't mean for me to get hurt? Funny, that's exactly what he said. You applied for the job I TOLD you I wanted. You let me believe you were supporting me, cheering me on. You gave me pep talks while secretly planning the whole time to take it yourself."

Naomi's voice rose. "I wasn't planning anything, Claire. I was just... I didn't think you were really going for it. You were hesitating. You were questioning everything."

"Because I trusted you," Claire snapped. "I was being honest with you. I was nervous. Vulnerable. I believed you were in my corner."

Naomi stood, pacing now. "It's not that simple. I needed the job too. I needed something for me."

"So you lied to me."

"I didn't lie! I just... I didn't tell you everything."

Claire stood too. Her voice was low but steady. "You DID lie, Naomi. I asked you if you were interested and you said no! And when you got it—you didn't even have the decency to tell me. You let me find

out like a stranger."

Naomi turned to face her, her eyes full of something desperate. "Because I knew you'd look at me like you are right now. Like I betrayed you. I didn't want to lose our friendship."

"You lost it the second you chose ambition over honesty."

"Claire—"

"You wanted the job more than you wanted loyalty," Claire said, finally voicing the truth neither of them had said out loud. "You wanted it more, and you were willing to do whatever it took to get it. Even if it meant stepping over me."

Naomi didn't deny it. She knew she couldn't. Her silence was louder than any admission.

Claire nodded slowly. "I came here to give you a chance to explain. And you did. You admitted your guilt. I can't trust you anymore."

Naomi's face crumpled. "So that's it? After everything we've been through?"

Claire picked up her purse. "Yes. That's it. You made your choice a long time ago. I just didn't see it until now."

She walked to the door, hand on the knob, then turned back one last time.

"I hope the job was worth it."

Then she left.

Outside, the brightness of the day no longer felt mocking. It felt clarifying. Like the light had finally touched the one corner she hadn't wanted to look at.

And it showed her everything she needed to see.



Chapter 21: The Whole Truth Comes Out

The knock on Margaret's door was sharp but not rushed. When she opened it, Claire stood on the porch with her arms at her side, an unreadable look in her eyes.

"I think I'm ready," Claire said.

Margaret stepped aside without a word, letting her in. There was no pretense this time—no awkward smiles or pleasantries. Claire walked into the small living room and stood by the window, still wearing her coat. She didn't sit.

"You said you'd tell me everything. I didn't give you the chance." Claire turned from the window. "Well, I need everything now. The real version. No edits. No half-truths."

Margaret sat slowly on the edge of the couch, her hands folded in her lap. "Alright. May I ask what changed your mind?"

"I keep discovering that people I've trusted didn't deserve it. They lied to my face and let me down." She paused before continuing. "It occurred to me the opposite could be true as well. Maybe people who haven't had my trust do deserve it. So I should at least know the whole story about you and Dad, too."

Margaret fought back tears. "Okay. Well, I promised you honesty, and you deserve that. But, Claire, it won't be easy to hear. Especially if you've already been hurt a lot recently."

Claire turned to face her. "I have to take that chance. So... You said

Dad had one affair. You said it broke you. But I need to know if that's really the whole story."

Margaret looked down at her hands. Her voice, when it came, was steady but tired. "It wasn't just one."

Claire inhaled sharply.

"From the beginning," Margaret continued, "almost from the start of our marriage, there were others. Casual ones. Meaningless, he always said. I told myself they didn't matter if he came home to me. If he still chose this family. But each one chipped away at the woman I used to be."

Claire blinked, stunned. "Why didn't you leave sooner?"

"Because of you," Margaret said simply. "Because I wanted to believe he would change. Because I thought keeping the family together was worth more than my pride."

Claire paced the room once, twice. "So what finally made you leave?"

Margaret nodded slowly. "Her name was Hannah. She wasn't a fling. She was real. She was a colleague. And he fell for her. I knew it the moment I saw the way he looked at her. There were months of it—him coming home late, making excuses. When I confronted him, he didn't even bother denying it."

Claire felt like the floor beneath her had started to tilt. "And he still let me believe it was your fault. That you just... abandoned us."

"He didn't just let you believe it," Margaret said softly. "He made sure you believed it. He told me if I tried to explain, he'd fight me in court. That he'd make you hate me. And he did."

Claire lowered herself into a chair across from her mother, her legs suddenly too weak to hold her up. "I don't understand how he could

do that. How anyone could... construct a lie like that and keep it going for years."

Margaret looked at her, pain etched into every line of her face. "Because he wanted to continue to be the hero of your story. And it was easier for me to be the victim than to admit he was the reason everything fell apart."

Claire wiped a hand across her face. "All this time, I put him on this pedestal. I trusted him completely. Defended him."

Margaret's eyes welled. "I know. And I let it happen for too long. I thought staying away was protecting you. I see now it just let the lie take root. Maybe... maybe my silence did more damage than his."

The quiet that followed was loud. Heavy.

Finally, Claire said, "I can't undo the years we lost. I can't go back and un-hear all the times he told me you didn't care. But I can listen now. I can choose what I believe moving forward."

Margaret nodded slowly. "That's all I wanted. A chance to tell you the truth. A chance to be part of your life, honestly this time."

Claire stood again, this time with redirected anger. All the fury she'd felt toward her mother for all those years was now flowing toward her father.

"I need time," she said. "I have to let this settle. But thank you... for telling me."

Margaret stood too, but didn't move to hug her, as much as she wanted to. She seemed to understand.

As Claire walked to the door, she paused with her hand on the knob.

"I think the hardest part isn't the lies. It's realizing how much he

wanted me to believe them."

She opened the door and stepped into the cool air, a gust of wind brushing her cheek like a warning.

The pedestal had shattered.

And in the wreckage, Claire finally saw the truth.



Chapter 22: What Remains

Claire hadn't set out to torture herself. She just needed a sweater.

It was late afternoon, the golden haze of autumn sun filtering in through the apartment windows. She was reaching into the back of her closet for the gray knit cardigan her dad had given her for her twenty-first birthday when her fingers brushed against a cardboard box. Somehow she lost her footing and in the process, she pulled it down, spilling the contents all over the closet floor.

There were relics she'd forgotten she even kept—photographs, handwritten notes, birthday cards. A treasure chest of nostalgia she had once found comforting. Now it felt like a trap.

Claire sank onto the floor, cross-legged, the mess spread out in front of her. The first thing she saw was a snapshot from her high school graduation. She stood in the center, beaming in her cap and gown. Her father had one arm around her shoulder, pride shining in his eyes. At the time, she remembered thinking how lucky she was to have such a steady, devoted dad.

She looked closer now. Was there anything in his smile that gave him away? Any tension around the eyes? Any guilt?

She couldn't see it.

There was the letter he'd written her on her first day of college, still tucked neatly into the box. She took it out and unfolded it with shaking fingers.

"Claire-bear,

I am so proud of you. Watching you grow into the woman you are has been my greatest joy. Never forget how loved you are, and how fiercely I believe in you. Keep your head high, and trust your instincts. You're stronger than you know.

Love you always, Dad"

It had brought her to tears when she read it the first time. Now it gutted her.

Every word sounded real. Every word was real. But now, Claire couldn't help but wonder: how do you hold something tender in one hand and betray it with the other? How does someone compartmentalize like that?

She picked up another photo—this one from a childhood camping trip. She was maybe eight. Her dad had just helped her catch her first fish. She remembered the way he'd cheered, the way he'd hoisted the fish high for the camera like it was a trophy.

She remembered feeling so seen. So loved.

And maybe she was. Maybe that was the part that hurt the most. Because it wasn't all fake. Her father had loved her. But he had also lied. Repeatedly. Intentionally. And when the truth threatened to surface, he chose to protect his image rather than her heart.

Claire leaned her head back against the closet wall, her throat tight.

The grief was different now. It wasn't just about losing trust. It was about losing a version of him—the man she thought he was. The man she had defended. Admired. Quoted.

It was like mourning a person who was still alive.

She thought of the night he taught her to drive. How patient he had been. How he'd talked her through the turns, the parallel parking, the panic. How he'd promised she was ready.

"You're in control," he'd said. "Even when it doesn't feel like it."

He was always full of wisdom. Little truths tucked into ordinary moments.

How could someone so careful with her be so careless with the people around him? With her mother?

Claire let the memories wash over her, each one now threaded with contradiction. The father who taught her to be brave had been a coward. The man who taught her to be honest had built their life on lies.

She didn't know what to do with that.

And yet, what remained was this: He had loved her. In his own way. She believed that. He hadn't been a monster. Just a man. A man who had failed. Who had betrayed her mother, and eventually, her too.

Claire put everything back in the box, closed it, and slid it back onto the shelf. She pulled the sweater from its hanger, wrapped it around her shoulders. Then took it off.

It was her size, but it no longer fit.

She took it to the trashcan and dropped it in as a tear slid down her cheek.

She would carry the truth now. All of it.

And she would keep walking forward.



Chapter 23: The Gift of Clarity

Claire hadn't planned to cry. She hadn't planned anything at all.

But as soon as Tasha opened her door, all the composure Claire has been working so hard to maintain simply came undone. She didn't even say hello. She just walked in, dropped her purse onto the kitchen table, and said, "I can't pretend I'm okay anymore."

Tasha didn't ask questions. She just pulled Claire into a hug and held her until the shaking in her shoulders began to slow.

They moved to the couch, and Tasha handed her a blanket like it was second nature. It always had been. The only friend who could see through Claire's armor without needing to pry.

"Talk to me," Tasha said gently.

Claire stared at her hands. "It's like everything I believed in cracked open all at once. Evan. Naomi. My dad. All of them lied to me. And I didn't see it until it was too late."

Tasha handed her friend a cup of hot tea, then sat beside her, one knee tucked under the other, listening the way only someone who truly cares can.

Claire shook her head. "I keep going over it in my mind—what I missed, what I ignored. I feel stupid."

“Stop,” Tasha said softly but firmly. “You’re not stupid.”

“I trusted them. I defended them. I believed in them.” Her voice trembled. “All three of them.”

“You saw the best in all three of them,” Tasha said. “That doesn’t make you weak, Claire. That makes you hopeful.”

Claire blinked. “Hopeful?”

“Yeah,” Tasha said, reaching for her own tea. “You believed in their potential. In their goodness. Even when they didn’t live up to it. That’s not naïve. That’s brave.”

Claire let that sit for a moment, like the warm cup in her hands.

Tasha continued, “You wanted to believe people could be better than their worst decisions. And maybe that belief got used. But it also makes you the kind of person this world desperately needs.”

Claire let out a long breath, shoulders sagging. “I thought I was a good judge of character.”

“You are,” Tasha said. “But no one gets it right every time. People lie. People disappoint. That doesn’t mean your heart was wrong. It means they were.”

Claire looked over at her friend. “How do I keep moving forward? How do I not shut down completely?”

“You stop trying to unlove them,” Tasha said gently. “You stop trying to erase what was good just because it ended badly. You learn from it. And you use that wisdom to draw better boundaries next time.”

Claire looked down. “But it hurts.”

“Of course it hurts. Grief always comes with clarity.”

That line stopped Claire cold.

“Grief always comes with clarity,” she repeated quietly. “Yeah. It does.”

“You didn’t lose who you are in all of this,” Tasha said. “If anything, you found her. Because you stood up for yourself. You asked the hard questions. You walked away when it would’ve been easier to stay numb.”

Claire’s throat tightened again. But this time, the tears that welled weren’t from pain alone. There was something else.

Relief.

“I feel like I’ve been carrying so many versions of myself,” Claire whispered. “The loyal daughter. The forgiving friend. The understanding girlfriend. But I don’t know which one is the real me anymore.”

Tasha shook her head. “They’re all you. But now you get to decide which parts you want to carry forward—and which ones you finally get to set down.”

Claire smiled for the first time that day. It was faint, but it was real.

Tasha bumped her shoulder playfully. “You know, clarity looks good on you.”

Claire laughed softly. “Thanks. It feels... heavy. But freeing.”

Tasha leaned back with her tea. “That’s how you know it’s real.”

They sat in silence for a while, the kind that doesn’t need to be filled. Claire looked out the window at the fading light.

For the first time in weeks, she felt the ground beneath her.

Not because everything made sense.

But because she was finally standing in the truth.

And truth, even when it hurts, is still a gift.



Chapter 24: Echoes in the Vows

Claire hadn't planned to stop at the bookstore. But she ended up with some time to kill before meeting Tasha for lunch, so she decided to wander through the aisles of Pine & Paper. It was one of those local shops that smelled like cedarwood and comfort. She ran her fingers along the spines of titles she wasn't in the mood to read, letting her mind drift.

Then she heard a familiar voice from two rows over.

"...I don't know, maybe she'll like it."

Claire stepped around the endcap and came face-to-face with Tom, Naomi's husband.

He blinked. "Hi, Claire."

It had been months since she'd seen him—maybe longer. He looked the same, still a little preppy, but tired around the eyes in a way that hadn't been there before.

"Hey," she said, unsure of what else to offer.

He glanced down at the book in his hand—something by a well-known mystery author—and then back at her. “I was picking something up for Naomi. She's been on an escapist fiction kick lately.”

Claire nodded once, the awkward silence stretching between them.

“You, uh... want to sit?” Tom asked, gesturing toward the small café tucked in the back of the shop.

Claire hesitated—then shrugged. What had happened wasn't Tom's fault. “Sure.”

They took seats by the window. The barista brought over two waters without asking, recognizing Tom as a regular. For a moment, Claire just watched the traffic roll by outside, unsure what to say.

Tom beat her to it.

“She told me what happened.”

Claire's eyes met his. “She did?”

Tom nodded. “I asked her a few weeks ago why she hadn't been spending time with you. She shrugged it off at first, said you two just ‘drifted,’ but I pressed. Eventually she told me about the job at Crosswell.”

Claire said nothing, letting him speak.

“She was so... flippant about it. Like it was just no big deal. But I could tell there was more. So I kept pressing until she finally admitted that you had told her you were applying. That you'd confided in her.”

Claire's throat tightened. “And she still applied.”

Tom nodded again, slowly. “Yeah. And she didn't tell you. She let you go through it with her cheering you on while she was angling for the

same position the whole time.”

Claire folded her hands in her lap. “She lied to me. And now that I'm hearing this from you, I see that she lied to both of us, in different ways.”

“I know,” he said, his voice low. “And I’m so sorry, Claire. I know I wasn’t part of it, but... I still feel awful about what she did. I know how much the friendship meant to you, and how carelessly she threw it away.”

Claire blinked fast, surprised by the lump in her throat. “Thank you.”

“I told her it wasn’t just a lapse in judgment,” Tom added. “It was a betrayal. And that if the roles were reversed, she’d be devastated.”

Claire looked down. “Did it cause a rift between you two?”

Tom gave a tired smile. “Yeah. We’ve had more than a few tense conversations. I’m not saying it’s the end of us, but... trust isn’t just about marriage. It’s about character. And I have to admit, I saw a version of her I didn’t like.”

Claire exhaled slowly. “Yeah. Me too.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of everything settling between them like dust.

“I know it’s not my place,” Tom said finally, “but I hope someday, if she really owns it... maybe the two of you could find your way back. Or maybe you could at least forgive her.”

Claire shook her head gently. “Maybe. But some bridges don’t burn down. They erode slowly. Quietly. Until there’s nothing left to cross.”

Tom looked down at his water glass and nodded.

“She misses you,” he said softly.

Claire stood, her chair scraping gently against the floor. “She had a strange way of showing it.”

Tom rose with her. “I understand. Take care of yourself, Claire.”

“You too, Tom.”

She left the bookstore and stepped into the sunlight. The breeze hit her like a sigh—part release, part sorrow.

There was nothing more to say.

But somehow, hearing it from Tom... helped.

The echo of what was lost still lingered.

But so did the clarity of what remained.



Chapter 25: Someone to Lean On

Claire had learned to keep her guard up at work.

After everything that had happened—with Naomi, with Evan, with the fallout from Crosswell—she wasn’t quick to trust people anymore. Especially not where smiles in meetings didn’t always match what was said behind closed doors.

Which is why Lena Maddox caught her off guard.

The first time Claire met Lena, she wasn’t sure what to make of her. Fresh out of grad school and full of polished confidence, Lena had stepped into the office of Reaching Together like she’d been working

there for years. She was sharp, assertive, and entirely unbothered by the subtle politics Claire had long since grown tired of navigating.

She'd transferred from a nonprofit in Chicago and had hit the ground running—sharp mind, quick wit, and a smile that didn't feel rehearsed. She asked questions. She offered help without sounding patronizing. And she actually listened.

She wasn't arrogant. She was thoughtful. Observant. And when Claire found herself in the middle of a professional mess, Lena didn't hesitate to have her back.

It started with the Jensen account.

Claire had been managing the client relationship for months, juggling unrealistic expectations, constant scope changes, and a particularly difficult liaison who seemed determined to find fault in everything she did. When one of his complaints landed with their supervisor—a complaint that twisted Claire's words and took her decisions out of context—she expected to be left hanging.

She hadn't anticipated Lena stepping in.

In the staff meeting, just as their supervisor began to voice concerns, Lena raised her hand.

"Sorry, but I need to say something," she said, voice clear and even.

Everyone turned.

"I sat in on the last call with Jensen," Lena continued. "Claire handled the shifting priorities with professionalism and patience. If there was confusion, it came from their side. Not hers."

Claire blinked, surprised by the firm support in Lena's voice.

Their supervisor hesitated, clearly recalibrating. "That's good to

know. Thank you, Lena.”

Afterward, Claire pulled Lena aside.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Claire said.

Lena shrugged. “Yeah, I did. It was the truth.”

Claire studied her for a moment. “You put yourself on the line.”

“So?” Lena smiled. “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do for each other?”

It was such a simple answer. But it hit Claire harder than she expected.

Later that afternoon, Lena appeared beside Claire’s desk with two cups of coffee.

“One of these is for you,” she said, handing over the one with a sticky note: strong & sweet—like you.

Claire laughed. “Are you trying to win me over?”

Lena raised an eyebrow. “Is it working?”

Claire took a sip. “Maybe.”

Claire found herself looking forward to Lena’s messages, her observations, her kindness that never came with strings. There was no competition between them. No agenda. Just genuine camaraderie.

One Friday evening, after everyone else had left, Lena peeked into Claire’s office.

“Want to grab Thai takeout? I could use something spicy after this week.”

Claire smiled. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

That weekend, they grabbed lunch together. It was supposed to be a quick bite, but turned into two hours of laughter, venting, and surprising vulnerability. Claire told Lena about Naomi. About Evan. About the illusion of loyalty.

Lena listened. Really listened. And when Claire finished, Lena said, “Sounds like you had a lot of people who saw what they could gain instead of what you needed.”

Claire nodded.

“Well,” Lena said, “that’s not how I operate.”

And Claire believed her.

Trust didn’t rebuild overnight. But it had to start somewhere. And maybe, just maybe, it had started with Lena.

Someone who didn’t see her as competition. Someone who didn’t want anything from her.

Someone who didn't have her own agenda.

Someone who simply stood by her.

She was starting to believe that not every chapter had to end in betrayal.



Chapter 26: More Than Enough

Claire wasn't expecting the call.

She was halfway through her to-do list at Reaching Together when her phone buzzed. Vivian Cross. The name still carried a quiet weight, though it didn't intimidate Claire the way it once had. She excused herself from the office, stepping outside into the crisp afternoon air before answering.

"Vivian," she said. "Hi."

"Claire," Vivian replied, her voice as composed as always. "I'd like to meet with you. In person, if you're available. I have a proposition I think you'll want to hear."

A few hours later, Claire sat across from Vivian in the same office she had once hoped to walk into full of hope—and instead had been left with nothing but disappointment and betrayal. This time, she was face-to-face with Vivian herself, and her expression held something promising.

"I won't waste your time," Vivian said. "There's a new role opening here. It's not the position you applied for months ago, but it's an emerging role we created after restructuring the youth initiative. And I think it has your name all over it."

Claire blinked. "You're offering me a job?"

"I'm offering you a job you've earned," Vivian said. "I've watched your work since the last Crosswell decision. I've read your latest proposal for community outreach expansion at Reaching Together. Your ideas are smart, grounded, and relevant. And they're your own."

Claire sat back in her chair. "Why now?"

Vivian didn't flinch. "Because now, you're not walking in with a whisper of favoritism behind you. No shadows. No shortcuts. Just merit."

The words landed like something sacred. For the first time in months, Claire felt herself breathe all the way in.

"Then yes," she said softly. "I'm interested."

Vivian smiled, just a little. "Good. We'll be lucky to have you."

Telling Lena was harder than Claire expected.

The two of them sat in their usual corner at the café downstairs—tea for Lena, coffee for Claire. The mood was bittersweet.

"So this is it?" Lena asked gently, stirring her drink. "You're leaving Reaching Together?"

Claire nodded. "I am. I wasn't looking, but... the opportunity is one I can't pass up. This time, I know I'm taking it for the right reasons. No shortcuts. No blurred lines."

Lena offered a sad smile. "I'm going to miss working with you, but it sounds amazing."

"I'll miss it too," Claire said honestly. "You've made this place feel like a safe space again."

Lena hesitated before adding, "You helped me, too, you know. More than you probably realize. Watching you stand up for yourself... trust again... that gave me permission to do the same."

Claire reached across the table and squeezed her friend's hand. "You're going to do great things here. And I'm not disappearing."

We still have lunch dates. And weekend thrift runs. And venting marathons.”

Lena grinned. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

On her last day at Reaching Together, Claire packed up her things with a peace she hadn’t expected. There were no lingering doubts. No fear she’d made the wrong choice. Just a quiet satisfaction.

She hadn’t won the original prize she chased.

She found something better.

Something she earned.

As she walked out of the office, Lena caught up to her and handed her a small potted succulent with a tag that read: “Root for yourself. Always.”

Claire laughed. “You’re so corny.”

“You love it,” Lena replied.

And she did.

She was stepping into something new—not to prove anything to anyone. Not to rewrite the past. But to walk fully into who she was becoming.

Not perfect.

But whole.

And finally, more than enough.



Chapter 27: The Last Word

Claire hadn't planned the meeting down to the minute. There was no dramatic script in her head, no list of points she had to make. She just knew it was time.

Time to see him.

Time to speak.

Time to stop waiting for the version of her father that no longer existed.

She called him on a cloudy Tuesday afternoon. The sky was the color of steel wool—gray, flat, unyielding.

"Hey, Dad," she said when he answered. "Can we talk?"

He hesitated. "Of course. My place?"

"No," she said. "Neutral ground. The park off Lincoln, by the walking trail."

He agreed without argument. She almost wished he hadn't—it would've been easier if he fought her. But John Whitmore never fought in the obvious ways. He won with charm, with calm tones and patient silences. She saw it now, for what it had always been. Funny how she never saw it before.

When she arrived, he was already there, sitting on a bench under a spindly tree whose leaves were beginning to turn. He stood when he saw her, arms open for a hug. She didn't move.

He dropped them.

“Hi, Sweetheart.”

Claire sat down, leaving a polite space between them. “Let’s just talk.”

He nodded, his face unreadable. “Alright.”

She looked out at the trail where a few joggers passed. “I spoke with Mom.”

His breath caught slightly—just enough.

“She told me everything,” Claire said. “About the affairs. About Hannah. About how you threatened to take me away from her if she told the truth.”

John looked down at his hands, folded neatly between his knees. He exhaled slightly, but didn’t argue. He didn’t deny. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer than she expected.

“I always knew this day would come.”

Claire didn’t look at him. “Why did you do it? Not just the cheating. The lying. The narrative you created about her walking away from us.”

“Because I was ashamed,” he said simply. “And because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing your admiration. You were the one thing I was proud of. The one thing I did right.”

Claire swallowed hard. “That’s not love, Dad. That’s selfishness. That’s control.”

“I know.”

His quiet admission hit harder than a denial ever could.

“I spent most of my life defending you,” she said. “Telling myself you were the hero, that Mom just gave up. And now I have to live with the fact that I was wrong. That I was blind.”

John finally turned to look at her. “You weren’t blind. You were a daughter who loved her father. That’s not something to be ashamed of.”

She met his gaze. “But you were a father who lied to his daughter. And that IS something to be ashamed of.”

Silence stretched between them. Not angry. Not cold. Just full.

“I’m not here to scream at you,” Claire said. “Or demand an apology. I’m not even here to forgive you. Not yet.”

John nodded slowly, accepting it.

“I’m here because I needed to say this out loud,” she continued. “To you. Not to a photo. Not to a memory. To the man who taught me how to ride a bike and how to lie to myself in the same lifetime.”

He looked like he wanted to speak, but waited.

“I don’t need your approval anymore,” Claire said, her voice steady. “I don’t need you to see me or believe in me or tell me you’re proud of me. Because I’ve learned how to be proud of myself.”

John’s eyes glistened. “I am proud of you.”

“I know,” she said. “But I don’t need it.”

She stood, brushing the wrinkles from her coat. He stood too, unsure whether to hug her or let her go.

She made the decision for him, extending her hand for a brief, firm shake.

“Goodbye, Dad.”

He looked down at their hands. “Will I see you again?”

“Maybe,” Claire said. “But I won’t be the same daughter who came here today.”

Then she walked away.

The wind picked up as she stepped back onto the trail, tugging at her coat, brushing hair across her face. But she didn’t pull it back.

She didn’t need everything to be neat anymore.

Some things could remain unsettled.

But that chapter with the father she used to know?

It was closed.



Chapter 28: New Beginnings

Claire hadn’t opened the box from the closet again since the day it spilled out at her feet, uninvited and unwelcome. She had shoved everything back inside, not caring about order, just wanting it out of sight. Out of mind. But now—after everything with her dad, after speaking the truth out loud—something inside her stirred.

It wasn’t about sentimentality. She didn’t want to hold on to his words, or their past. She wanted to make space. Mentally. Emotion-

ally. Physically. The box needed to go. But before she could toss it, she had to know exactly what was in it.

So she sat cross-legged on her bedroom floor, the late afternoon light streaming across the hardwood. The box sat open in front of her, the same way it had weeks ago. But this time, she was ready.

She pulled out the graduation photo. The college letter. The birthday cards. One by one, she examined them, not with nostalgia, but with clarity. She set aside what she wanted to keep—a few photos, a note from her grandmother—and tossed what she didn't.

And then, tucked between a crumpled play program and an old report card, she found something she hadn't seen the first time.

A letter addressed to her.

The handwriting wasn't her father's.

It was her mother's.

Claire froze, fingers trembling as she lifted it out. The paper was worn, the edges curled slightly, as if it had been hidden for years. There was no date. No explanation.

Only her name.

She unfolded it slowly.

Claire,

I don't know if you'll ever read this. I don't know if I'll be brave enough to give it to you. But I need to say what I couldn't say when I left.

I didn't walk away from you. I would never do that. I need you to know that I never wanted to leave you. I wanted to fight. I wanted to

tell you everything. But the cost was too high. And your father made sure the price would be my relationship with you.

So I left, thinking that if I couldn't be the mother you believed in, at least I wouldn't become the one you were forced to hate.

But I have loved you every day. And not from a distance—because love like that doesn't recognize distance. It lives in memory, in hope, in the quiet belief that one day, you'd come looking not just for me, but for the truth.

You are more than what you were told. More than what either of us lost. And I am so, so proud of the woman I know you've become.

If you ever find this, come find me too. My door will always be open.

With all the love I was never allowed to say out loud, Mom

Claire sat on the edge of the bed, the letter trembling in her hands. She read it again. And again. Each word peeled away another layer of the past she thought she knew.

She didn't cry. Not this time.

Instead, she folded the letter carefully, placed it back in its envelope, and reached for her phone.

Her mother answered on the third ring. "Claire?"

"I found your letter," Claire said softly.

There was a pause. Then a breath. "You did."

"I'd like to come over. If you're up for it."

"I am," Margaret said. "I always am."

When Claire arrived, Margaret opened the door before she even knocked. No hugs. No expectations. Just open space.

Claire stepped in. Her mother didn't ask questions. Didn't rush. Just led her to the living room where they sat quietly, the letter between them on the coffee table.

"I never saw it until today," Claire said. "It was buried."

"So much was," Margaret replied.

Claire looked around, taking in the small, tidy space that was starting to feel familiar. Safe.

"I'm not here to rehash the past," Claire said. "I just... I want to get to know the version of you I never let myself see."

Margaret looked at her daughter, eyes damp. "I never stopped wanting to be your mom. Even when I wasn't allowed to be."

Claire's voice broke. "I never stopped needing you."

They sat in silence, not to avoid the pain but to honor it. Two women, wounded by the same man in different ways, beginning—at last—to walk out of the wreckage together.

Claire reached for her mother's hand, and this time, she didn't let go.

"I'm not sure where we go from here," she said honestly.

Margaret squeezed her fingers. "Forward. That's the only place left to go."

Claire smiled faintly, the kind that doesn't force away the sorrow but welcomes the possibility of something more.

And as they sat together, sunlight breaking through the clouds and pooling at their feet, Claire realized something she hadn't before:

Some pedestals are meant to fall.

Because only then can the truth stand in their place.



Epilogue: Standing On Her Own

The sun was out in full, a soft golden blaze stretching over the park trails near Crosswell's downtown offices. A gentle breeze tugged at the edge of Claire's blazer as she walked, heels clicking softly against the paved path. The sound wasn't hurried. It wasn't uncertain. It was steady.

It had been a week since she started the new job.

A week of meeting faces who only knew her by the work she'd done, not the shadows she used to walk in.

A week of contributing ideas, asking questions, earning her place without apology.

She passed a mother pushing a stroller, a man tossing a frisbee to a golden retriever, a girl sketching in a notebook under a tree. Life, unremarkable and radiant. And she was in it—not performing, not chasing, just... being.

Her phone buzzed with a message—Lena checking in, of course. A smile tugged at her lips.

LENA: “How’s Day 5? Are they treating you like the goddess you are, or do I need to come throw coffee at someone?”

Claire laughed under her breath and typed a quick reply:

CLAIRE: “No coffee assaults necessary. They’re actually... amazing. I pitched an idea yesterday and the director wants to meet about it next week. Also, the breakroom has real snacks. Like, adult snacks. With labels and everything.”

Lena’s reply came back immediately:

LENA: “I hate you. But I also love you. Keep killing it. You’re exactly where you’re meant to be.”

Claire smiled, holding the phone a little longer before slipping it back into her pocket. It meant something—maybe everything—that Lena still checked in, that their friendship had not just survived the change, but grown with it.

Work had been busy, but in the best way. The team at Crosswell was sharp and curious, a blend of seasoned professionals and passionate up-and-comers. No one asked about her connections. No one referenced the drama that had once clouded her chances. They didn’t see her as someone who had been passed over.

They saw her as someone who had arrived.

Her first week had been full of surprises—coffee with the department head who asked for her input before a major grant proposal, a brainstorming session that left her feeling energized instead of drained, even a quiet moment with Vivian in the hallway where, for the first time, mutual respect passed between them without words.

It wasn’t just the role that fit—it was the timing. Claire knew now that if she had come to this job when she first wanted it, she wouldn’t

have been ready. She would have been chasing validation instead of stepping into purpose.

She liked this part of her day. The stillness. The sun. The space.

It gave her room to breathe.

To think.

To remember, without being owned by it.

Claire paused near a bench, not to sit, but to turn and look at where she'd come from. Not just the path, but the long, winding road that had led her here—through grief, disillusionment, and the sharp breaking of every image she once held sacred.

She'd carried the weight of so many people she had unintentionally put on pedestals. Her father. Her best friend. Evan. Even herself, in some ways. Trying to be perfect. Loyal to everyone even at her own expense. Always strong.

But now?

Now, she didn't need any of it.

She didn't need to rewrite the past or prove her worth to people who failed to see it. She didn't need anyone's approval to feel grounded. She didn't need every answer tied up or every pain resolved.

She just needed this.

The sun on her skin.

The wind at her back.

And the knowledge that she was finally, fully, standing on her own.

Claire turned forward again and kept walking—no weight on her shoulders, no ghosts at her heels.

The pedestal was behind her.

And she didn't need it anymore.



A Final Word from the Author

Thank you so much for taking this journey with Claire.

If her story resonated with you, I hope it reminded you that love and trust are still worth giving—but not blindly. The people we admire, the ones we let into our hearts, should be seen for who they truly are, not who we hope they'll be.

It's not weakness to believe in others. But there's strength in being discerning. In asking hard questions. In staying true to yourself even when others fall short.

And if you've ever watched a pedestal crack—whether in family, friendship, or love—know this: the breaking isn't the end. Sometimes it's where the rebuilding begins.

May you find the courage to love wisely, the clarity to trust where it's earned, and the confidence to stand—fully and freely—on your own two feet.

—Mary Carroll McKenzie Grant



