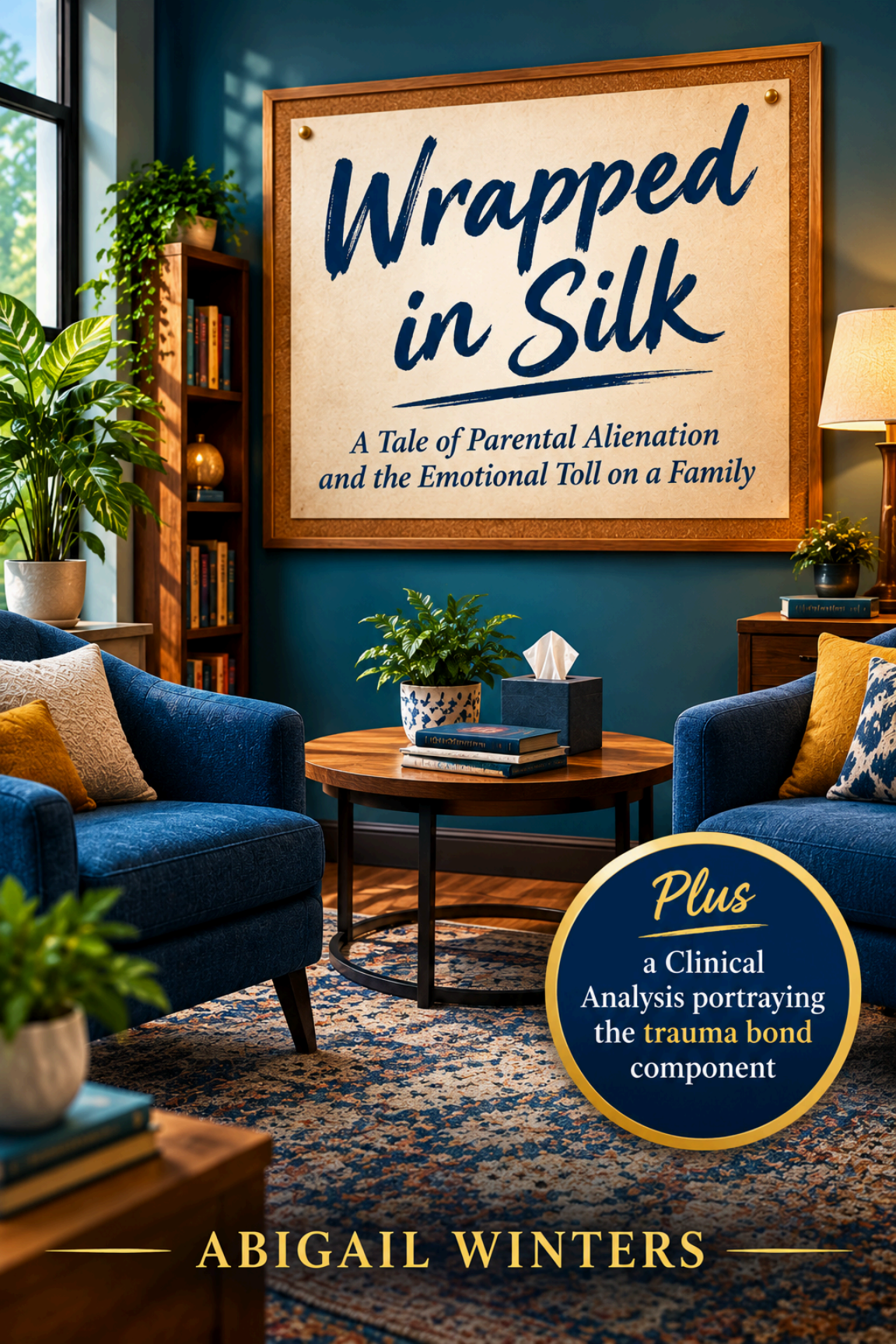

Wrapped in Silk
A Tale of Parental Alienation and the Emotional Toll on a Family
Plus
a Clinical Analysis portraying the trauma bond component
ABIGAIL WINTERS

Wrapped in Silk

A Tale of Parental Alienation
and the Emotional Toll on a Family

A Memoir

Abigail Winters

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This is a memoir. Names, ages, dates, places, and other identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people in it, and some events have been condensed or reordered. Conversations are reconstructed from memory.

BETA VERSION

Advance Review Copy - Not for Distribution

Dedication

For Rosalie, Noam, Dalia, and Daniel,

and for Penina and Tamar,

who still sit at my table.

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About This Book

A LETTER TO THERAPISTS AND CLERGY

To the therapists, counselors, clergy, and community leaders who read this book,

You are often the first people a family turns to when it begins to come apart, and the last people a parent like me is able to reach. I wrote this book with you in mind.

When an adult child pulls away from a parent, the natural assumption is that the parent did something to cause it. Often that assumption is right. But sometimes the break is shaped by a third person: a figure of standing and generosity at the center of the family, whose kindness is real and whose influence is invisible. When that happens, the parent who is losing her children looks exactly like the problem. She is anxious and tearful, and she cannot name a single concrete cause, because there is none she can point to. Every professional I sat with in those years saw my distress. Almost none of them asked where it came from.

This book is one family's account of how that happens, step by step, over thirty years. It shows how generosity can create obligation, how warmth that comes and goes can bind a person more tightly than kindness alone, how compliments given in private can return as diagnoses, and how a power figure can shape a family's story without ever saying an untrue word. Two readings at the end of the book name these patterns. "Understanding the Story" explains them, among them trauma bonding, triangulation, and influence by proxy, and offers questions that may help you recognize them. "A Professional Reading" traces them stage by stage, as they unfold across the book.

I am not asking you to take my side. I am asking you to hold one more possibility open when a parent sits in front of you and says, "I do not know what I did." Ask for a concrete example. Ask who else is in

the story. Notice who has never been asked to explain anything.

If this book helps even one family be heard before the door closes, it will have done what I hoped.

With gratitude and respect,

Abigail Winters

PROLOGUE

San Diego, November 2018

By the autumn of 2018, I had stopped being surprised by the telephone. It rang, and what came through it was a sentence I could not place. I would stand there with the receiver in my hand, replaying it, trying to match those words to any child I had raised.

"I wish I had better news, Abigail," a friend said gently. "The children feel you are looking for pity."

"Everyone knows you have a hard time handling pressure," my son told me, flatly, as though he were describing the weather. It was not the words that stayed with me but how little feeling was in them.

And in another conversation, a daughter informed me that my children were "afraid" of me. Of me, who had sat up with every one of their fevers. I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. If it were not so sad, it would have been comical. I was not, in any way, a forceful person.

Each time, I did what I have always done when a figure refuses to add up. I went looking for the error in myself. I reviewed the years. I reviewed the words I had said, the days I had been short-tempered, the nights I had spent at the warehouse instead of at home. I found a tired woman who had done her best, and no mistake large enough to explain any of it.

* * *

On Sundays I still made dinner as though the whole family were coming.

“Mom,” Penina said one evening that November, counting plates as she set them on the table. “There are ten.”

“Are there?”

“There are ten, and we are only four.”

“Habit,” I said.

It was not habit. I had set them out for the people I still hoped would walk through the door. Rosalie and Robert. Noam and Erica. Dalia. Daniel.

Tamar began quietly carrying the extra plates back to the cabinet, one stack at a time, the way you would lift something off a sleeping person’s lap. “It’s okay, Mommy,” she said. “We’ll just put them away.”

Michael was in the study with his papers and his blanket. The house hummed around us. I stood in the kitchen with a serving spoon in my hand and thought: I know exactly what a missing figure looks like on a page. I do not know what it looks like at a table.

* * *

Chanukah was three weeks away. For years, ours had been the house where the whole family gathered for it. Latkes crackled in two skillets, the grandchildren raced their dreidels across the kitchen floor, and a mountain of gifts waited under the stairs. Everyone counted on it. All of it was waiting for me to say yes. I had loved every noisy minute of it, and I could not say when the love had begun to feel like a test.

I tried to picture the evening. I saw the children and grandchildren arriving together in a happy rush, close to one another, the way people are close when they share a story: a single circle with me at the edge of it, holding a tray of latkes and smiling. I saw myself being watched. I saw myself being gentle with every word, and bracing for the next sentence I would not recognize. It would be years before I understood whose sentences they were.

I could not do it. Not one more evening of being the problem in my own living room.

So I wrote to them. I wrote it four times, because the first three had too many adjectives. The one I sent was four sentences long.

I love you. I will no longer host the yearly Chanukah gathering until one of you comes forward to talk with me. It is not a punishment. The door is open.

I read it three times before I sent it. I knew exactly how it would look. A mother who could not manage her own life, canceling the party that held the family together. I knew how the news would travel, and what it would be called, and that no one would ask what the canceling had cost me. It was the hardest decision I had made in years, and it was the one that would work most against me, and I made it anyway, because I could not bear another picture of being turned away by my own children.

But I did not go empty-handed. That weekend I wrapped every gift myself, and I wrote a card for each child and each grandchild in my own hand. If I could not give them the evening, I would not give them the silence of a mother with nothing to say.

That night I sat at the kitchen table with the ledger open in front of me, the way I had on a thousand nights before. The columns were in order. The household was in order. Everything balanced, except the one account that mattered.

I kept books for a living, and I do not believe in a loss without a line item. For years I looked for the entry that explained mine.

The only way I know to find a missing figure is to go back to where the books were last in balance. For me, that is a garage that smelled of motor oil, and a father whose hands never lied.

PART ONE

* * *

THE WELCOME

CHAPTER 1

* * *

HONEST HANDS

San Diego, 1969–1981

"Mommy, look at that door! It's shaped like an arch. And look at the porch. It's gigantic!"

We had driven up to Los Angeles for my mother's cousin's wedding, and my father had taken the long way, through Beverly Hills. I pressed my nose to the window.

"How come there's no hopscotch on the sidewalk? And where are all the kids?"

"Probably out with their nannies," my mother said.

"What's a nanny?"

"Someone who takes care of the children. She dresses them in the morning, gets them ready for school, and helps them with their homework."

I thought about that for a long block. "But where's the mother?"

My young mind could not take in the difference between those wide, silent streets and my own, with its small houses and fenced front yards, and cars and pickup trucks parked along the curb because nobody had a driveway long enough. That day I got a small education in how the wealthy lived, and I did not like it at all.

If you want to understand how a mother can find herself standing outside her own family looking in, you first have to understand the ground she was raised on. Mine was concrete, California sunshine, and the sharp, honest smell of motor oil.

I grew up on a simple tree-lined street in San Diego among Jewish families, some observant, others, like us, less so. People there said what they meant. There were no hidden agendas and no whispered campaigns. Our house was small, and every room was used. I knew the sound of my father's key in the door, the smell of my mother's cooking, and which stair creaked. I never wondered whether I was loved. It was like the floor: you did not think about it, you simply stood on it.

I was the youngest of three. Benjamin, the brother I was closest to, always made time for a conversation or a game of chess. Samuel was more serious, rarely lifting his head from his books. We all expected great things of him.

I was nine the summer Mrs. Katz from next door came up our driveway with my kickball in one hand and a squashed tomato in the other.

"Abigail," she said, holding both out like evidence. "This came over my fence in the middle of my tomatoes."

My father slid out from under a neighbor's Buick, wiping his hands on a rag. "How many tomatoes?"

"Four. The good ones."

"Then four it is." He turned his head toward me without getting up. "Abby, you'll pay Mrs. Katz for four tomatoes out of your allowance, and you'll tell her you're sorry like you mean it."

I said I was sorry. I meant it. The next afternoon my mother sent me across the lawn with a plate of cookies, and nobody ever mentioned the tomatoes again. No one shamed me, and no one raised a voice. I had made a mistake and put it right, and I was still theirs.

I grew up believing that disagreements were temporary. A wrong was named, paid for, and forgiven, and nobody went to bed carrying it. I took that belief into my marriage.

When a baby was born, the grandmothers came with pots of soup, and no one thought it remarkable. The summer the Levys' daughter had her first, I watched old Mrs. Bensoussan climb their steps with a pot nearly as big as she was.

"Don't thank me," she told the new father, who had opened the door with the stunned look of a man who had not slept in three days. "Somebody did this for me in 1948. You'll do it for somebody else."

Somebody's mother always kept somebody's freezer stocked, and on any afternoon half the toddlers on the street were being minded on a porch step by a grandparent. Family looked after family. Gifts of time and effort were never taken lightly, and they were always repaid. As a child I assumed every street worked this way, and that behind every door was a grandmother with a pot.

My parents belonged to the generation that crossed the ocean in the 1960s, when jobs were scarce in Jerusalem and America was the land of opportunity. I was born in Jerusalem, but I was too young to remember the trip. My mother loved telling the story, and my father loved correcting it. "We arrived with two suitcases and a toolbox," she would say.

"The toolbox was bigger than the suitcases," he would say.

"That is why we had only two suitcases."

He would laugh until he had to wipe his eyes with a forearm that left a streak of grease across his cheek. My father was a gifted mechanic, and he opened an auto repair shop. My mother stood beside him for forty years, running the front office. It was not clean work, but business was solid and we were happy. I never once felt that we lacked anything. Dinner was at the table, with the radio low and the day's work told in turn, and no one left until everyone was done.

As a little girl I envied my friends who were tall, blond, and blue-eyed. To me that looked like instant class. I, little Abby, had olive skin, jet-black hair, and eyes so dark they looked black.

"I wish I looked like Jenny Parker," I told the dresser mirror one evening, while I worked a brush through the knots in my hair and my mother folded towels in the nearby laundry room. "Everybody looks at Jenny."

"And what does Jenny look at?" my mother asked, shaking out a towel.

I thought about it. "Herself?"

“And you? What do you look at?”

“Everything. I knew Mrs. Levy was sad on Sunday before she said one word.”

“There,” my mother said, and smiled at me in the glass. “That is the beauty you have, Abby. Learn to see the good in yourself and you will feel beautiful. It may not be the beauty you pictured.” She held my eyes in the mirror. “Trust your mind. Trust what you notice. It has never once lied to you.” She said it plainly, the way she said everything, and for a moment I felt completely seen.

I looked at my reflection again. My hair was still dark, my eyes unchanged, but I felt a little more comfortable with what I saw. I carried my mother's words into adulthood: Trust your mind.

My father was broad-shouldered and boisterous, with grease in the lines of his hands that no soap could fully erase. My mother was sharp and practical. She kept every ledger, every invoice, and every customer in order from a small glass-walled office above the shop floor. As a girl I did my homework at the corner of her desk, under the hum of the compressors, and on some nights I fell asleep on the couch in that office to the sound of tools being put away.

Somewhere in that corner I also fell in love with words. When the homework was done I read whatever I could carry up the stairs from the library, two and three books a week, and when I ran out of other people’s sentences I began to write my own. By twelve I kept a spiral notebook of poems under my mattress, rhymed and earnest, about the sea and about my father’s hands. My mother found it once and put it back exactly where it had been. She never mentioned it. Years later I learned that she had read every page.

It was the kindest silence anyone has ever given me.

I remember sitting in that office one Tuesday afternoon when I was seventeen, an advanced algebra textbook balanced on my knees, my eyes on the garage below. The shop floor was loud with hissing compressors and clinking tools. My father was bent under the hood of a Chevy, wiping his brow with his forearm. Without a word from him,

my mother stepped out of the office, crossed the concrete, and set the exact socket wrench he needed directly in front of him. He lifted his head and smiled his thanks. She walked back inside to balance the register.

My father had not asked, and she had not announced. They simply knew each other's work. It was not a performance. There was no single "power" in our home, only respect.

That was the marriage I hoped to have someday: two people who faced life's difficulties together, without keeping score.

That evening, after the bay doors rolled shut, my mother sat across from me at the scratched metal desk and slid a thick envelope toward me. My father hovered in the doorway, hands wrapped in a rag, pretending not to hover.

"Well?" he said. "Did she tell you yet, or am I going to burst?"

"Let her open it," my mother said. "You'll frighten her."

It was my acceptance letter to study business administration. My father whooped, and the sound bounced around the empty garage. I remember my mother's hand flat on the envelope, and how she waited until I had read it twice before she let herself smile.

"You see, Abigail?" my mother said, tapping the paper once he had quieted. "Your father and I built this shop from nothing because people know our word is good. In business and in life, your character is your résumé. You are smart, you are capable, and you tell the truth. Never compromise that."

I promised her I wouldn't. I took her words to university, and I looked for a partner who lived by them: plainly, honestly, with hands not afraid of work. When I left home I felt I was carrying something with me, like a full tank for a long drive.

* * *

I met Michael Winters in my third year. He was a second-year medical student, tall and handsome, with a mild, unassuming gentleness that I found restful after the high-pressure circles of campus.

We met in the library, late, with swatches of Egyptian cotton spread across a table the size of a door while I worked out the landed cost of a container from Alexandria. A voice behind me said, "Forgive me. I'm supposed to be memorizing the brachial plexus, and I can't stop looking at your table. What is thread count?"

"The number of threads woven into a square inch." I held up a swatch. "Higher means finer. Feel it."

He studied it with the solemn attention of a man reading an X-ray. "And higher is better?"

"Not always. A cheap mill will cram in thin threads and call it four hundred. What matters is the length of the fiber. Long-staple cotton."

"So the number can lie."

"The number can lie," I said. "The fiber can't."

He pulled out a chair. "Tell me about import duties," he said, as though asking for a bedtime story. He stayed until the librarian flicked the lights, and he asked more questions than I could answer. Where other ambitious young men rushed to dominate a conversation, Michael listened. He listened as though every word mattered.

After a year of steady dating, he invited me to his parents' home for Sunday night dinner. I tried on my blue dress, then the green one with the white collar, and in the end I settled on a simple skirt with a matching jacket. All of them would have been fine if I had been calm enough to see it. By the time we reached their street my hands were cold.

"Relax, Abigail," he said as we stood outside their immaculately painted front door. "My mother is eager to meet you. She's going to love you."

Before we could ring, the mahogany door swung open.

"Michael!"

Eleanor Winters stood in the entryway under the amber light of a brass chandelier. Not one highlighted hair was out of place, and her silk blouse looked as if it had never known a crease. She filled the doorway. She greeted her son with a warm, proud look, and then her sharp eyes found mine. They took my measure in a fraction of a second, from my posture to my shoes. Then her face broke into a smile so radiant it felt like a spotlight turning on me.

"And you must be Abigail," she said, turning from her son with a gracious sweep of one cool, manicured hand. "Michael told me you were brilliant, but he didn't mention you were so lovely. Come in, darling."

Inside, the floors gleamed, and a staircase climbed the far wall lined with framed photographs: Michael in his graduation gown, Michael at a table piled with books, Michael at six with a missing front tooth, beside a scowling toddler on Eleanor's hip, with Michael's dark eyes. In every frame Eleanor stood at the center, her face full of pride.

"That's the tooth I lost to a fire hydrant," Michael murmured. "And that's my sister Andrea, who will swear she was never scowling."

"That is the tooth," said Eleanor, "that cost me a very good dentist. Come, come. Leon, they're here."

Dinner was a study in poise. The table was set with heavy sterling and crystal stemware. The talk turned to who was coming for the Sabbath and the dishes Eleanor was planning in its honor. I had heard that the Sabbath brought a special glow to a home, and I saw it now in the way she spoke. I wanted to belong to it.

Michael's father, Leon, sat at the head. He was a distinguished man who smiled kindly and asked polite questions but otherwise deferred to his wife.

"The traffic this week," he began, "you wouldn't believe—"

"Leon, darling," Eleanor said, without looking up from her plate, "Abigail did not come to hear about traffic."

He glanced down the table, and reached for his water glass instead.

“Michael tells me you are preparing to launch a textiles company, Abigail,” Eleanor said, cutting her chicken with delicate precision. “Importing high-thread-count fabrics.”

“That is the plan,” I said, meeting her gaze. “My parents run an auto shop, so I grew up watching how a business really runs. I want to bring the same discipline to importing directly from the mills.”

She set her silverware against the rim of her plate and gave me her whole attention.

“Logistics and imports. That takes a particular temperament. At Macy’s I oversee hundreds of staff and millions of dollars in inventory. Most people think management is about giving orders. It isn’t. It is about anticipating breakdowns before they happen.”

“Exactly,” I said, leaning forward. “It’s about building enough margin into the supply chain that when a delay hits, your clients never feel it.”

Eleanor laughed, a rich, melodic sound that dissolved the formality of the room. She raised her crystal goblet in a spontaneous toast. It rang one clear, small note, and every head at the table turned toward her.

“Listen to her, Leon. A woman after my own heart. Last autumn a shipment of holiday crystal was late, and my assistant nearly burst into tears. I told her, ‘Darling, panic is an indulgence for amateurs. We don’t wring our hands; we reroute the trucks.’ We had the displays dressed two hours before the doors opened.” She turned her gaze back to me. “You have that same fire, Abigail. A woman who knows how to steer the ship when the water turns choppy. It is an exceedingly rare quality.”

A warmth spread through my chest, and I noticed I was sitting taller. I had grown up among people who showed respect by handing you the right wrench. I had rarely heard it said aloud, and never over crystal. She was not treating me like a girl courting her son. She was speaking to me as a peer.

I turned to share the moment with Michael, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was staring at a spot on the linen tablecloth, his fork loose in his fingers, his eyes glazed. It was a vacant, faraway look I had noticed a

few times when we studied late, a fleeting shadow. Under the bright chandelier it was jarring.

"Michael?" I murmured, tapping his spoon lightly. He blinked, shook his head, and gave me a faint, delayed smile.

"Sorry. Long week at the clinic."

When dinner ended, Eleanor rose. "Abigail, darling, leave the dishes. Come have coffee with me in the kitchen."

The kitchen smelled of roasted beans and lemon wax. Everything on the counters sat at right angles. She poured coffee into two porcelain cups and leaned beside me against the counter, drawing me into her confidence.

"I wanted a quiet moment with you," she said. "Michael has brought girls home before, but I have never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. He is gentle, and he needs someone grounded. Someone with a backbone. After tonight I see why he chose you."

"He's wonderful," I said, warming my hands on the cup. Then, because I came from a home where we said things directly, I asked, "Though, if you don't mind my asking... is he feeling all right? Sometimes he gets this look, as if he's miles away."

The spoon in her cup clinked once and stopped. She turned to face me, and the bright hostess settled into the serious warmth of a protective mother.

"Darling," she said, with smooth, unshakeable confidence. "Michael is in the middle of grueling clinical training. He runs on four hours of sleep. If he drifts off at dinner, it is because his mind is running through a thousand diagnostic scenarios. You are an analytical woman, Abigail. You mustn't let your protective instincts mistake exhaustion for something more."

Her explanation was so rational, so maternal, that my worry dissolved. I nodded, a little ashamed of overthinking.

Then she opened a drawer, took out a small velvet box, and set it on the counter in front of me.

“Eleanor, what is this?”

“Open it.”

Inside, on black velvet, lay a slender silver bracelet, beautifully made. “It’s stunning,” I said, genuinely startled. “You shouldn’t have. It’s our first meeting.”

“I wanted to,” she said, in a tone that left no room for argument. “It is not easy for a woman to build a business from the ground up. I know that road. You are going to face headwinds, and you will need strong people around you. Consider this a welcome to our circle. Women like us, women who build things, have to stick together.”

I looked into her steady, warm eyes and felt moved. She fastened the clasp around my wrist herself, and kissed my cheek.

The bracelet caught the kitchen light as I turned my wrist. I had come to dinner hoping Michael’s mother would like me. I was leaving with something that felt almost like a promise. It closed with a small, neat click, and I heard it as welcome.

CHAPTER 2

* * *

ALREADY SETTLED

San Diego, 1982–1984

Michael and I married the following year, in a hall that smelled of roses and floor polish. My father had rented a suit and spent the morning tugging at the collar. My mother straightened my veil three times and, on the third, held my face for a moment without saying anything.

"You look like someone who knows what she is doing," she said finally.

"I don't," I whispered.

"That is what everyone looks like," she said, and kissed my forehead.

Eleanor had seen to the flowers, and the flowers were extraordinary: white roses banked along every wall, so many that guests stopped in the doorway just to look. When the ceremony ended and Michael had stepped on the glass, she was at my side before the applause faded, her hands light on my shoulders. "Now you are ours," she said, smiling at the guests as much as at me. I laughed and hugged her. Over her shoulder I saw my mother watching us, her hands folded, still smiling. I did not hear anything in it but welcome.

The first year was busy and bright. With a clear plan and a work ethic inherited from my parents' garage, I launched the company. We imported fine cotton directly from overseas mills, then cut and sewed it into linens in our own small warehouse. I loved the feel of it: the hum of industrial sewing machines, the clean scent of Egyptian cotton, the quiet satisfaction of turning raw bolts into finished goods. I managed a small team, negotiated distribution terms, and kept the books the way my mother had taught me.

Some evenings, after everyone had gone, I lingered among the cutting tables, running a hand along the stacks of finished linens. Every stack was a customer who had trusted us.

I looked forward to showing my parents what I had built. My mother would recognize her lessons in the books I kept, and my father, who had made something with his own hands, would understand my pride.

Michael and I ate dinner standing at the kitchen counter more often than not, laughing about our days, and I remember thinking that no one had ever told me marriage could feel this light.

At the warehouse I made linens; at home I made wedding showers for friends, and poems at the kitchen table after Michael had gone to sleep. He read each poem over his glasses and solemnly declared it his favorite.

Whatever I was making, I felt most myself with something in my hands and a deadline I had chosen.

Michael could tell I'd landed a new customer before I finished my first sentence, and I could tell when a hard day at the clinic had followed him home. Even the ordinary troubles seemed smaller once we'd shared them. I assumed every marriage worked that way.

When I felt unsure in those years, I heard my mother's voice: Trust your mind. Trust what you notice.

Michael came to the warehouse one Saturday in his good shirt and walked the aisles like a man in a museum.

"It smells like clean laundry and ambition," he announced.

"It's Egyptian cotton," I said. "Say it with respect."

"Egyptian cotton." He bowed to a bolt. Two of the cutters at the far table grinned into their sleeves. "Are you happy, Abigail?"

"I'm building something," I said. "That's better than happy."

"I'll take it," he said, and made me a small, formal bow in front of the whole floor. Someone whistled.

Then came Rosalie.

I had always heard about the miracle of maternal love, but I was not prepared for how it felt, as if the whole noisy world dropped to a hush to make room for the rise and fall of her small chest. I will never forget the day she turned four weeks old. I leaned over the bassinet, and she met my gaze with deliberate focus, and then she gave me a radiant, intentional smile. I stood very still, afraid that if I moved it would end.

"Michael," I whispered. "Come here. Quick. She's smiling at me."

He appeared in the doorway with a stethoscope still around his neck. "That's gas, Abigail. I'm a doctor. I can tell you officially."

"Look at her. She knows me."

He looked. The skepticism went out of his face. "Hello, Rosalie," he said softly. "I'm your father. I'm the one with the funny coat."

In that single instant I had a friend, and she was my daughter.

I wanted to hold her every waking hour, but the business needed steady hands. A sweet woman from the neighborhood, whose own children were already grown, watched Rosalie during the day while I looked for something more permanent. I would leave for the warehouse with my heart still in the nursery, and I carried a small, constant ache that I told no one about. Between shipping manifests and baby bottles, I was never off duty.

That was when Eleanor stepped firmly into our lives.

It was a Tuesday afternoon. I was at the dining room table with quarterly tax papers spread around me while Rosalie slept nearby. The doorbell rang, and Eleanor came in, dressed in a navy suit and carrying a foil-covered casserole.

"I brought dinner, darling," she said, setting it on the counter and turning her sharp eyes on the stacks of invoices. "You have enough on your plate. You shouldn't have to worry about the kitchen."

"Eleanor, thank goodness. That is very thoughtful," I said. "We're interviewing nanny agencies. It's an investment, but with the warehouse expanding I need dependable help."

She gave me that brilliant smile, the one that made you feel all the light in the room had settled on you.

I knew that feeling. I had known it as a girl in front of the mirror with my mother, and I did not stop to ask whether it was the same thing.

"Nonsense. I have already spoken with regional management at Macy's. I am adjusting my floor hours. I will come here and care for Rosalie while you are at the warehouse. It is already settled."

"Eleanor, your career. I couldn't possibly ask that of you."

She put down her handbag, walked to the bassinet, and gathered Rosalie into her arms. She smiled down at the baby with a look of pure delight.

"Look at this perfection, Abigail," she whispered, her voice husky with feeling. "A stranger from an agency watches the clock until her shift ends. A grandmother watches the soul. You aren't asking. I am offering. We are a family, and family protects its investments. Let me handle the home front while you focus on the bottom line. We are a team."

"Then at least let me pay you what I would pay the agency."

"You will do no such thing." She said it lightly, rocking the baby, but she did not look up. "Insult a grandmother with a salary? Darling. Where I come from, one does not send a bill to family."

Why hire a stranger when a loving grandmother was volunteering? I had dreaded the agencies. Every interview had brought back a quiet street in Beverly Hills, and my own small voice asking, But where's the mother? My own mother would have done the same as Eleanor, but she could not leave the shop. I thanked Eleanor warmly and meant every word. The relief was like setting down a bag I had carried so long I had forgotten its weight.

For the first time in weeks, I drove to the warehouse without worrying about who was holding my baby. I remember turning up the radio and singing along.

Within a month the house had rearranged itself around her afternoons: her teacup in our cupboard, her coat on the hook by the door, her chair turned a little toward the window where the light was best.

"Where is my blue mug?" I asked one morning, rummaging in the cabinet. "The chipped one."

"I put it away." Eleanor did not turn from the sink. "A woman who runs a company should not drink from a chipped mug. I set out the good cups for you."

"It's my favorite."

"Then I shall find you a new favorite. Sit, sit, you'll be late."

I laughed, and sat, and drank from a cup so delicate I was afraid to hold it. It was a small thing. But I missed the chipped mug all day.

* * *

Our arrangement settled into a daily ritual. I would come home from the warehouse around four to find the house peaceful, the laundry folded, and Rosalie playing. Eleanor would set the kettle on and pour coffee into delicate porcelain cups. For the first half hour she wrapped me in praise.

"I looked over your distribution files on the credenza," she said one afternoon, sliding a saucer across the granite. "Your grasp of inventory turn-rates is remarkable. Most women would crumble under that volume of freight. You handle it with such precision."

"You went through my files?"

"I tidied them," she said, with a small wave of her hand. "And I couldn't help seeing. Don't scold me. I am an old retailer. Numbers are my weakness."

In our community, Eleanor was an institution. She chaired hospital charity galas, spoke at private-school fundraisers, and directed an organization that provided clothing to families in need.

One afternoon I stepped out to collect the mail and found Ruth Adler, from our synagogue, standing on our front walk with Eleanor, who was listening with her head tilted.

"Eleanor, I don't know what I would have done this winter without you," Ruth said. Her eyes were wet. "Sammy is eating again. The doctor says it's the best news he's had all year."

"It was nothing, Ruth," Eleanor said, with a warm, steady look. "Call me Thursday and tell me what the doctor says. And bring the little one by. I have a coat in his size."

I remember thinking, This is what a good person looks like.

"We had our clothing drive yesterday," Eleanor told me over the cups, when Ruth had gone. "A young mother came in holding her little boy's hand, mortified to be standing in a charity line. I didn't hand her a pre-packed box. I walked her through the racks myself, pulled down a lovely wool coat, and told her, 'Every woman meets a winter she didn't budget for, darling. Taking a warm coat for your boy isn't charity. It's wisdom.' She wept right there in aisle three and walked out with her chin up."

"What did you say to her after that?"

"Nothing. One doesn't. Dignity, Abigail." She lifted her cup. "You can give someone bread, but if you take away their self-respect doing it, you have done harm."

I repeated her words to Michael that evening. They sounded just like something my parents would have said.

Once she had built me up, the talk would turn to her own world.

"Please keep this between us," she would say, lowering her voice though only Rosalie was in the room, stacking blocks. "Leon's brother is having a business difficulty, and the board has no idea. And Andrea, Michael's sister, is quarreling with her father over the hall for her wedding. Not a word."

"Of course not," I said.

“I know. That is why I tell you.” She gave me a confiding smile. “I know you are not a gossip.”

It felt like being handed a key.

That Friday at the Winters’ table, the quarrel I had promised not to mention came out into the open anyway. Andrea was passing the salad and talking about her wedding. She had her heart set on the grand ballroom downtown, the largest and most elegant in the city.

“It’s a beautiful room, Andrea,” Leon said gently. “But we aren’t expecting nearly that many people. In a hall that size, our guests will feel lost. Perhaps something a little smaller, where everyone can be close.”

“Papa, it’s my wedding.”

“Of course it is. I only thought—”

“Leon, darling.” Eleanor did not raise her voice. “We will talk about it later.”

Andrea’s mouth tightened into the scowl she would swear in later years she had never worn. Leon looked down at his plate and cut a potato that did not need cutting. Eleanor leaned toward me, her hand light on my wrist, and spoke so quietly that only I could hear.

“Don’t take Leon so seriously. He has absolutely no understanding of what his daughter needs.” She smiled and patted my hand. “But no worries. I’ll handle it.”

I smiled back. It was a comfort to be let in on it.

Soon I was confiding in Eleanor as freely as she confided in me—about the business, my worries, and the nights I lay awake doing sums.

Until then, I had shared those worries with Susie, my college roommate, who lived three thousand miles away. But our Sunday telephone calls gradually grew shorter and less frequent. Eleanor was nearby, and she was always there.

“You must be terrified,” she said, when I told her we were losing an old customer, the one whose payments covered our rent. Her eyes were warm and soft.

"Only at three in the morning."

"Then telephone me at three in the morning."

I laughed, but her offer stayed with me. I had never expected to find that kind of friendship in my mother-in-law.

* * *

For a long time Eleanor arrived each day impeccably groomed, her handbag matching her shoes, her makeup so natural it looked like good health. I sometimes wondered whether she ever had an off day.

The answer came one stormy morning that winter, when Rosalie was a few months old. It had rained since before dawn. I stood at the front window with Rosalie on my hip and my car keys in my hand, watching the street run like a creek, when I saw Eleanor making her way up the walk, fighting an umbrella the wind had all but dismantled. Two of its ribs stuck out like broken fingers. Her hair hung in wet strands, and a few had tangled in the spokes.

I had the door open before she could knock.

"Where's your car?" I asked.

"Oh, don't ask. It got stuck in the mud a few houses down, so I thought it best to make a run for it." She was laughing, a little out of breath, rain running off her chin. "I suppose some days treat us better than others."

I had never seen her anything but finished. Her coat was soaked through to the lining. Her handbag, which she had held pressed under one arm the whole way, was perfectly dry, and I remember being impressed that she had thought to save it. I carried Rosalie to the nursery, came back with every towel I owned, and sat Eleanor at the kitchen table, where she wrapped one around her own shoulders while I put a cup of tea in front of her. In all those months it was the first time I had been the one to pour. It felt strangely good to take care of her.

She caught sight of herself in the hall mirror. For an instant her face went perfectly still, the way it had in that brass-lit doorway the night we met, as though she were taking inventory. Then the stillness broke into a grin.

"Do I dare look?" she asked, and we both burst out laughing, like two schoolgirls in a hallway.

"I'll tell you a secret, Abigail," she said, when she had stopped laughing. "Leon says I should never be allowed near an umbrella. If the committee ever hears that Eleanor Winters arrived at her granddaughter's door looking like a drowned cat, I shall never recover." She wrapped both hands around the cup. "So this stays between us. Now, you. You looked as though you had been up for hours before I came. What keeps you awake, darling?"

Nobody had asked me that. I had not told Michael, and I had barely told myself. But she had just handed me a secret of her own, and I took it as a sign that she trusted me.

"Every morning, when I put Rosalie in your arms and drive to the warehouse, I feel as though I am stealing hours from my own child," I said. "For a spreadsheet."

She leaned across the table, her gaze steady and kind. "Every woman who builds something pays that toll, darling," she said gently. "You pay it with grace. Never be ashamed of it." She gave a slow, approving nod. "Our secrets."

I drove to the warehouse an hour late and did not mind. I felt closer to her than I ever had.

Years later, I would ask myself whether that morning had been genuine, or whether it, too, had been meant to earn my trust. I have never been able to decide.

CHAPTER 3

* * *

A DIFFICULT AFTERNOON

San Diego, autumn 1985

The first hairline crack appeared on a crisp Thursday afternoon. Rosalie was nearly two.

For six months I had been pitching our high-thread-count linens to a regional department store chain, and we needed that account. That morning, after weeks of difficult negotiation, the buyer finally signed the distribution agreement. I drove home with the contract on the passenger seat and the radio turned up, rehearsing the news. I could hardly wait to tell Michael, and most of all Eleanor. I wanted to see her face. Part of the pleasure of that signature was knowing she would be proud of me.

I unlocked the front door and stepped into the entryway with a wide smile.

"Eleanor! You won't believe it. The regional contract went through!"

She was in the front hall, hanging Rosalie's little wool coat in the closet. She did not turn around. She did not speak.

"Eleanor?" My smile faltered. "Did you hear me? We got the account."

Perhaps Eleanor had something on her mind. I waited, certain that in another moment she would face me, clap her hands, and tell me how proud she was.

Slowly she turned around. The warmth that was always in her face was gone. Her eyes met mine and went straight through me, as if I were made of glass. There was no pleasure in them, no curiosity, not even the politeness she would have shown a stranger. Without a word she

reached past me, took her leather handbag from the entryway table, smoothed her blazer, and let herself out. The latch clicked behind her.

I stood alone in the hall, the contract still in my hand. "Eleanor?" I said again, to the door. Turning back toward the living room, I caught sight of myself in the hallway mirror, a woman looking faintly puzzled, with a contract in her hand and no one to show it to.

From the living room came the clatter of Rosalie's blocks. "Mama! Mama, look!" I went in and looked at a tower of blocks, and said it was the tallest tower in the world, and my voice came out far steadier than I felt.

I went over the week as I would go over a supplier's account. A missed invoice? A breach of manners? We had shared our usual afternoon coffee the day before. I had thanked her for the babysitting, as I always did. The house was tidy. Nothing had been said. Nothing had been broken.

When Michael came home from the clinic that evening, loosening his tie, I brought it up as I set a plate of roasted chicken in front of him.

"Did something happen with your mother today? When I came home with the news about the contract, she looked right through me and walked out without a word."

He barely looked up from the paper he was reading. He gave a mild shrug.

"You know my mother, Abigail. She has very particular standards, and she carries a lot with Macy's and the hospital boards. She probably just had a difficult afternoon. Don't read into it."

"I'm not reading into it. I'm reporting it."

"Then report that the account went through." He grinned up at me. "Congratulations, by the way. I'm very proud. My wife, the regional distributor."

"Michael."

"Eat your chicken before it gets cold," he said, and that closed the subject.

He meant to comfort me, and his pride was real. But I had not come for a compliment. Something had happened that I could not explain, and I wished he would put down the paper, look at me, and say, "Tell me exactly what happened." Even without an answer, I would have felt less alone with the question.

How could a woman so gracious in public be so cold to her son's wife in private? I could think of no reason Eleanor would wish me anything but well. Perhaps she had simply had a difficult day.

I resolved to speak to her directly the next afternoon, calmly, to ask if there was something unspoken between us so we could clear the air like adults.

Before bed, I opened the ledger book I kept by the kitchen phone and wrote beneath the day's shipments: Thurs. E. left without a word. Cause: none found.

The entry looked strange among the invoices. I could not make it balance.

I had written it in pencil. Perhaps some part of me hoped I could rub it out by morning.

The next morning at nine, the kitchen phone rang. I let it ring twice, drying my hands on a dishtowel.

"Abigail, darling!"

Eleanor's voice came through the receiver bright and warm. The chill of the day before had vanished without a trace. She sounded almost giddy.

"Eleanor, about yesterday—"

"I was at the European boutique on Fifth this morning and I found the most exquisite embroidered smock dress for Rosalie. Tiny pink rosebuds along the collar. I'm bringing it by this afternoon. I simply cannot wait to see her in it!"

"Eleanor, I wanted to ask—"

"You will adore it. Pink on her skin, with those eyes? Darling, I must run, I have the florist on the other line. Kisses to my girl."

The line clicked. I stood with the receiver in my hand, listening to the dial tone, as though it might still offer an explanation.

There was no mention of the silent exit. No word about the contract. It was as though yesterday had never happened.

Relief came first. Whatever had troubled Eleanor yesterday seemed to have passed. She had just bought Rosalie a beautiful dress, and she continued giving her afternoons so my business could grow. How could I confront her over what might have been one bad day?

That afternoon she brought the smock dress. She knelt on the living room rug and buttoned Rosalie into it herself, one rosebud at a time.

"Isn't she a dream?" she said, not looking up.

"She's a dream," I agreed. I opened my mouth to ask about Thursday, and found that the room was too sunny, and Rosalie was too happy, and the question had gone somewhere I could not reach.

"Stay for coffee," I said instead, matching her warmth.

That night, as I dried the dishes, I promised myself I would ask Eleanor about it if it happened again.

Rosalie wore the smock dress for a week.

My mother called that Sunday, as she did twice a week, and I told her about the contract, and about the dress. I did not tell her about that Thursday. It did not seem like something to carry across a telephone line.

"A smock dress with rosebuds," my mother said. "Did you thank her?"

"Of course I thanked her, Ma. She is so generous. She is always bringing something."

"That is a fine thing to be. Is it ever your turn?"

"My turn?"

"Where we come from, when somebody gives you something, you give something back, and then you are even and everyone can breathe." I could hear the kettle behind her.

"Ma, she is my mother-in-law. She is not a bank."

“I didn’t say she was a bank. I said keep your own books, honey.”

Her words stung. Had I missed something obvious?

“What did she say? What did she say?” came my father’s voice from somewhere behind her.

“She says the woman is generous,” my mother called back.

“Generous is a fine thing,” said my father, and that was the end of the discussion.

I laughed and let the matter rest. I had been raised to give people the benefit of the doubt, and Eleanor had given me little reason to do otherwise.

Three weeks later a second department store signed on. I told Michael over the sink that night, and he whooped so loudly that the baby monitor crackled. The next morning, while the kettle warmed, I practiced in front of the toaster.

“A small account, Eleanor,” I murmured. “Nothing special.”

“Small!” she said, when I told her, and laughed. “Darling, small accounts are how the big ones start. You are so modest.” I smiled, relieved that the old Eleanor, the one I had first known, might be back.

I went on thanking Eleanor for her devotion to my children. I learned which topics were safe at our afternoon coffee and which were not. I called it ordinary tact between a woman and her mother-in-law. Life was full and good, and I saw no reason to go looking for trouble. It was easier than being surprised again.

Every woman I knew had a mother-in-law story, and I collected them at lunch the way other women collected recipes. One friend's mother-in-law rearranged her kitchen cabinets; another's deliberately sent birthday cards late. We laughed over these small grievances, and I came home reassured that Eleanor, with her gifts and occasional chill, was simply another mother-in-law with her peculiar ways.

CHAPTER 4

* * *

THE GOLDEN YEARS

San Diego, 1986–1992

The years that followed were good. We would come to call them our golden years. I did not yet know to look at gold the way my father looked at metal, for the hairline cracks.

In those years Eleanor's attention turned to her daughters, Michael's sisters Andrea and Debby. They married three years apart, and each soon had children of her own. Eleanor threw herself into being a grandmother with the same energy she brought to everything, and the afternoons that had once been ours were often spoken for.

We still saw her on Fridays and holidays, but how often was hers to decide. I missed our afternoon coffees more than I expected to, and I did not say so.

Rosalie was just past two when she showed me how her mind worked. We had been on a long walk, and as we turned for home I told her it was only two more blocks. A little later she looked up at me.

"No, Mommy. It was three more blocks."

She had been counting the whole way. I felt a small thrill of pride. This child sees everything, I thought.

She listened, observed, and came back with questions that caught me unprepared. I never wanted her to accept an opinion simply because someone else said it. I wanted her to think for herself.

Noam arrived not long after, and the house grew louder. Rosalie adored him from the first and kept watch over him.

Eleanor, still looking after Rosalie in the afternoons, held her new grandson for a long while, as delighted as any grandmother could be, and another pair of hands was welcome while I recuperated.

In the months that followed, I tried not to ask Eleanor for more than she was already offering. She came by almost every day. With two small children underfoot, I was more tired than I had ever been, and some afternoons I stood at the sink with my hands in the dishwater, unable to remember what I had come into the kitchen to do.

She was generous with praise. "You carry your responsibilities like a duchess, darling," she murmured one afternoon, watching me fold laundry with a baby on my hip. Another day, at the sink, with her hand on my arm: "I don't know how you hold it together. I would have gone to pieces." And once, when I had teared up over a sentimental advertisement: "You feel everything so deeply, Abigail. It is your gift." I glowed. There was never anyone else in the room, and it never struck me as odd. I thought that was what it felt like to be seen by someone older and wiser than I was.

I wanted her to feel as fortunate to have me as I felt to have her.

One of those afternoons, after a few hard nights, I asked her to stay a little longer so I could rest. She smiled warmly and gave me her usual answer: "Okay, darling."

I was so grateful. I went to lie down, and as I sank into the mattress, I felt how tightly I had been wound for so long. Thread by thread, it began to loosen.

I woke with a start. Three hours had passed. I had meant to sleep for twenty minutes, just enough to get me through the rest of the day, and now I had left Eleanor alone with both children all that time. I came out of the bedroom mortified. My hair was flat on one side and my cheek was creased from the pillow, and Eleanor was sitting on the living room floor with both children, calm as ever.

It was already late, and Rosalie needed her ear infection medication. By the time I fed the children and got them out the door, the pharmacy would be closed. I mentioned it to Eleanor, apologizing as I spoke, and

she went for it herself. When she came back, she looked at me with a knowing expression, the look of a woman who could always be counted on, and who wanted me to remember how lucky I was to have her.

I was grateful, but something in that look unsettled me. My gratitude felt like a coat a little too heavy for the weather. I resolved not to depend on her like that again.

About three months later I was back at work, and Eleanor was watching the children in the afternoons. One day she asked if I could lend her three hundred dollars. She had some shopping to do on her way home, she explained, and she had left her wallet at home. She promised to return it the next day.

I handed it over gladly. She gave me a smile in return, a sweet "that's a girl" smile, a little sweeter than it needed to be. I noticed it, but I did not dwell on it. She was the older woman and I was the younger, and it seemed natural that she would be the one to guide me.

The next day she gave me the three hundred dollars, exactly as promised, with a warm thank-you.

I put the money away and thought no more about it. After the awkwardness of oversleeping, it was nice to do something for her, too, and my resolution not to depend on her went quietly out of my mind.

It was a loud house, and I loved it. In the evenings I turned up the radio and we danced in the kitchen in our socks, Rosalie standing on my feet and Noam bouncing on his father's arm.

Sometimes Michael caught my eye over the children's heads, and we laughed at the sheer racket of it. I was often tired, but even the exhaustion belonged to a life I loved.

At my first PTA evening, when Rosalie was in first grade, her teacher, Mrs. Adams, told me something I have never forgotten. "I don't think you know how bright your daughter is," she said. "She stands far above her classmates, and she's always polite and eager to take part." I could not wait to get home and tell Michael every word.

When I shared the news with Eleanor, she perked up.

"Of course," she said. "A Winters child, just like Michael."

She beamed with pride. I had hoped for a word of acknowledgment myself, but I let the disappointment pass. What harm was there in a grandmother taking pride in her granddaughter?

After we married, Friday nights became Shabbat, and the glow I had once only heard about at the Winters' table became the center of our week. We alternated between my parents' table and the Winters', and the two could not have been more different. My parents' table was quiet: a little small talk, and my father leading the songs while Michael and the children joined in, and he looked around at us with pride. My parents had never been strictly observant, but whenever we came the Sabbath was kept fully at their table, and my father said it was an honor to have us.

The Winters' table was louder. Guests came and went, and community talk filled the room. That autumn it was all about the synagogue elections.

"So who has your vote?" a guest asked, passing the challah. "For president."

"Both men have real qualities," Eleanor said, with the air of a judge about to rule. "Dr. Schiff is wise and experienced. He has sat on every committee. Mr. Alon is warm. He remembers the name of every child."

"Warmth is lovely," Leon offered, from the head of the table.

"Warmth is lovely, darling," Eleanor agreed. "But experience keeps the roof on. I find that Dr. Schiff has a few more qualities." She raised her glass, and heads nodded all around the table, as though the matter had just been settled by someone more qualified than any of them.

Leon sat mostly silent, but he had a loving smile for each of his children and children-in-law. When he looked at us we could feel his admiration for who we were. To connect with the little ones he would tease them with riddles. "What has hands, but cannot clap?" he would ask Rosalie, who was eight, with great solemnity.

"A clock!" Noam shouted from under the table, where he was not supposed to be. "You can ask me too, Grandpa. I'm not little. I'm in kindergarten. I can tie my own shoes and write my own name!"

"A scholar," said Leon gravely. "Forgive me."

I can still hear their giggles. Michael, too, played his part when the conversation got underway. He could mimic anyone: a cashier, a colleague, a heated argument in the synagogue. "'Paper or plastic,'" he would drone, in the exact flat voice of the girl at the supermarket, "'or would you like to carry it all home in your arms like a gentleman?'" The table would fall apart laughing.

One afternoon at the Winters' house I sat on the sofa beside Leon. Eleanor was on the telephone in the hall and then in the kitchen, her voice rising and falling as she moved between rooms. Leon watched the doorway for a while and then spoke without turning his head.

"Eleanor has a way of making me nervous," he said, almost to himself. "Some days I have to lie down in the middle of the afternoon, just to sort out her moods, so I know what to expect."

I did not know what he meant. I felt sorry for him, and I nodded, because I could think of nothing to say. If I am honest, I wondered what it was about Leon that Eleanor found so trying.

In the kitchen a cabinet closed, and Eleanor's laugh carried down the hall. Leon straightened his cuffs, and we talked about the weather.

CHAPTER 5

* * *

PINPRICKS

San Diego, 1992–2004

The following autumn Dalia arrived, and eighteen months after her came Daniel, and our home grew into a bustling, energetic household. Rosalie and Noam took to the babies as though their own hands, suddenly so big, were meant to care for a sibling.

When Rosalie turned twelve, we celebrated her Bat Mitzvah. Eleanor arrived looking grand and gracious, and from the first moment she took charge. She greeted the guests as they arrived, and again and again I found that they had already been welcomed before I could reach them. Time after time she stepped in front of me to greet a relative or a friend, and I stood a half step behind at the celebration of my own daughter.

I sighed and tried to accept it. She was proud, I was sure, and pride does not always know where to stand. That was the price, I supposed, of an otherwise wonderful family.

And there was so much to be proud of. Rosalie looked a dream. She was bright-eyed and mature in the way she greeted the guests, the adults included. When she rose to speak, she thanked her parents and grandparents with real warmth and spoke about the beauty of being part of the Jewish nation, as she had learned in Hebrew school.

My father looked strong and healthy and proud, and my mother stood beside him, gracious as always. One look at his loving, accepting smile was enough to lift me. To him I could never do wrong.

Dalia and Daniel were fast friends from the start. Each would wait for the other and insist that whatever one had, the other should have too. If Dalia was handed a cookie, she broke it in two before she took a bite, and Daniel did the same. When they came home from their separate playgroups, they ran at each other, shrieking, as though they had not met in weeks. No amount of money could have given me what I felt watching them.

I imagined that whatever life brought them, they would always have each other.

Michael was a devoted father in those years. He loved bringing home small surprises, a wooden puzzle or a die-cast car, and on weekends he took the children to the science museum or the zoo while I savored a few quiet hours at home.

When the front door flew open late in the afternoon the children rushed in, cheeks flushed, tumbling over each other.

"Mom, a sea lion tasted a man's hat!" Noam cried.

"It didn't taste it, it ate it," said Rosalie.

"It spat it out," Noam said, with dignity. "So it tasted it."

Dalia, who was four, had a painted whisker on each cheek. "I was a sea lion," she informed me. Daniel, worn out, was carried in on Michael's arm, fast asleep.

The smell of sunscreen and the Pacific Ocean came in with them. Michael stood behind them in the doorway, tie loosened, watching his family with a quiet smile. They had a calm mother to greet them.

Rosalie and Noam were remarkably capable. On trip mornings they stood side by side at the counter, making tuna sandwiches and packing snack bags. They dressed their younger siblings and tied their sneakers.

I made a point of thanking them. I never wanted their help to become something I simply expected.

"Please make sure Dalia takes her antibiotic at twelve," I'd call.

"Sure, Mom!" Rosalie would call back. She never forgot.

"Hold their hands in the parking lot!"

"No worries, Mom," Noam would answer, already gripping Daniel's small hand.

During the week I stayed in touch with my parents by phone, calling about twice a week. If I missed a call, the line would ring before I could dial.

"Where are you? Is everything okay?"

"Ma, it has been two days."

"In two days, a whole life can change," my mother said. "Tell me about the children."

I told her. I told her about the Lego, and the cookies, and the sea lion with the hat, and as usual I could hear my father in the background asking, "What did she say? What did she say?" and my mother holding the receiver away to answer him.

* * *

Eleanor never criticized me openly, and certainly never before others. But she could not always resist a small punch when no one else was near. One year I sewed myself a black wool dress with tiny pink stitching, and I thought it very becoming. I wore it to a holiday dinner at her home, and before the meal was over she cornered me.

"Why would you wear something so unflattering?" she asked.

"I like it," I said, and went to find a plate.

I still have a photograph of myself in that dress, and it is a stunning picture. At the time I brushed the remark off as quickly as it had come. I let it pass, though I had promised myself I would not.

* * *

In my father's garage, wear and tear did not happen in an instant. A timing belt does not snap without first fraying; a bearing does not seize without thousands of miles of quiet friction. You only notice the

failure when the engine stops, but the work of the breakdown was done in the ordinary days when nobody was listening closely.

The 1990s were our busy years. My textile warehouse had grown from a modest storage bay into a bustling enterprise with regular shipments arriving from overseas. Between keeping the company solvent and raising four spirited children, my days were measured in minutes.

Michael was building his practice at the clinic. He was a dedicated doctor, admired by his colleagues, but looking back now, that was the decade the quiet began to take him. He would come home, greet me warmly, and retreat into his study with a stack of journals.

"Michael, dinner is in twenty minutes," I would call from the kitchen island.

"I'll be right out, Abigail," his voice would drift back, mild and agreeable. But twenty minutes would stretch into an hour, and when he finally emerged, his eyes would have that distant, glassy look that I took to belong to a man who carried life and death in his hands all day. I protected his rest. I made sure the house was quiet so he could recharge, never suspecting how much was fraying beneath the surface.

Some evenings I wanted to knock on his study door and ask him to sit with me for a while, not because anything was wrong, but because I missed telling him the small things and hearing his. Then I would see him bent over his journals and remind myself how much he carried. There would be time for us when the children were older.

* * *

A few years later came Noam's Bar Mitzvah. He sat at the center of the head table between his father and his two grandfathers, tall for his age and a true scholar, the little boy in him playing the gentleman so well that he won the whole room. When he gave his speech on that week's Torah portion, he paused now and then to glance at his father for approval.

Eleanor was again grand and gracious, and again she took charge, greeting the guests before I could reach them. This time I found other ways to be the hostess. During the meal I circled the tables and greeted each guest myself, and when the music picked up to a dancing beat, I offered each one a dance.

* * *

As the years went by, the evenings changed. Rosalie reached high school, Noam middle school, and Dalia and Daniel were in elementary school. At homework time, the whole family gathered around the table, each child at a project of their own. I walked around giving a nod, a light compliment, a little encouragement.

Daniel was the quiet one, content with a book or even a dictionary. He loved learning and quiet time, and he could stay busy for hours. I had to remind myself to look in on him.

"Hey, Kiddo," I called across the table, and gave his shoulder a pat, until he lifted his head. "I love your smile. Any new interests on your mind?"

He looked up over the edge of the dictionary. "Words that start with Q."

"Why Q?"

"They're lonely," he said, entirely serious. "Nobody invites them anywhere."

I laughed and pulled him close. Daniel never demanded attention the way some children do, and I learned that loving him meant leaving room for his quiet while letting him know I was interested in whatever occupied his thoughts.

Michael used to joke that if he didn't take attendance each night, he might not notice whether Daniel was home. One evening he did it. "Roll call," he announced to the family room. "Rosalie?"

"Here."

"Noam? Dalia?"

"Here! Here!"

"Daniel?" Silence. Michael peered around the room with elaborate concern. "Has anyone seen Daniel?"

"Here," said a small voice from the armchair, where Daniel had been sitting the entire time, behind a book. The whole room collapsed in laughter.

On quiet evenings Michael sat cross-legged on the carpet for hours, officiating sprawling games of Monopoly, while Rosalie slid her brother twenties across the board. "He's financing my railroad empire," she said. "Family discount."

Rosalie went off to college, and her room was quiet for the first time, but she came home often, and the phone rang with her news.

Late one afternoon I was drying the last dinner plate, listening to the voices in the other room, when the thought came to me whole: This life was worth every early morning at the warehouse and every late night with the ledgers. My children were healthy and grounded. My husband was gentle. We were building something honorable. I did not think of the afternoon Eleanor stood in my front hall and looked straight through me, as if I were made of glass, or of the latch clicking shut behind her.

* * *

In the winter of 2004, during the midwinter break, Eleanor decided to take the family to Disneyland in Anaheim, about two hours from San Diego. We were to stay a full week, and Eleanor had paid for the trip and the hotel. We piled into the family van: Eleanor, Leon, Michael, Dalia, Daniel, and I. Rosalie was away at college, and Noam, busy with school, chose to stay behind.

Dalia and Daniel were awestruck from the moment we passed through the gates. Daniel stopped dead on Main Street, staring up at the castle.

"It's real," he said, as though someone had tried to convince him otherwise. He bought a mouse-ear hat and wore it all day, tilted at an angle he considered dashing.

Eleanor moved through the crowd with her usual composure, pointing out sights, delighted by her grandchildren's delight, the benefactor of the day. For a while I thought it was exactly what a grandmother's gift should be.

On the third morning, the warehouse called. The machines had broken down, our mechanic couldn't repair them, and deadlines were looming.

I apologized to Eleanor. I had to return to San Diego, and Michael and the children would come with me.

Before I could finish, she interrupted. "Michael and the children are staying."

I looked to Michael, and he gave me an apologetic shrug; his mother had clearly made up her mind. Dalia and Daniel had had two full days in the park and were in no hurry to leave it, though I knew the school projects waiting for them would be a different story by Friday. I had a warehouse full of idle machines and no wish to turn a happy trip into a debate in front of the children. I would have liked to be asked, but I was not going to quarrel over it.

So I left my children behind and made my way home alone by bus. I watched the buildings slide past and kept turning to look at the empty seat beside me.

Michael called to tell me that he would be leaving the next day, and that he was coming alone. His mother was adamant that the children stay. He was as upset as I was.

Eleanor kept Dalia and Daniel for the rest of the week, and she gave them a wonderful time. They seemed fine with it. When she brought them home, she greeted me with a hug and a silk scarf she had picked out for me at the park, and the moment for saying anything passed. I had never thought of our relationship as a contest.

At lunch that week I told a friend about Anaheim, and she rolled her eyes so hard I thought she would hurt herself. “A week at Disneyland with Grandma? Abigail, that’s not a problem. That’s a vacation.” We laughed, and I felt better, and I thought no more about it.

CHAPTER 6

* * *

MUSIC IN THE HOUSE

San Diego, 2005–2009

Penina and Tamar were born on a bright March morning in 2005, when Daniel was almost eleven. The house, which I had believed was already full, simply made room. Daniel, newly promoted to big brother, took his post beside the bassinet each afternoon after school, still wearing his backpack.

"Which one is Penina?" he asked.

"The one who is frowning."

"They're both frowning."

"Then you'll have to wait for one of them to stop," I said. He settled in to wait.

Dalia hummed to the babies over her homework, Noam came home from university and learned to hold one in each arm, and Rosalie arrived on Sundays with the quiet pride of a second mother. Even Michael lingered in the nursery doorway to watch them sleep. Eleanor, newly retired from Macy's and busier than ever with her charity committees, came by most afternoons and stayed to hold them.

"Give me the one who looks like me," she said, holding out her arms.

"They look exactly alike," I said.

"Then it hardly matters." She settled a twin against her silk blouse. "Look at that chin. A Winters." I laughed, because it was sweet, and because I was too tired that spring to hear anything else in it.

* * *

At family gatherings, my children gravitated to Eleanor the way children follow a piper. She would stand at the center of any room, spread her arms, and call out in a voice that could fill a ballroom, "Look who's here! My favorite grandchildren!" And each of them, from the youngest to the eldest, would walk a little taller.

She never lacked for stories. "I'll tell you something nobody else in town knows," she would begin, lowering her voice, and the children would lean in: which bakery's famous honey cake was really made by the owner's mother-in-law, which judge kept a jar of jelly beans in his chambers. They were harmless secrets, and she handed them out like candy, so that to sit beside her was to be let in on something.

She gave each child a spotlight of their own: for Rosalie, questions about her future, asked as though she were interviewing a person of consequence; for Noam, questions she knew he could answer, and applause when he did; for Dalia and Daniel, praise for an artist's eye and a gift for noticing.

Eleanor could make a child feel extraordinary in thirty seconds. A question, a compliment, a moment of undivided attention, and each grandchild came away feeling uniquely important to her.

In the early years I was part of all of this. "Abigail, darling, come and sit, you must hear this," she would say, and I would sit, glad.

I cannot say when it began to change. I know only that the shout of welcome went to the children, and then, more and more, only to the children. I would come in behind them with a platter in my hands and sometimes receive a small nod, and sometimes not even that.

At first I told myself I was being foolish. Of course a grandmother would rush to her grandchildren. Nothing unkind had been said. Yet I sometimes drove home from a family dinner feeling strangely invisible.

* * *

In the spring of 2006, with six children and a household that was running out of room, Michael and I decided the time had come to purchase a larger home. I planned to use David Cohen, a respected real estate attorney and a trusted friend of my parents.

"David Cohen did my cousin Rina's closing," my mother said on the telephone when I told her. "Two weeks, no surprises. You'll never find a better one. His clients speak of him like a saint."

I mentioned it casually at our Tuesday coffee. In the years when the children were small, Eleanor and I had shared coffee every afternoon. As they grew, it had narrowed to a standing Tuesday appointment, the one hour of the week when the two of us still sat down alone.

"I'm sending the purchase contracts to David Cohen tomorrow," I said, setting out the cups. "He's sharp, and I trust him with this one."

Eleanor tilted her head. "Oh, darling, no," she said, in a sweet voice that sounded like concern. "You simply cannot use him."

I looked up in surprise.

"Why not? His reputation is immaculate."

Eleanor smiled indulgently.

"Abigail, sweetie, you haven't heard the full story. His last major transaction was an absolute disaster. He overlooked critical zoning clauses and cost his clients thousands. The man is completely out of his depth. He is a liability."

I frowned. It clashed with everything I knew.

"Really? That's not what my mother heard. She spoke to his clients herself last week, and they—"

Eleanor did not let me finish. Her eyes lifted briefly toward the ceiling, the look one reserves for someone who imagines she knows more than she does. It was meant for my mother, and it was not kind.

No word had been spoken, but the atmosphere in the kitchen shifted. Eleanor stopped stirring her coffee and looked at me with a steady smile.

I could see this mattered to her, yet I wanted to protect my mother's dignity.

"My mother is a meticulous businesswoman," I said carefully. "She doesn't usually get these things wrong."

"I'm sure she doesn't, darling." The smile did not move. "I am only saying that I have seen the file."

Eleanor spoke with such certainty. What if she knew something my mother and I didn't? And with the whole family looking forward to the move, I didn't want to quarrel over an attorney.

I filed it under small things. It was the first time she chose for me, and I let her. I have gone back to that afternoon more often than I have gone back to some of the larger ones.

"All right," I said quietly. "Who do you recommend?"

Instantly, her warm demeanor returned.

"My attorney, of course. He is brilliant. I will facilitate the introduction and oversee the paperwork for you. You have enough on your plate, darling. Let me handle the details."

We retained her attorney. Eleanor arranged the introduction, sat in on the first meeting, and reviewed the closing paperwork with him "so that nothing slips past you."

"It's a small thing," I told Michael that night, brushing out my hair.

"It's my mother," he said, from behind a medical journal. "She likes to be useful. Let her be useful."

It was a small thing. It sat in my stomach for a week, and then it was gone. We moved into the new house that autumn. On our first night the children ran from room to room calling out which one they wanted, and I stood in the empty kitchen and felt, for a moment, that I had done something right. The mortgage took a larger bite of the month than I had budgeted, but I did not mind. A house full of children is worth a tight budget. I had chosen peace, and I believed with all my heart that peace was the greatest gift I could give my family.

* * *

By the fall of 2007, when Dalia turned fifteen, our home had settled into the rhythm of six children, and Dalia was its performer. If a song was playing, she was singing along; if there was open space in the living room, she was dancing across it. Eleanor, who considered herself deeply musical, took particular notice.

One Sunday afternoon, while visiting for family dinner, Eleanor sat beside Dalia on the sofa. She listened with indulgent affection as Dalia hummed a complex melody from a vocal showcase.

"What is that piece?" Eleanor asked.

"It's from the winter showcase. I can't get it out of my head." Dalia drummed it out on her knees. "The left hand goes like this, but I don't actually know what it's supposed to sound like on a real piano."

Eleanor turned to me, her eyes bright with sudden, generous inspiration.

"Abigail, darling," she announced, her voice carrying across the living room with effortless authority. "It is simply a crime that this child is not studying an instrument seriously. Dalia has a genuine ear. I want her to take elite, classical piano lessons. It will be my personal gift to see my granddaughter master the keys."

I looked up from the table where I was folding linens.

"Eleanor, that's a wonderful idea, and we'd love to see her play. But with the warehouse expansion and the new mortgage, we just can't stretch to it right now."

"You won't pay a single cent," Eleanor interrupted smoothly, waving a manicured hand as if dismissing a speck of dust. "I have already spoken with one of the premier private instructors in town. She will come twice a week, and the fee is two hundred dollars a week. I will personally handle the expense. You will see the eight hundred dollars transferred directly into your bank account on the first Tuesday of every month. Consider it handled."

"Grandma!" Dalia gasped. She pressed both hands to her cheeks and spun around the living room. "Really? Real lessons? Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I was moved to see her so happy.

"Eight hundred dollars a month, Michael," I said that night, once the house was quiet.

"She loves doing it." He was already half asleep. "Let her."

"It's a great deal of money."

"It's her money, and it's Dalia's dream." He said it kindly, into the dark. "Don't look for a catch, Abigail. Sometimes a gift is just a gift."

I lay awake a little longer, and then I let it be.

For the next two years, the arrangement ran like clockwork. Eight hundred dollars arrived in our account on the first Tuesday of every month, Ms. Petrov came twice a week, and Dalia threw herself into her lessons. Watching her blossom was one of the great pleasures of my motherhood.

"Again," I would hear the instructor say, from the living room. "From the top. Wrists loose, Dalia. The Chopin is not a fight."

"It feels like a fight."

"All the worthwhile ones do. Again."

She never needed to be prodded to practice. The sound of complex scales, Bach inventions, and Chopin waltzes became the daily soundtrack of our home, floating down the hallway while I prepared dinner or reviewed shipping invoices.

Penina and Tamar, barely three, planted themselves on the hallway floor outside the living room in their pajamas, swaying along to whatever she played.

"Play the sad one," Penina would command.

"They're all sad ones," Dalia would say, and play it anyway.

Dalia and Daniel loved to tease the twins. One evening Dalia leaned down and whispered, "Wee Willie Winkie is coming. You'd better go

to sleep on time, or he'll get you." "Mommy, make her stop it!" Penina cried, and burrowed into Michael's side. "Stop," Michael said mildly, and Dalia did.

A moment later the teasing began again, and this time Michael only raised an eyebrow, and all was well for about twenty minutes.

The discipline of the music transformed Dalia. Within months, local theater productions and youth choirs were asking her to accompany their rehearsals, and she was earning her own pocket money playing for neighborhood events. She was no longer just a talented student but a capable, respected young musician, with a circle of ambitious, artistic friends and a quiet new confidence.

In the winter of her junior year came a major district showcase. When Dalia walked onto the stage of the high school auditorium in her velvet recital dress, her poise was remarkable. She sat before the grand piano, adjusted the bench, and launched into Chopin's Ballade in G Minor. Her fingers moved across the keys with astonishing maturity, filling the vaulted hall. "Is that our Dalia?" Michael whispered.

"That's our Dalia."

Sitting beside him, I watched Eleanor in the row ahead of us. When the final chord rang out and the auditorium erupted into enthusiastic applause, Eleanor was the first to stand, clapping with tearful pride. Afterward, in the crowded lobby, she enveloped Dalia in a fragrant embrace and presented her with a bouquet of miniature pink tea roses.

"My brilliant girl," Eleanor proclaimed warmly, turning to the parents and faculty members gathering around them. "Didn't I tell you she had the touch? Pure artistry."

"I messed up the second page," Dalia whispered.

"Nobody noticed but you." Eleanor's smile was dazzling. "Come. We are going for hot chocolate, and you may order two."

Eleanor swept Dalia away to a downtown dessert parlor for hot chocolate and pastries. Dalia's eyes shone under her grandmother's attention, and I was grateful to see my daughter so happy.

In 2008, Rosalie brought Robert home to meet us. He was a serious young man, educated and refined, and a little shy at meeting all of us at once. Michael liked him from the start. He admired Robert's respectfulness and found him an interesting, knowledgeable person. A few months later they were engaged, and for months our house was full of lists and phone calls about the hall and the music. I could hardly believe that my firstborn was about to become a bride.

There was excitement in the air, with grandparents, aunts, and uncles calling constantly for the latest details. My parents, in their quiet, reserved way, offered to help with any phone calls that needed to be made. Eleanor took a grander stand. She offered to dress the children for the big day, in the finest of everything.

At the wedding, it was plain that this was her pride. She had chosen every gown and every suit herself. All evening Dalia swept across the hall in her beautiful Eleanor gown, the twins twirled in theirs, and Noam and Daniel stood tall and handsome in their suits. Guest after guest stopped to admire them, then turned to compliment her. By the end of the night it felt less like my daughter's wedding than an evening in Eleanor's honor. I smiled and agreed that the children looked lovely. They did.

Late in the evening I looked across the room and saw Noam talking with Eleanor. People passed between us. Some stopped to greet her, and she greeted them in return. Conversations rose and fell around them, and chairs scraped in and out from the tables. Through all of it, Noam's eyes never left her face. He looked almost mesmerized, hooked, as if nothing else in the room existed. I watched him for a long time, and I could not understand it.

At one of our Tuesday coffees, Eleanor set down her cup and said, with evident satisfaction, "Rosalie is flying high."

"She sounded busy when she called on Sunday," I said. "She didn't say much."

"She is blossoming. We had dinner downtown on Tuesday. She was positively radiant."

"You did? She didn't mention it."

"Didn't I?" Eleanor lifted her cup. "I suppose it slipped my mind, darling." I took it for a grandmother's pride, and I was glad. Still, that evening I held the phone a moment longer than I needed to before I set it down.

* * *

"Abigail, why are you always so serious?" Michael asked one day that spring. "Go out there, make a racket, rob a bank, maybe steal some cars while you're at it."

I laughed, for the first time in what felt like weeks. That was my Michael: even with his medical journals piled beside him, he still remembered the load I carried.

"Well, then," I said, "let's make a date of it."

"Today?"

"Today. I'll be late to the warehouse and the world will go on."

Off we went to a nice kosher restaurant for a quiet lunch while the children were out for the day. We left our work worries at the door and traded memories and news of old friends. The waiter arrived with the menus, and Michael, deadpan, bowed over them. "'Today's special,'" he intoned, in the waiter's exact voice, "'is the soup of unfulfilled promise,'" and I laughed so hard I had to hide my face in the napkin.

"We really need to do this more often," Michael said as we stood up to leave.

"Promise?"

"I promise." He held the door for me. "Next month." We did not go the next month. There was a shipment, and then a recital, and then it was simply one more thing we meant to do.

On the drive home I felt lighter than I had in weeks. For a few hours we had been only Michael and Abigail.

I did not know then how precious that quiet hour would become.

Those years were filled with warmth and pride, and the sacrifices I made at the warehouse felt fully justified every time Dalia played the final chord of a sonata and turned around with a glowing smile. Our life felt solid, beautiful, and enduring.

The folder with David Cohen's name on it was still in my desk drawer. I had not thrown it away, and I did not take it out.

PART TWO

* * *

THE SHOCKS

CHAPTER 7

* * *

THE MUSIC STOPS

San Diego, autumn 2009 – winter 2010

The autumn semester of Dalia's senior year arrived with a sense of vibrant momentum. She was soaring in her ensemble, her calendar marked with rehearsals, upcoming showcases, and conservatory audition coaching. Music was the pulse of our home.

"Ms. Petrov says I'm ready," Dalia announced one evening, dropping her music bag in the front hall. "She says if I play the Chopin at the audition the way I played it today, they'll have to take notice."

"Did she say it in words, or with the eyebrow?" Michael asked, from his armchair, over the top of a medical journal.

"With the eyebrow. But the eyebrow is very clear."

I loved the easy camaraderie between father and daughter. Each time I heard it, the sweetness settled over my home like another layer of cream. The sound of the piano began again in the next room, scales rising and falling like a tide. Then, without a single word of warning, the music stopped.

It was the first week of October. I was sitting at the kitchen desk late on a Tuesday evening, balancing our monthly household register. When I opened the bank statement, I noticed a discrepancy. The monthly transfer from Eleanor's account had not arrived. At first I assumed it was an ordinary administrative delay, a clerical hold or a bank oversight.

"Michael," I called toward the living room. "Did your mother say anything about changing the piano arrangement?"

He appeared in the doorway, loosening his collar. “Changing it how?”

“The transfer didn’t come. It always comes the first Tuesday.”

“Then it’s a bank glitch.” He yawned. “Or she forgot. She has the gala season, and half the committees in the county. Ask her.”

“I will.”

“There you go.” He smiled, already turning back toward the couch. “Problem solved.”

But by Thursday afternoon, when the piano instructor arrived at our front door with her sheet music under her arm, the account remained empty.

“Abigail, forgive me,” Ms. Petrov said, lowering her voice in the hall. “I only want to confirm the arrangement for the month. Is everything in order?”

“A small delay on our end,” I said. “Please, come in. Dalia is waiting.”

I sat quietly at the dining table while Dalia’s lesson progressed, my stomach in knots. Through the wall I heard the instructor’s voice. “Again. From the top. Don’t rush the left hand.” And Dalia’s, patient and bright, “I’m not rushing. It’s the Chopin that’s rushing.” When the hour concluded, I pulled out my checkbook, wrote the instructor a check for two hundred dollars, and saw her out with a polite smile.

Later that night, I opened the household ledger again. I went through the figures twice, hoping I had overlooked something. The mortgage, the warehouse expenses, the groceries, the children’s needs—every dollar already had a destination. Another eight hundred dollars a month simply wasn’t there.

Before I closed the book, I wrote the date in the ledger, and beside Eleanor’s name, where in two years I had only ever written a figure, I wrote one word: Missing.

I sat for a moment with my pen still in my hand. From the next room came the sound of Dalia practicing, repeating a difficult passage until the notes finally fell into place. She knew nothing of the question I

would soon have to put to her grandmother, or of the figures spread across the table.

How would I tell Dalia if the lessons had to stop? I closed the ledger before she could come into the kitchen and see my face.

What troubled me almost as much as the missing money was that Eleanor hadn't called. For two years the arrangement had worked without a single reminder, a commitment she herself had insisted on making. Surely, if something had changed, she would have told me. I dialed her number the following morning, expecting a simple explanation. The machine picked up.

"Eleanor, it's Abigail," I said, in my cheeriest voice. "I'm calling about the piano transfer. Nothing urgent. Call me when you have a moment."

An hour later, I called her office line at the charity foundation.

"I'm sorry, Abigail," her assistant said, in the careful tone of a woman reading from a card. "Mrs. Winters is at a committee meeting and unavailable."

"Would you tell her I called? It's about Dalia's lessons."

"Of course I will."

I left two calm, friendly messages asking her to call me back at her convenience. She never returned either call.

A week later I put it to Michael again. "Did you speak with your mother?"

"I saw her Sunday." He did not look up from his plate. "She says she's reviewing things."

"Reviewing what things?"

"She didn't say. Abigail, please, she's seventy-four years old and has more on her calendar than a senator. Don't make it a thing."

"She could have said it to me."

"Well, now she's said it to me." He shrugged, and reached for the salt. "Eat."

Over the next two months, Eleanor simply erased herself from my conversational circle. At family gatherings, she engaged Michael with devoted warmth and laughed with relatives. But the moment I entered the room, her expression shuttered into cold, polite glass. One Sunday at the Winters' table I crossed the dining room to where she stood by the sideboard.

"Eleanor, have you a minute? I'd love to speak with you about Dalia."

"Not now, darling." She did not turn her head. "Ruth is waiting for me."

She glided across the room, completely avoiding eye contact, and Ruth Adler, who was not waiting for anyone, looked up in surprise as Eleanor took her by the arm toward the hall. If I stepped toward her again, she was somewhere else.

If Eleanor could no longer afford the lessons, I would have understood. I only wished she had told me.

Yet her public life told an entirely different story. She continued her standing appointments with her private dressmaker, kept her weekly hairdresser appointments, and hosted lavish hotel dinners for her older grandchildren. One morning Ruth Adler stopped me in the supermarket, her cart full of fruit.

"I saw Eleanor last night at the hotel," she said. "In the corner room, with Rosalie and Noam. The three of them were laughing so hard the waiter had to wait. She looked wonderful." She paused. "Weren't you there?"

"I had a late shipment," I said.

"Oh, what a shame. She is so good to those children." Ruth shook her head with open admiration. "You are lucky."

I picked up a bag of oranges, and put it down again, and could not have said what I had come in for. I wasn't angry that Eleanor had taken the children to dinner. I was hurt that it had gone on without me, and that she could find time for them yet apparently couldn't find five minutes to return my call.

I was backed into a corner. The last thing I wanted was to extinguish my daughter's artistic spark, but the numbers would not stretch. When the next month arrived with no deposit, I had no alternative. I sat Dalia down at the kitchen table on a Friday afternoon.

"Sweetheart," I began gently, covering her hand with mine. "I need to talk to you about your piano lessons. Grandma isn't able to keep paying for them, and right now we just can't afford them on our own. We're going to have to pause them for a while."

Dalia looked at me as if I had struck her. Her eyes welled with immediate, furious tears.

"Pause?" she cried, pulling her hand away.

"Mom, the winter ensemble showcase is in six weeks, and conservatory auditions are right around the corner! Everyone in my section has a private tutor. If I stop now, I'll lose my standing! Why are you doing this to me?"

"Dalia, no one is doing anything to you," I said softly. "I am so proud of your hard work. You can still practice here every day, and play in the school band. But lessons like these cost a great deal, and right now—"

"You just don't care about my music!" she sobbed, standing up so abruptly her chair scraped loudly against the tile.

"I care about it more than—"

"Grandma cared! Grandma made sure I had what I needed. Why can't you ever just figure things out?"

She ran upstairs to her bedroom, slamming the door. I stood with my hand on the banister, listening to her footsteps overhead. I wanted to go after her, to tell her that I understood how frightened she was about the auditions. But I had no solution to offer, and I couldn't bear to promise her something I might not be able to provide. Even the twins, who had been bouncing down the hallway, stopped at the foot of the stairs.

"Mommy," Penina asked, in her small, careful voice, "where did the music go?"

I lowered myself to their height and gathered both of them against me. "It's resting, sweetheart," I said. "Just for a little while." I hoped she did not hear how thin my voice had gone.

Over the following days, Rosalie and Noam rallied around Dalia, taking her for ice cream and spending evenings with her in her room. Their sympathy was understandable, but I began to feel that they held me responsible for her disappointment.

I walked into the kitchen one evening and found the three of them with their heads together over the island.

"—and she just doesn't see it," Rosalie was saying. She stopped.

"See what?" I asked.

"Nothing." Rosalie smoothed the counter with her palm. "Dalia's audition schedule."

"Mom, we're fine," Noam said, with a smile that did not reach his eyes. When had my son learned to smile like that?

Conversations stopped whenever I entered the kitchen. I decided it was time to speak directly with Rosalie and Noam.

One evening after dinner, I found them together in the living room.

"I want to talk to you both about Dalia's lessons," I said, keeping my voice as calm as I could. "Two years your grandmother paid for them. Every month. And then she just stopped. No call, no word, nothing. If she had told me, I could have prepared Dalia. Instead I'm the one who had to tell her. It hurt me, the way it was done."

I expected them to understand. I had raised them to know what was fair. Instead, Rosalie and Noam exchanged a fleeting, knowing glance. When they turned back to me, they wore the same face.

"She didn't owe you anything, Mom," Noam said, his voice clipped and dismissive.

I stared at him. "Noam, she made a commitment to a child—"

"Noam is right," Rosalie interrupted, crossing her arms with a cool authority I had never seen in her. "Grandma did something wonderful for Dalia out of the goodness of her heart. She doesn't owe you an

explanation for what she does with her own money. You're just looking for someone to blame because you can't manage your budget. Grandma is so very special to us. Don't you see, Mom? She's a saint. She does so much for us all."

"I have not said she isn't," I said quietly. "I have asked for one phone call."

Rosalie lifted one shoulder. "Maybe if you didn't make everything so hard, people wouldn't avoid calling you." I remembered her at eight, asleep against my arm on the long drive home from the shore, and I could not find that child in her face.

I looked from Rosalie to Noam. I had asked why Eleanor had ended the arrangement without a word. Somehow, I was the one on trial.

I wanted to explain myself again, but their expressions stopped me.

I did not yell. I did not grovel for their understanding. Afterward I stayed in the kitchen until the kettle I had put on went cold.

Later, from the living room, I heard a single note from the piano. Then nothing.

Dalia did audition that winter, and she did well. Her talent alone would have opened the door to any ensemble she chose. What she lost was not her future as a pianist. The loss was emotional, and it was lonely. I have never stopped feeling awful that I could not give her the dream she had every right to believe was hers.

* * *

By January I had a second worry, and it frightened me more than the first. It had come and gone for years, like a shadow at the edge of a room, and each time I had explained it away. Michael was tired. Michael had clinic. Michael had been up since five. And each time he would rally, and the shadow would lift.

Now it stayed. The father who used to build hotels on Boardwalk and pack the car for the zoo was disappearing, a little at a time, into a quiet I could not reach.

Michael could still rally when he needed to. He praised the children's report cards, smiled for family photographs, and restored order with a gentle but firm word when they grew too rowdy.

Each morning he put on his tie and went to work, and I wanted to believe he was simply overworked. Yet more and more of our household responsibilities had fallen to me. I was becoming a single mother within a marriage, though I still believed our family would pull together when we needed one another most.

One rainy Sunday afternoon brought the contrast into sharp focus. Daniel and Noam, home on winter break, were sitting on the family room rug assembling a scale model, while Penina and Tamar lay on their stomachs beside them, handing over small pieces they could not name.

"Pass me the red wire," Daniel said.

"That's the blue wire," said Noam.

"It's a very dark red."

"I can hold the screws," Penina offered.

"I hold the little ones," said Tamar, who held nothing at all.

Across the room, Rosalie was curled up on the sofa with a thick library book, absorbed and oblivious to the world around her. My eyes went to the armchair in the corner, where Michael sat beneath the floor lamp with a heavy medical journal open across his knees. From the kitchen doorway I watched him, and realized he had not turned a single page in forty-five minutes. The lamplight caught the gray pallor of his face. His eyes were watery, dull, and fixed on a blank patch of wall. It was the same distant, glassy look I had glimpsed years ago at his mother's dining table, but now it had hardened into his default. "Michael?" I called softly. "Do you want to take a look at the wiring on Daniel's model?"

He did not blink. He simply stared straight ahead, as though my voice could not reach him through the fog.

"Michael," I repeated, stepping into the room, my voice firmer. He jolted. The journal slipped from his lap and struck the hardwood floor with a dull thud.

"What? Yes. Fine," he muttered, blinking rapidly. He rubbed his face with both hands, trying to scrub away the numbness, and forced a smile for the children. "You're doing great, guys. Keep at it."

Daniel looked up at his father. Then, very carefully, he looked back down at his model. I saw it, and I knew that he knew I had seen it, and neither of us said a word.

I wanted to reassure Daniel that his father was only tired. But I was no longer sure I believed it myself.

It was barely eight o'clock that night when I went to look for Michael and found him lying across the top of the duvet, fully dressed in his trousers and work shirt, fast asleep.

"Michael," I said, from the foot of the bed. "Michael, wake up."

His eyes opened slowly.

"Michael, we need to talk. Look at me. You're asleep at eight o'clock in your clothes. You're pale. Your pupils are like pinpoints. I'm worried. Please, see someone this week. Anyone you trust."

He rolled onto his side, facing the wall.

"It's nothing, Abigail. Clinic overload. The new electronic records system is a nightmare, and with the household expenses, I'm just exhausted. You put everything under a microscope. Don't make a mountain out of a molehill."

"A molehill doesn't keep a man from turning a page for forty-five minutes."

"Good night, Abigail." I stood at the foot of the bed a while longer, listening to him breathe, and thought of the man who had done the waiter's voice for me across a restaurant table, and wondered where he had gone.

Michael continued going to the clinic, but I could no longer dismiss what I saw at home. He refused to discuss his health, and I was running out of ways to reach him.

Finally, I called Eleanor. Our Tuesday coffees had stopped in October, and we had barely spoken since. But Michael was her son. Surely she would want to help. “Eleanor, it’s Abigail,” I said, when she finally picked up. “I need to speak with you about Michael. It’s important.”

There was a pause long enough that I checked the line. “I can give you fifteen minutes on Thursday,” she said. “Three o’clock. Come to the house.”

She received me in the front room, not the kitchen. A single cup of coffee sat at her elbow. She did not offer me one. I chose my words carefully.

“Eleanor, I’m worried about Michael,” I said quietly. “He’s exhausted all the time. He’s gray. He drifts off in the middle of a sentence. He says it’s work, but you’re his mother. You must have noticed. If we both ask him, I think he’ll see a specialist.”

I expected her to lean in. I expected the protective mother I knew to start making calls. Instead, Eleanor picked up her silver spoon and stirred her coffee. She did not look at me. A perfectly practiced smile touched her lips, a smile that held not a single drop of warmth.

“Speaking of specialists,” she said smoothly, “my son-in-law’s firm is bringing in an architect for the new residential cul-de-sac downtown. Have you looked at the blueprints? The square footage is simply marvelous.”

I sat frozen, my hands in my lap. I had come to discuss Michael's health, and Eleanor was talking about square footage.

“Eleanor,” I pressed. “Did you hear what I said about Michael’s health?”

She finally turned her head to look at me. She waited for me to finish, the way one waits out a child.

“Abigail, darling,” she said softly, patting my hand. “You run a very demanding business. You manage a large household. It is perfectly natural for a woman carrying your level of responsibility to project her anxieties onto her husband. Michael is a brilliant, respected physician. He is perfectly fine. Now, about those blueprints.”

I glanced at the clock on the mantel. Eleven of my fifteen minutes had passed.

I had come seeking Eleanor's help with Michael's health. Instead, she had questioned my judgment. I stood to leave, knowing I would have to find another way to help him.

Eleanor did not walk me to the door.

In all my years of coming to that house, she had never failed to walk me to the door.

Three weeks later the Winters family hosted a milestone birthday celebration for Michael’s sister, Andrea, at a private banquet hall.

Earlier that evening, I had attended a charity reception in my own community. Two women I had known for twenty years greeted me warmly, and friends drew me into lively conversations about textiles and business. I felt entirely at home.

An hour later, Michael met me at the Winters’ celebration. He went to sit with his friends, while I joined Andrea and two of his cousins, Judith and Carol. “The room looks lovely tonight, doesn’t it?” I said to Andrea. “How is the renovation coming along?”

Andrea offered a thin, clipped smile. “Fine.”

Then, with deliberate precision, she shifted her chair several inches to the left, angling her back toward me to speak exclusively to the guest on her other side. I turned to my right.

“Judith, it’s good to see you. How are the girls?”

“Fine.”

“Carol? Did you get the fabric samples I sent for the new curtains?”

“Mm.”

They angled their shoulders away, closing their circle and locking me out. For two hours I sat in a crowded, noisy hall, walled off by the backs of my relatives. Nobody spoke to me. Nobody passed a dish in my direction unless asked. I did not make a scene. I held my head high, sipped my water, and observed the room.

I reached for my water glass, then set it down. Across the hall, Eleanor was laughing with relatives beneath the chandeliers. She glanced toward my table several times, but our eyes never met.

Michael had already left to prepare for an early meeting the next morning, and I dreaded the drive home alone.

I managed to hold back my tears until I had driven away from the banquet hall. Then I pulled onto a dark side street and began to sob.

What had I done to deserve such coldness? I searched the evening for an explanation, but found none.

Family had always been the ground I stood on. I did not know how to walk away from a room full of my husband's relatives, and I did not want to learn.

It had been three weeks since I had spoken to Eleanor about Michael, and nothing had changed between us in that time. It did not cross my mind to connect the two.

The purpose of the freeze-out became even more confusing the following morning. I was at the warehouse office reviewing an import invoice when the telephone rang.

“Abigail, darling.” Eleanor’s voice was soft with sympathy. “I am just calling to check on you. I noticed you were having a very difficult time at the party last night. You looked so isolated, sitting all the way at the end. Would you like me to call your cousins and find out what kept them so clustered together without including you? Do you want to know why it happened?”

The previous evening's humiliation was still fresh. Before I could think of a response, I heard myself say, “I know.”

The words surprised even me. I didn't know why everyone had been so cold the night before, and I certainly didn't know what Eleanor could do about it. I only knew that I didn't want her making telephone calls on my behalf. Whatever had happened, I wanted to understand it for myself.

Eleanor breathed deeply into the receiver. Then came a long, drawn-out "hmmmm."

If I had to put words to it, I would say it meant, "So, this is how you want it. We will see." I had not wanted anything from her. If she was kind, I would accept her, and if not, I would build other connections.

I kept my voice steady and did not answer what she seemed to be offering. Instead I asked whether she thought the evening had been a success. We made small talk and hung up.

After we hung up, I sat very still. The family had frozen me out the night before, and now Eleanor was offering to protect me.

Could the two things be connected? I had no proof, and I did not want to believe it.

A week later I told one of my oldest friends about the party, over tea, and she shook her head. Her own mother-in-law refused to sit at the same table as her at weddings, and her sister-in-law had not spoken to her in six years. "That's families," she said. "You get three, and you cry in the car." I laughed, because she was right about the car. But hers was a quarrel with a name and a cause, and she could tell you the date it began. Mine had no cause that I could find, and nobody had said a word to me. It was the first time it occurred to me that what I had been calling ordinary might not be.

CHAPTER 8

* * *

THE LONGEST MORNING

San Diego, spring 2010

It was an ordinary Tuesday morning. I was at the warehouse, clipboard in hand, checking a large shipment of Egyptian cotton line by line against the packing slips. Our margins were narrow that quarter. When the office phone rang, it was my mother. Her voice, usually so steady and commanding, was thin and trembling.

"Abigail, you need to come."

"Ma? What happened?"

In the background, the rising wail of an ambulance siren cut through the receiver. "It's your father. His heart. He collapsed on the shop floor, right beside the Chevy. They are taking him to Sinai Hospital."

The floor seemed to drop out from beneath my feet. My father, the loud, indestructible center of my childhood, had fallen. I dropped the clipboard. For one dizzy second I was nine years old again, standing on an upturned crate in his garage, handing him wrenches he did not need.

"Take over the dock," I called to my warehouse supervisor. "Nothing leaves without a signature. I'll call you."

Then I ran for my car.

The next forty-eight hours were a blur of fluorescent corridors, the sterile smell of antiseptic, and the rhythmic alarms of cardiac monitors. The surgeon found us in the waiting room on the second night, still in his cap.

"Your father has had a massive coronary event," he said. "We found severe blockages in three arteries. He needs open-heart bypass surgery, and he needs it soon. We'll operate at seven on Thursday morning, if he holds."

"If he holds," my mother repeated.

"What does a bypass mean, exactly?" she asked me, when the surgeon had gone. Her hands were clutching mine so tightly that my rings pressed into my fingers.

"They take a vein from his leg, Ma, and build a detour around the blocked arteries."

"A detour." She laughed, a small broken sound. "Your father never took a detour in his life. He wouldn't take one to avoid a pothole."

I smiled, to give her a moment of the closeness she had always felt with the man she married. "Yes, Ma," I said warmly. "That's Dad, all right." She squeezed my hands.

My mother, who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in the garage for four decades, was entirely unmoored. My practical instincts took over. I spoke with the cardiologists, put the surgical terms into plain words for my mother, and fielded the stream of worried relatives.

"What can we do?" my brothers asked, hovering in the corridor with their hands in their pockets.

"Take Ma to eat something," I said. "And make her finish it."

As long as there was something practical to do, I could keep moving. It was the quiet moments I dreaded, when there was nothing left to arrange and I had time to think about what might happen to my father. More than anything, I wished Michael could be there beside me.

When I finally drove home late on the second night to gather fresh clothes, I found the house dark and eerily quiet. The older children were out, and the younger ones were asleep upstairs. Passing the twins' room, I stopped in the glow of the hall light. Penina and Tamar lay with their arms flung over their heads, breathing in unison. Watching

them sleep, so calm and relaxed, settled my frayed nerves for a moment.

I found Michael in the family room, sitting in his armchair in the dark, staring at the black television screen.

"Michael," I sobbed, collapsing onto the sofa across from him as the adrenaline finally crashed. "It's critical. The surgeons don't know if he will survive the bypass tomorrow morning. My mother is falling apart. I don't know how I'm going to manage the hospital, the warehouse, and the household all at once."

He did not get up. He slowly turned his head in my direction, his eyes glassy and remote, wearing that distant expression that had become his constant shield.

"I'm tired," he said, his voice flat. "You'll figure it out."

I stopped crying. A cold shock settled deep into my bones. I looked at my husband, searching his face for even a trace of the gentle, engaged man who had once taken our children to the zoo and stayed up late explaining science homework. There was nothing.

Morning brought the grim reality of the surgery schedule. The bypass was set for seven, and I needed to be at Sinai before they wheeled my father into the operating room. With Michael checked out, I needed someone to hold down the home front for the younger children. Naturally, I thought of Eleanor. She had been a fixture in our family routine for years, and she had always insisted that family protects its own. We had barely spoken since the fall, and I hesitated with the phone in my hand. But this was a grandmother and a hospital, and I believed that whatever stood between us could not survive a morning like this. I called her at six.

"Eleanor," I said, my voice hoarse. "It's my father. They're operating at seven. Michael isn't well enough to help. I need to be at the hospital with my mother. Could you please come and stay with the little ones today?"

"I will be there in twenty minutes," she said smoothly.

When the doorbell rang, I rushed to open it, weak with relief. I was already pulling my coat from the hall closet. Eleanor stepped into the entryway, impeccably dressed in a tailored blazer, her hair set with flawless precision, her leather handbag resting on her forearm.

"Eleanor, thank goodness," I breathed, sliding one arm into my coat sleeve. "The surgical team is prepping him now. I have to be there before they take him down. The twins will be up in half an hour—"

"Abigail."

She cut me off. The tone was not the affectionate purr she used over coffee. It was flat, rigid, and cold. I paused, my hand on the closet door. Her face was an expressionless mask.

"I am not staying," she said.

My mind simply could not process the words. "What? Did you forget something at home? The children will be awake shortly—"

"I am not watching them today." She was looking straight past my shoulder at the wall. "In fact, I simply came to tell you that I cannot help you and do not count on me."

I stood there, frozen, trying to make sense of the sentence she had just spoken.

"Eleanor, I don't understand," I stammered. "Is something wrong? Did an emergency come up?"

"No."

She offered no explanation. She did not ask how my father was. She did not look at my tear-stained face, or acknowledge the emergency unfolding at the hospital.

"I am done," she said, her eyes meeting mine with quiet finality. "You will have to manage on your own."

With that, she turned on her heel, opened the front door, walked out onto the porch, and pulled it firmly shut behind her.

Why? I stood in the entryway with one arm still in my coat, looking at the closed door, expecting it to open again. Surely she couldn't have meant what she said.

I could not move. My car keys were in my hand, my father was waiting to be taken into surgery, and I had only minutes to get to the hospital. I wanted to run after her and ask what I had done. I wanted to remind her that this was not about a disagreement between us. It was about a frightened family and the twins, who needed someone to look after them.

Then I heard movement upstairs. There was no time for questions. Whatever I was feeling would have to wait.

"Mom?" Dalia stood at the top of the stairs in her pajamas, her hair in a knot. "Was that Grandma?"

"She couldn't stay." My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Dalia, I need you to get the twins to preschool this morning and be home at noon. Can you do that?"

"Of course." She was already coming down the stairs. "Is Grandpa okay?"

"He's going into surgery now. Say a prayer."

"Go, Mom," she said. "I've got them." She was seventeen, and for that one moment she was the steadiest person in the house.

I did not tell her why Grandma had left. There was no time to analyze the riddle. Then the kitchen phone rang. It was the hospital, calling with pre-op paperwork, and the warehouse was waiting on inventory releases, and my father was lying on a gurney, and there was no one left to call.

At the first red light, I sat gripping the steering wheel, and for the first time I added it up. I thought of the Thursday Eleanor had walked out without a word, and of the warmth with which she had returned the next morning. I thought of Andrea's party, and Eleanor's sympathetic telephone call afterward. Until now I had treated those moments as separate misunderstandings. But this morning was different. I had asked for help because my father might die, and Eleanor had come to my house only to tell me she was finished. I still didn't know why. I knew only that I could no longer count on her.

The months that followed were a long exercise in triage.

My father survived the surgery, but his recovery was slow. The first time he walked the length of the hallway on his own, my mother stood at the end of it with her hands pressed to her mouth, as if he had crossed an ocean. Even so, he needed someone beside him for every step, and more and more often that someone was me.

At the warehouse, one late shipment could erase a month's profit. At home, Michael had gone somewhere I could not follow. It was not anger, or even sadness, only a dim, slow absence, as if he were walking through water. The running of the household passed into my hands without anyone saying so. Every afternoon hour Eleanor had once covered now had to be filled, and I filled it. I ran from dawn until past midnight, checking invoices at red lights, cooking with a phone on my shoulder, signing homework at the counter, and driving across town to make sure my parents had eaten.

I began losing weight without trying. In the mornings I would catch sight of myself in the mirror and wonder when the dark circles beneath my eyes had become so noticeable. I had always been a woman who woke up humming; lately I could feel that energy running out. Even small interruptions made me impatient. Sometimes I would look at the twins' drawings curling on the refrigerator and realize I hadn't stopped long enough to admire their latest masterpieces.

One evening, while trying to stir dinner on the stove and take a vendor's urgent call about a delayed delivery, my hand slipped. A glass tumbler fell from the counter and shattered across the kitchen tile.

"I'll call you back," I said into the phone, and dropped it, and fell to my knees, my breath hitching as I hurried to sweep the shards together so no one would step on them.

Rosalie, who had stopped by after work, appeared in the kitchen doorway. She stood there, watching me from a safe distance, her arms folded across her chest. Her expression carried no warmth, no inquiry, and no offer to help. It was a look of cool appraisal.

"Mom," she said slowly, her tone heavy with judgment. "Why are you always so out of control lately?"

I looked up at her, still holding the dustpan. For a moment I was too surprised to answer. I had dropped a glass. I was on my knees cleaning it up so nobody would get hurt. How had that become evidence that I was out of control?

For an instant, I wished she would simply bend down beside me and help pick up the glass. I did not need her to solve my problems. I did not even need her to understand every burden I was carrying. A hand reaching for the broom, a quiet "Mom, are you all right?" would have been enough.

Instead, I found myself preparing to defend my character to my own daughter while down on the kitchen floor.

"I am not out of control, Rosalie. I am stretched to the limit. Grandpa is recovering from open-heart surgery, your father is unwell, and your grandmother stepped away when we needed her. A little understanding would mean a great deal."

I thought my daughter would see what I was carrying. Instead, her face settled into calm condescension.

"Everyone has stress, Mom," she said, her voice cool and unfamiliar, the voice of a stranger. "You're the only one who turns it into a tragedy. Maybe if you managed your time better, you wouldn't be dropping things and snapping at everyone. You just have difficulty managing your life."

"Rosalie, ask me about your grandfather. Ask me how he is."

"I'm sure he's fine." She glanced at her watch. "I have to go."

Without offering to take the broom, without asking about her grandfather or acknowledging the work I had done to put dinner on the table, she turned around and walked out of the room.

I remained on the kitchen floor after Rosalie left, the dustpan still in my hands. I had wanted her to understand how difficult things had become. Instead, she seemed to believe I was the problem. I looked toward the doorway where she had stood, wishing she would come back and ask how Grandpa was doing. The broken glass stayed in the dustpan by the back door. I did not empty it for a long time.

* * *

As a mother of young children, I was still at the school from time to time for parent-teacher evenings and seminars, where I met other mothers. One spring evening, at a seminar for the parents of seniors, I met Harriet. Her older daughter had been Rosalie's close friend all through school, and her younger one, Jennifer, was now in Dalia's grade. I had known Harriet for fifteen years. It is always nice to see a familiar face, but something about this one did not feel familiar. She looked at me across the room with a cold stare.

Why the stare? I thought. I'll break the ice. That usually works.

"Harriet, hello!" I said, crossing to her. "It's so good to see you again. I hear glorious reports about Jennifer. Your little genius."

What came back was a colder stare. "Is everything okay, Harriet?" I asked.

"I'm okay, Abigail. But you're no mother." Her voice was low. "What's this sudden interest in showing up at a school meeting?"

I was stunned. I kept my composure. Perhaps, just perhaps, I could get some answers if I kept the conversation going.

"Harriet, what are you saying? Why the change? You know me. Where is this coming from?"

"Well, Abigail." She lifted her chin. "There's talk that you're cold. Stone cold to your children."

"Honestly, Harriet, I don't know where that is coming from. Does that sound like the person you have known all these years? I can't believe you would believe something so unkind about someone you know."

"I heard it directly from Rosalie," Harriet said. "She's hurting. She needs a mother."

"Rosalie told you that?" I asked. I could hardly believe my own daughter had described me that way. "Thank you for telling me,

Harriet." I turned away before she could see how deeply her words had hurt.

It was another bombshell. What else was still to crack in my life?

* * *

That night I called my older brother Benjamin from the car, before I went in.

"Eleanor walked out on the morning of Dad's surgery," I said. "She said she would never watch the children again. She gave no reason."

"Ma told me." I heard him shift the phone to the other ear. "That is a hard thing to do. But Abigail, a woman is allowed to stop babysitting."

"And tonight Harriet told me I am stone cold to my children. She said she heard it from Rosalie."

"Rosalie is tired. You're tired. That's what stress sounds like from the outside."

"Then why does it feel as though everyone knows something I don't?"

"Because you haven't slept properly in months." He let out a breath. "And think who you're talking about. Eleanor is the most respected woman in that whole community. Who would hear you say a word against her? I wouldn't say it to anyone, if I were you."

I held the telephone against my ear, waiting for him to say something more. I hadn't called to turn him against Eleanor. I had called because I was frightened by what was happening in my family, and I needed someone who knew me to listen. But he had already told me what he thought I should do: say nothing. The worst of it was that he was probably right.

"Get some sleep," he said. But the words sounded hollow. This wasn't the Benjamin who had been the security of my childhood.

I rolled from one side of the bed to the other. Eleanor's silence was one weight and my brother's coolness was another, and now Rosalie was confiding in Harriet that I was a cold mother. Where would this end? I

was only myself, the same woman who had never lacked for friends or for people who wanted her on their team, and I had never walked away from a problem. Toward morning I got up, sat at the kitchen table, and opened the ledger book by the phone. I wrote the date of my father's surgery, and beneath it: E.: "I am done." Then I added what I had heard since. R.: "You have difficulty managing your life." H.: "Stone cold. Heard it from R." Then, below the lines, I wrote one word on its own: Why?

Counting the line I had written in 1985 and the word I had written beside Eleanor's name, it was the third entry of its kind in all my years of keeping books. There would be many more.

A few weeks later I decided to speak to Harriet myself. It would not be pleasant, but she had been something of a mentor to Rosalie since the school years, and Rosalie had been confiding in her. I did not want to go behind my daughter's back, so I asked Rosalie first.

Her face changed. "No way. Why would you want to talk to her? You want her to see your side. You want someone to comfort you. Is no one allowed to disagree with you?"

"I need to understand how we came to this, Rosalie," I said. "She's a wise woman, and she's your mentor. If you want what is best for this family, I don't see why you would mind."

I did not let up. I may have been called stubborn, but there are times when it is needed. Robert, her husband, was in the next room, and I think she felt she could not refuse with him listening. In the end she relented.

Harriet agreed to meet. She was gracious, and she was entirely on Rosalie's side. She told me Rosalie needed a mother who was present, and that I did not see what she needed. I tried to explain the year I had had: my father's surgery, the business on my own, a hot meal on the table every night. I did not tell her about Michael; I was not sure myself what to make of it. Even without him, there was plenty on my plate. She listened politely. In her eyes, none of it excused being too hard pressed to give my children the usual family time.

Before I left I asked whether she would be willing to act as a go-between for Rosalie and me.

"I wish I could," Harriet said. "I really don't have the time." She said it kindly, and she walked me to the door.

That night I wrote in the ledger: H.: "No time." Beneath it I drew a line.

CHAPTER 9

* * *

NOT MYSELF

San Diego, spring–autumn 2010

I had always been upbeat, and happiest when I was busy. I loved my home, I loved the people who worked with me, and my children were the delight of my life. At the warehouse, when a shipment went missing, people came to my office because they knew I would not raise my voice, and that I would not blame someone who had tried their best. At home, when the older ones came storming in to complain that the little ones were being a nuisance, I could usually find a way to ease the tension and restore the peace. It took a great deal for me to lose my composure. So when it began, I did not recognize it as mine.

A few days after my father's surgery, I came home late to find Tamar hollering and Dalia standing over her, red in the face. Dalia had borrowed a comic book from a friend, and Tamar, who had just turned five, had used it as the base for one of her paintings. It was ruined.

"You're going to pay for that," Dalia said.

"I'm not. It's not a big deal."

"Then I'll take your dolls. And your sticker collection."

"You're a horrible sister!" Tamar shouted. "You're the worst!"

I stood in the doorway with my keys still in my hand. This was the girl who used to break every cookie in two so that no one would have less. I did not know what had hit us.

A few days later I was invited to a friend's fortieth birthday party. I had met Stephanie when Rosalie was a baby and we took a parenting class

together. She was not a confidante, but she was cheerful and warm and easy to talk to, and we had kept in touch ever since. She loved to cook and bake, so I went to a gift shop and chose a beautiful molded cake pan, the kind used for designer cakes. The staff wrapped it nicely and were pleasant to me.

I am embarrassed to write how difficult I was in that store. It took me far too long to choose, and it did not end when I finally did. At home I decided it was the wrong gift, and the next day I went back to exchange it. I gave some explanation of what was wrong with it. I could feel every eye in the shop on me. The saleswoman gave me a look I can only call pity. I did not take the hint. I told myself I was perfectly entitled to take half an hour of her time and then blame her for not having the gift I needed.

Then the tears started, at odd times and in odd places. I developed a sore throat and went to the doctor for a simple throat culture. The nurse came in, looked at me, and asked whether I was all right. It was the kindness that undid me. I could only nod, and I left the office as quickly as I could, crying, with no idea where the tears were coming from.

That spring I went to my hairdresser, as I had for years. I trusted her so completely that I never even looked in the mirror while she worked. She is a wonderful person, and an hour in her chair had always been a pleasure. That Wednesday morning, nothing she did could please me. One side was too long. The layers were too short. The part was in the wrong place. She did everything I asked and gave me a strange look, which was not like her. I felt strongly that I was the customer, and that it was my right to keep insisting nothing had been done right.

I still believed the problem was everyone else. It was as if the whole world had suddenly run out of patience with me.

Then, one evening, I tried to cook a proper dinner for the children, if only to prove to myself that I was fine. I left the tray in the oven too long, and it came out half burned. Michael and the children walked into the kitchen together, glanced at the pan, glanced at one another,

and quietly walked out. A moment later Tamar came back alone. "It's okay, Mom," she said. "We can have sandwiches."

Why the sudden pity? At first I could not understand it. But it was that look on a five-year-old's face that finally woke me. I was not behaving like myself, and everyone could see it but me. Rosalie had told me I was dropping things and snapping at everyone, and I had not believed her. Now I let myself feel what I had been refusing to feel. I could not hide how deeply my children's coldness hurt me, and the hurt was coming out of me everywhere, at people who had done nothing to deserve it.

Later that evening, Michael asked me what was going on. I could not tell him. "Get some rest, Abigail," he said. I had heard those words so often by then that they barely registered.

I had blamed many things in those months: the long hours, the warehouse, my father's slow recovery, Michael's silence, and Eleanor's. All of them were real. But it was months before I understood even this much, and the full picture would take years.

When I next sat in my hairdresser's chair, I apologized for how I had behaved. I was still hurting, but at least I could put a name to it: a sadness over what was happening in my family. She was one of the very first people I opened up to. She did not judge me. "I understand," she said. "Life can throw us some punches." I have never forgotten it.

Only many years later, when I felt somewhat whole again, did I understand the rest. Being rejected by the people closest to me had made me painfully self-conscious, and I had begun to need everything around me to be perfect: the gift, the haircut, the dinner. I had never been like that. And the tension did not stay outside the house. My children felt it at home, and I think it was part of what I walked into that evening, when two sisters who loved each other were fighting over a comic book.

I still go to the same hairdresser, all these years later. She always asks how I am, and she listens to the answer. I have thought more than once

that she gave me something that year that my own family could not. She saw me at my worst, and she decided it was not who I was.

CHAPTER 10

* * *

THE BAKERY BOX

San Diego, 2011

It took nearly a year of hard daily discipline to right our family. Slowly, things calmed. My father's recovery progressed, and he was finally able to spend quiet mornings on the back patio with my mother.

"Look at him," my mother said on the phone one morning. "He is telling the sparrows what they are doing wrong."

"That sounds like Dad."

"He is back, Abigail. Slowly. But he is back."

At the warehouse, through strict cost control and late nights over freight manifests, I kept the company solvent. Michael remained in a fog, rising each morning and putting on his tie to attend the clinic, but moving through our home like a silent, detached spectator.

"How was your day?" I would ask him in the hall.

"Fine."

"Fine" had become his whole vocabulary. Throughout that grueling stretch, Eleanor had remained completely absent from our daily burdens. She offered no childcare, no check-ins, and no word about her sudden departure on the morning of my father's surgery.

Yet Eleanor continued seeing Rosalie and Noam regularly. They went out for dinners downtown, and she often surprised them with gifts. Dalia was away at college, while Daniel, now a senior, spent much of his time in his room with his models and headphones.

"Grandma took us to the hotel again last night," Noam told me on the phone, and I could hear the pleasure in his voice. "You should see what she gave Rosalie."

"That's wonderful, Noam. Enjoy it."

At the time, my practical mind welcomed this. I was running on a deficit of time and energy, and if their grandmother was giving them warmth while I kept the business alive, I considered it a blessing.

One Tuesday afternoon I was at the kitchen sink, scrubbing a stubborn roasting pan before sitting down to review the week's accounts, when the doorbell rang. I dried my hands and opened the front door to find Eleanor standing on the porch. She was holding a large, beautifully wrapped bakery box tied with a satin ribbon. She looked ten years older than the woman who had stood in my hallway a year before, and her tailored blazer hung a little loose at the shoulders. Her posture was not rigid or aloof, as it had been on the morning of my father's surgery. Her eyes were filled with tears. I had imagined this moment a hundred ways over the past year, and in none of them was she crying.

"Abigail," she whispered, her voice trembling. "May I please come in?"

I hesitated. But I was raised in a family where reconciliation was always given a chance. I stepped aside and led her into the living room. Penina and Tamar, six now and curious about the satin ribbon, hovered in the doorway until Eleanor smiled at them. She set the box on the coffee table and sat on the sofa. I sat beside her, and she reached out to clasp both of my hands in hers. Her grip was tight, her eyes pleading.

"I have been so foolish, darling," she said, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Last year, seeing Michael struggling with his health, seeing everything you were carrying, I panicked. I felt so overwhelmed that I walked away when you needed me most. I stood in your hallway on the morning your father went into surgery and told you I was done. I have heard myself say it every night since. There is no excuse, and I will not insult you with one. It was terribly, terribly wrong of me. I am asking nothing of you. I only could not bear for you to go on thinking

that this is who I am. I have prayed for your father every morning for a year."

I sat in silence, taken aback. An apology from a woman of Eleanor's stature and pride was extraordinarily rare. Her hair was pulled back without its usual care, and her face, without its layers of powder and color, was the face of the woman who had fought an umbrella up my walk the winter Rosalie was born. I had loved her that morning. I felt it again, against my will. I have wondered since whether the bare face was part of the performance. I will never know.

"You have been an exceptional wife to my son," she continued, her voice heavy with emotion. "You are the glue holding this entire family together. I love you, Abigail, and I feel so deeply indebted to you for everything you shoulder. I watched you carry your father, your husband, and my grandchildren all at once, and I should have been holding the other end of every one of them. Can you ever forgive a foolish woman?"

I wanted to forgive her. I missed the easy afternoons when we could sit together over coffee and talk about the children. I missed having someone who seemed to understand how much I carried. And I wanted my family to be at peace again.

"Of course, Eleanor," I said softly, squeezing her hands. "It was a hard year for all of us. Let's leave it in the past."

"Not so quickly," she said, almost smiling through her tears. "Let me earn it."

She had asked for nothing, and she had refused the easy forgiveness I offered, and I think that, more than the tears, is what undid my caution.

Accepting her apology did not feel foolish. It felt like getting part of my family back.

"Then you must open the box," she said, wiping her eyes and smiling at last. "It is honey cake, from the bakery on Fifth. I remembered that you liked it."

"What's inside, Mommy?" Penina asked.

"Cake," I said. "Honey cake."

"Can we have some?" asked Tamar, who had already decided.

Eleanor laughed, a real laugh, and cut the first slice herself. The twins ate with their eyes closed. I thought of the story she used to tell the children about whose mother-in-law really made the famous honey cake, and I almost asked her to tell it again. For the first time in a year, the living room felt like the room I remembered.

"And how is my son?" she asked, when the girls had run off with their plates.

"Tired," I said. "Some days are better than others."

"He has always carried too much." She looked down at her lap. "Please give him my love."

The knot in my stomach loosened, and our family seemed whole again.

It was only that night, washing the cake plates, that an unwelcome thought surfaced. Years before, after the cold front hall and the smock dress, I had promised myself that if it ever happened again, I would ask what it meant. Now it had happened again: a coldness, then a kindness, and nothing in between to explain either one. This time the kindness came tied with a satin ribbon. And once again I had said nothing. Why ruin a good evening by looking for trouble? I dried the last plate.

I set each dish in its place, but the thoughts in my mind would not stack so neatly. Eleanor was a woman of standing and grace. Why did she keep leaving me uneasy? I had no answer, but the question stayed, and once again my guard went up a little. I had known since the morning of my father's surgery that whatever Eleanor was to this family, she was not a friend I could lean on when it mattered. She was Michael's mother and my children's grandmother, and I chose a careful peace over none. And a woman who had spent a year paying for one bad morning, and who had come to my door with nothing to ask, could not be only that.

Before I turned out the light, I opened the ledger book by the phone and wrote the date, and beneath it: E. returned. Honey cake. "Foolish."

Cold, then kind. Same as 1985 (smock dress). I looked at the lines for a long moment before I closed the book.

Two days later my mother telephoned, and I could hear that she was smiling. "Your mother-in-law was here," she said. "She came with a slice of honey cake wrapped in a napkin and sat on the patio with your father for an hour. She did not say a word about the surgery until he asked where she had been. And then she told him. She cried, Abigail. Your father, who cannot bear to see a woman cry, told her she was a silly woman and that the sparrows had been asking after her."

I laughed, and my mother laughed with me, and then she said, more quietly, "Whatever she did, she has paid for it. A person who does not mean it does not sit on a patio with an old man for an hour." I had no answer to that. I did not want one.

My mother knew only that Eleanor had gone that morning. She did not know about the year that followed, because I had not told her; I had no wish to hand her a worry on top of my father's recovery. She had once told me to keep my own books, and she did not ask to see mine.

With harmony restored, Eleanor stepped back into our lives with her familiar, energetic presence. The Tuesday coffees resumed. She arrived at four o'clock, set her handbag on the credenza, and asked about the business as though no year had passed.

The same compliments were back. "You held the ship together, Abigail," she said, stirring her cup. "Anyone else would have gone under. I told Ruth Adler so only last week. I said, my daughter-in-law is a marvel."

"You said that?"

"Of course I said that, darling. Why would I not?"

I felt the warmth settle over me like sunlight after a long winter, and I did not examine it. That night I slept as I had not slept since before my father's surgery. The next morning I caught myself humming over the dishes, and I let myself.

CHAPTER 11

* * *

THE STUDY DOOR

San Diego, 2012–2013

Over the years I had seen the signs of Michael's retreat come and go, and in recent years more often than they went: the chronic fatigue, the pinpoint pupils, the long hours spent staring into space. I had attributed it to depression, or to the unrelenting weight of his practice. If I am honest, part of me had suspected more than I admitted. A doctor's wife learns the names of things, and I had chosen not to say them, because each time the shadow lifted I wanted to believe it was gone. But my mind deals in evidence, and eventually the discrepancies could no longer be explained away.

Even then, there were evenings that made it easy to look away.

Friday nights were the best hour of my week. By sundown the kitchen smelled of challah and chicken soup, and the twins had been scrubbed and buttoned into their good dresses. I lit the candles. Michael made the Kiddush in his rich baritone, and Daniel, eighteen and pretending not to care, sang the harmony. Then Michael sat back, thinner than he used to be but in fine form that night, and gave us the rabbi, the pharmacist, and the man at the bakery who always counted the change twice, until Penina laughed so hard she slid off her chair and Tamar, who took her duties seriously, informed her that this was not how a lady sits.

Everyone talked at once over dessert. I remember thinking that I had everything I had ever asked of life, and that no sum of money would have bought me that noise. Only later did I notice that Michael had

gone quiet in the middle of the meal and left his dessert untouched. It had been a long week, I thought, and I went on humming.

It began with a coat. I was gathering clothes for the cleaners the following Tuesday morning when my hand closed around something hard in the pocket of his tan trench coat. It was an amber pharmacy bottle. The label carried the name of a colleague of Michael's, not his own, and the date of a fill eleven days earlier. Sixty tablets had been dispensed. I counted what was left. There were nine.

I counted the tablets again, although I knew I had counted correctly. Then I put the bottle back exactly where I had found it. I went about the rest of my morning, but I kept seeing those nine pills in the palm of my hand. That night, and the next, I lay awake, listening to him breathe. I wanted to ask him about the bottle. I was afraid of what he might tell me.

I was frightened for his health, and almost as frightened by the sudden distance between us. We had built a marriage on the belief that whatever came, we would face it together. Now I was holding something that said there was a part of his life I knew nothing about.

My mind was whirling. A heart condition or diabetes I could have faced; those have names and treatments, and families know how to rally around them. This I did not know how to face. I was walking into the unknown, and I knew I could not buckle. My family needed me, and I would do whatever needed to be done.

On Sunday evening I waited until the younger children were asleep. I walked into Michael's study and quietly closed the door behind me. He was sitting at his mahogany desk, his skin carrying that familiar ghostly pallor, staring at a stack of unfiled patient charts. I sat in the leather armchair across from him and looked him directly in the eye.

"Michael, I know," I said gently, keeping my voice steady despite the grief tightening my chest. "I found the bottle in your coat. I'm not here to condemn you. But no more pretending. Not after tonight."

For a long moment the study was utterly silent. I braced myself for the defensive arguments, the polished medical justifications he had used

before. Instead, the last of his defenses simply dissolved. Michael dropped his face into his hands and wept, great shuddering sobs that seemed to have been waiting years for a way out.

"It isn't new," he said, between breaths. "It isn't something that started here. I had a serious illness as a boy, and the pills were part of how I got through it. I thought I had left it behind, and for long stretches I had. I would stop, and be well for a year, sometimes two, and then a hard season would come and I would take one, only one, to get through it. It was never more than that, not until these last few years. The practice, the hours, my mother's expectations. One is never enough now, and I can't stop. I was terrified that if anyone found out, I would lose everything."

"Everything," I repeated.

"My name. My license. My mother's face when she heard." He reached across the blotter, his hands trembling. "I can't stop, Abigail. I've tried. I am so sorry. I will do whatever you ask. Please help me." It was the first time in months that he had really looked at me, and I saw the boy he must once have been, frightened and trying so hard to be good.

"I knew something was wrong," I said, more gently than I felt. "For two years I have known. I did not know what."

"I made sure you wouldn't." He gave a ghost of his old dry smile, and it hurt to see. "I know what a family looks for, Abigail. I taught myself to look like a man who was only tired."

I looked at the man sitting across from me, his shoulders bent, his hands still trembling. I wanted to reach for him, but I was also frightened and hurt that he had kept this from me for so long. For a moment neither of us spoke. At least now I knew what we were facing. We could begin looking for help.

I did not think, then or later, of leaving. Michael had been a loving husband and a wonderful father for more than twenty-five years, and illness can come to anyone. It could have been me, I thought, and I asked myself whether, if it had been me, he would have walked out the

door. I knew that he would not. We were a team, and our love was strong. Whatever else had come undone, that part of us had held.

"I love you, Michael," I said softly. "But you can't go on like this, not in this house. You need real help. Take a leave from the clinic and go into a treatment program. I'll manage the business. I'll take care of the children. But you have to save your own life."

He nodded slowly, his eyes on the desk. "Tell me where to go."

"And your mother?" I asked. He closed his eyes. "Tell her, but only after I am inside," he said. "If she asks me to come home, I will not be strong enough to go."

Within forty-eight hours I had found a confidential program for physicians, sorted out our insurance, and spoken to an intake coordinator at a respected inpatient recovery facility.

"We have a bed on Wednesday, Mrs. Winters," she said. "Is he willing?"

"He is," I said. "He asked."

"That is more than half the battle," she told me.

I drove him there myself. At the door he stood a moment with his small suitcase, and I said only, "We'll be here." That night I told the children at home what I could: that their father was sick, that the sickness had a name, and that the place he had gone would help him. Daniel asked only whether he could visit. Penina asked whether Daddy had a cold. I phoned Dalia at school, and she was quiet for so long I thought the line had dropped. The next morning at breakfast, Penina laid her father's spoon beside his empty chair. I did not have the heart to move it.

That night I also called Rosalie and Noam. I did not want them to hear it from anyone else, and in a facility full of patients and staff, word can travel. Rosalie was quiet, but she was with me. She had been worried too. Noam was frantic. He took it as a personal blow, and his first thought was how he would face the world as the son of a father in rehab.

It hurt us all.

I dreaded telling Eleanor. We had only recently found our way back to each other, and I knew how proud she was of Michael. But I remembered her apology, the afternoon she had spent with my father, and the warmth that had returned between us. Surely, whatever difficulties we had experienced, we could put them aside for Michael's sake. I picked up the kitchen telephone and called her.

"Eleanor, I have hard news," I said quietly. "Michael is safe. But he's been addicted to prescription pills for a long time. It goes back to his illness as a boy. He told me himself, and today he went into a treatment program."

There was a long pause on the line. I waited for the gasp, for the tears, for the frantic questions about his well-being. When Eleanor finally spoke, her voice had dropped into a low, icy register.

"How dare you."

I stood frozen. "Eleanor, I know this is a shock—"

"Do not speak to me as if you understand anything." She cut me off. "My son is a brilliant, distinguished physician. He is not an addict. He is exhausted because he works himself into the ground to sustain the extravagant expectations you place on him."

"Eleanor, he told me himself," I pleaded. "He sat in his study and asked for help—"

"He asked for an escape from you." There was not a second of hesitation. "You are an impossible, relentlessly demanding woman, Abigail. You have made that house so tense and chaotic that you have driven my son to this. To invent an addiction to cover your own shortcomings as a wife is utterly disgraceful. Do not contact me again."

The line went dead. I kept the receiver against my ear for another moment, unable to believe the conversation was over. Michael had asked for help, and I had helped him enter treatment. I lowered the receiver, my hand trembling.

I stood in the kitchen a long time. I had phoned a mother to tell her that her son was safe, and had been told that I had invented his illness. My first thought had been to protect Michael. Hers, it seemed, was to protect a name.

I thought of my friends and their mothers-in-law, who criticized the cooking or the children's manners or the way the napkins were folded. None of them had ever told me of a woman who wept on my sofa one year and, the next, told her daughter-in-law that she had invented her son's illness. Theirs were quarrels. This was something else, and I did not yet have a name for it.

That Sunday I phoned Susie, as I did every Sunday, at six my time and nine hers. I told her that Michael was unwell and was being cared for, and that his mother had taken it badly, and I said no more than that; the rest was not mine to tell. Susie did not ask for more. She let the silence sit on the line for a moment, the way only an old friend can, and then she said, "Abigail, you were the only girl in our dorm who read the syllabus before the semester started. You will read your way through this, too."

I laughed, for the first time in days, and found that my eyes were wet. Susie had known me before I was anyone's wife or daughter-in-law, and it was a comfort past words to be spoken to by someone who remembered that girl. "Call me next Sunday," she said, "and the Sunday after. And let somebody help you." I said I would. I hung up lighter than I had been in a week, and went to look in on the twins.

With Michael away in treatment and Eleanor openly hostile, our household entered a period of heavy financial and emotional pressure. A sudden downturn in the regional textile market hit our business hard, and without Michael's income, the mortgage and household bills became a weight I carried alone at the kitchen table. I spent my nights staring at spreadsheets.

"Three of them," I told my warehouse supervisor one morning, handing him the list of names I could no longer pay. My voice would

not hold steady. “I can’t carry them this quarter. I’ll take their floor shifts myself.”

“Abigail, you can’t lift those bolts all day and do the books all night.”

“Watch me.”

By the end of my first week on the warehouse floor, my shoulders ached and my hands were sore. I came home smelling of cotton dust, changed my clothes, and went straight to the kitchen to see what the children needed. When the house was finally quiet, I opened the ledgers. There were evenings when I could barely keep my eyes on the figures, but the bills still had to be paid, and the next morning the warehouse doors still had to open. It was the honest tiredness of work that needs doing, and I slept well on it.

What I had not counted on was the crew. They had called me Mrs. Winters for years, and within a week they were calling me something else when they thought I could not hear, and I pretended not to. My supervisor quietly rearranged the pallets so that the heaviest bolts sat at waist height. Someone left a thermos of tea on my desk each morning. On Fridays the men drew straws for who would carry my bolts to the loading dock, and lost, loudly, on purpose. I had been afraid of how it would look, the owner on the floor in work gloves. It looked, I found, like a woman who was not above her own warehouse, and they respected that more than a signature.

* * *

Michael came home on a bright morning in early spring. The spoon Penina had set beside his empty chair had never been moved, and the twins stood at the window for an hour before the car pulled in. He stepped out thinner than I remembered, holding the same small suitcase, and for a moment he only stood on the walk, looking at the house as if he were not sure it was still his. He was changed, and he would stay changed: fragile, tired, a shadow of the physician he had

been. I loved him no less. I learned to treasure his moments of clarity when they came.

Penina and Tamar learned to tiptoe past his door on his hard afternoons, and to climb onto the sofa beside him on his good ones. Eleanor, however, refused to acknowledge her son's medical reality. She did not call, and she did not visit. Once, from the couch, he asked, "Has my mother called?" I said she had not. He nodded slowly, the way he had nodded in his study, and turned his face to the cushions. He never asked again. I came to understand that he stopped asking because he already knew the answer.

Leon, by then, was in no position to ask. He had begun to slip during the years of Michael's decline, a name lost in the middle of a sentence, the same story told twice, and by the time Michael went into treatment the doctors had given it a name: early dementia. No one told him what had happened to his son. When he asked, cheerfully, how Michael was, he was told that Michael was working hard, which was true. I missed him then more than I could say. Of everyone in that family, he had been the one who looked at me as though what I said mattered.

Michael continued to suffer from cravings and tremors. He spent a large part of each day wrapped in a blanket on the living room couch, trying to calm himself. He joined support groups, both in person and online, which gave his days some structure. What pained him most was feeling useless. After a few months of recuperating at home, still edgy and limited, he found his interest in medicine returning. He was not fit to practice, of course. His license was on hold while the state's monitoring program ran its course, and there was no income from the clinic, so every check that kept us afloat was one I earned.

"I've been reading about opioid tolerance," he told me one evening, with something in his voice I had not heard in years. "What it does, and what we miss when we prescribe. I have an idea for a paper."

"Tell me," I said.

Having lived it himself, he began to research the effects of painkillers, the damage they do, and the adaptations medicine might need. He

hoped to publish his findings. It kept him stimulated in a healthy way, and I loved to hear about it. It also kept him connected to other professionals, which gave him much-needed standing among his peers.

I was glad for him. For a while it felt as though we had both survived something, and might yet find our way back to the people we had been.

CHAPTER 12

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CONFUSION EVERYWHERE

San Diego, 2013–2014

With Michael still in recovery and the business on razor-thin margins, I was functioning as a single parent carrying the workload of three people. I knew that surviving a crisis of this scale would take allies, and I hoped I had them. I could not have known how little I would recognize the people who answered.

The first came on a Sunday afternoon in the autumn of 2013. I was at the kitchen sink, rinsing the last of the supper dishes before sitting down to review the week's accounts. Dalia, twenty now and back at home after two years away at college, balancing her ensemble commitments with her classes, walked in and tossed her heavy denim jacket onto the counter, knocking over a freshly sorted stack of business mail.

"Dalia, please hang that up in the hall closet," I said gently, brushing a stray lock of hair from my forehead.

She stopped, crossed her arms, and let out a dramatic sigh.

"Rosalie says you're always so stressed out about little things," she said, with an edge of impatience. "It's just a jacket, Mom. Why does everything have to be a major issue with you?"

I stopped rinsing the dishes. I had asked Dalia to put away her jacket, nothing more. Her annoyance didn't surprise me as much as the mention of Rosalie. Why had my older daughter been discussing how I handled things around the house? I turned off the tap and dried my hands.

"Dalia, it's a jacket on top of the mail," I said. "Please hang it up. And please don't speak to me that way."

She rolled her eyes slightly, picked up the jacket, and walked away. A year earlier she would have hung it up, smiled, and said "Whoops, I'm sorry, Mom." I stood in the quiet kitchen, turning the sentence over. Rosalie says you're always so stressed out. Was my strain being passed along as a trait, as if it were something I was and not something I was carrying? It was an unsettling thought, and I did not say it aloud.

I wanted to call Dalia back and say I was tired, not angry; overwhelmed, not incapable. But I could not think how to say it without sounding as though I were defending myself against an accusation I had never expected to hear.

That week I called our eldest son, Noam, who had moved to Texas that year to complete his studies. He had always been an intelligent, perceptive young man, and I hoped that as an adult he could offer a word of comfort.

"Noam, sweetheart," I said late one evening from my office desk, rubbing my burning eyes. "I just wanted to hear your voice. Dad is working hard at getting better, but things here are stretched thin. Business is down, and I'm working on the floor myself now. I could use a little encouragement."

I waited for the warmth I had always heard in his voice.

"Mom," Noam said. His voice was light, casual, and completely detached. "You're an adult. You have choices."

I blinked, and pulled the phone slightly away from my ear. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, if the business is struggling, why don't you just go to the bank and take out a commercial loan?" he suggested, as though advising a stranger on a minor inconvenience. "Or find another revenue stream. You just need to figure it out instead of complaining about it."

A cold knot formed in my chest.

"Noam, I'm working fourteen-hour days to keep our home standing while your father recovers. A bank won't lend to a business that's losing money. I'm not complaining. I'm calling my son."

He let out a heavy, exasperated sigh. It was not a sound I had ever heard from my son.

"Look, Mom, everyone knows you have a hard time handling pressure," he said flatly. "You always make things sound worse than they are."

The line went quiet. Neither of us spoke. I could hear that I was getting nowhere, and that every word I added would only make me sound more like a nuisance. "Be well, Noam," I said. "Bye."

I almost called him back. I wanted to tell him that I hadn't expected him to solve anything. I had only wanted to hear that he cared about how we were managing at home. Instead I set the receiver down, and thought of the little boy who used to bring me dandelions with the stems bitten off.

He was always the child who did things around the house without being asked. If we ran out of juice, a carton would appear in the refrigerator. If the little ones crumbled cookies on the floor, Noam was the one who stood up and swept them. Bulbs were changed without a word, and sometimes only days later would I notice and thank him. I have wondered since what else he did that I never saw. When I thanked him, his face would light up. He loved making me happy. I had never expected him to be cold to anyone, least of all his mother. I looked at the invoices on my desk, and for a while I could not pick up my pen.

Michael's medical crisis had vanished from the conversation. Nobody had asked about his health, or about the catastrophe our family was living through. In its place stood a different story, already finished: Their father isn't ill. Their mother is simply an anxious, difficult woman who struggles to manage her life. How could my son, who knew me so well, accept it so quickly?

Rosalie was the one I turned to next. In the months after the bakery box, when Eleanor's warmth had returned, Rosalie's had returned

with it, and for a while she had telephoned on Fridays again and once asked my advice about her son's school. The Fridays had grown quiet since Michael went into treatment. She was an adult now, married and raising two small children of her own, and because she was running her own household, I assumed we could speak as peers. I visited her on a quiet Thursday morning. We sat at her kitchen table over cups of hot tea. I was careful not to pour out my grief or ask her for money. I only wanted her to know where things stood.

"The business is struggling," I said calmly. "Without Dad's income, money is very tight. I'm not asking you to carry any of it, Rosalie. I just need someone in this family to know what I'm holding together."

Rosalie nodded thoughtfully and asked practical questions about the warehouse leases. She seemed receptive. I left her home with a sense of relief. I drove home with the windows down, humming, and I do not think I had hummed in a year.

The next morning my warehouse office telephone rang. I picked it up, expecting an import broker.

"How dare you burden your children with your personal failures." It was Eleanor. Her words were measured and icy. "You went to Rosalie's home and attempted to drag her into your financial mess. You are entirely out of line."

I stood behind my desk, stunned into silence. I had spoken to my daughter in the privacy of her own kitchen less than twenty-four hours earlier. How had Eleanor come by every detail so quickly?

"I was having an adult conversation with my daughter about our family's realities," I said, keeping my voice steady. "That is not a burden. It is honesty."

"It is instability," said Eleanor, with cold finality. "And I will not allow you to infect my grandchildren with it."

The line went dead. I sat holding the receiver, thinking about the pleasant conversation Rosalie and I had shared the morning before. I had driven home feeling that we understood each other. Now I wondered what she had told Eleanor. Had she felt burdened by our

conversation? If so, why hadn't she said anything to me? Stressed out. Everyone knows. Instability. I had now heard the same few phrases from three different mouths, and in none of them could I find the children I knew.

That night I wrote the phrases in the ledger, one beneath another, each with the date and the speaker's name, the way I would log the same defect arriving from three different suppliers.

That call from Eleanor was the first time I saw that news was traveling, and in one direction. Until then the shocks had come one at a time and far apart. Why was my private conversation at Rosalie's table on Eleanor's desk by morning? And why was it so important to describe me this way? Noam, too, had gone silent on the phone until I was the one to say goodbye. I did not yet let myself imagine that someone might be arranging all of it. I had no enemies. I got along with everyone, or so I thought.

I kept thinking small. Perhaps Rosalie was feeling pressured and had found someone to share it with, though that would not explain Eleanor's outburst. Perhaps Noam was truly under pressure. But the tone of Eleanor's voice stayed with me. It was the voice of someone who had already reached a verdict. Where was I supposed to put that? Who would understand me?

The change at home was swift and baffling. Almost overnight Rosalie stepped into the role of family gatekeeper. If I reached out to Daniel or Dalia, their answers came back brief, cautious, and clipped. I asked them for help with small things, the twins' dinner, a ride to school, and their replies were polite and vague.

"Dalia," I said one evening, "could you watch the girls for an hour so I can finish the invoices?"

"I can't, Mom." She did not look up from her phone. "I can't help anymore."

"Did something happen?"

"No."

"Then why—"

"I just can't."

I was about to say that I understood if she had other plans. But something in her voice stopped me. She had not said she was busy. She had said she could not help anymore, as though a decision had already been made.

Before I could ask another question, Dalia began to cry. I put my arms around her and held her, asking what was wrong, but she only shook her head against my shoulder. I tried taking her for a walk, hoping she might find it easier to talk away from the house. She cried through much of the walk without telling me what was troubling her. In the days that followed, she spent long hours speaking with Rosalie and Noam on the telephone. She rarely went out with friends and seemed increasingly withdrawn. I was frightened for her, and I didn't know how to help.

At one point Dalia said she wanted to talk to someone. I went to a teacher I trusted.

"I don't want to get involved, Abigail," she said, and looked at her hands.

Before I could think who else to ask, Rosalie stepped in. Dalia was hurting, she said, and since there was no one else, she would take her to Harriet.

It was the one thing I had been trying to avoid. I had already seen what Harriet's counsel had done between Rosalie and me. But I could see the choice in front of me plainly. If I forbade it, I would be the difficult mother who would not let a hurting child talk to someone her sister trusted, and that would prove everything they said. If I allowed it, I could only hope Dalia would hear Harriet and still remember me.

I let her go. Stopping a child in pain from talking to someone, I decided, would do more harm than anything Harriet could say.

I do not know what was said at that meeting. I know only that Dalia came home quiet, and stayed quiet, and I could not reach her.

Daniel's withdrawal was quieter. One evening I stood in the doorway of the room where he was studying and said, to the room as much as to

him, "What is happening to my family? Tell me, Daniel, are you part of this too?"

He looked up at me sadly, and all but begged. "Mom, please don't make me be different from my siblings."

His answer caught me off guard. I had come hoping he would tell me what was happening, but I could hear how uncomfortable my question had made him. Whatever his reasons, he did not want to be placed apart from his siblings. I wished I had found a gentler way to ask. "Of course," I said quietly. "Study well."

There was never a single incident I could point to, and yet when the pieces were set side by side, a picture emerged. The clearest sign was how abruptly my children had changed, from loving to suddenly cold.

Michael listened from the couch with a blanket around his shoulders. "It's probably the stress," he said. "It will pass." He did not call Rosalie, and he did not call his mother, and I did not ask him to. He had no strength to spare, I thought.

Rosalie would later insist that she never told her siblings to avoid me, yet she admitted that she felt a duty to "warn" them, because she now considered me a "difficult person."

At a wedding that spring, Ruth Adler found me by the dessert table and took my hand in both of hers. "Eleanor tells me you've been under such strain," she said, her eyes full of kindness. "I hope you're resting." I thanked her and said that I was fine. It was only in the car that I thought it through. I had not spoken of the strain to anyone in that community. I had said it to one person only, on my own sofa, with both of my hands in hers.

To my business vendors, my friends, and my community, I was known as a dependable, articulate woman. When I quietly confided in a few close friends about the sudden hostility in my home, they were appalled. "What? You, Abigail? That is impossible." Those small gestures of understanding were sometimes all that held me together on the hardest days. When I needed a lift, I would call to mind my friends' words and picture their compassionate eyes, and I would know that I

was not completely alone. Yet inside my own family an entirely different picture had taken hold.

* * *

That autumn I kept trying to have an ordinary conversation with Rosalie, the way one keeps trying a door that has stuck.

I called on a Wednesday evening, cheerful, with news. "I am thinking of taking an accounting course," I said. "Just a few evenings. I have kept the books by instinct for thirty years, and I would like to know the vocabulary."

"You'll never manage that," Rosalie said.

I laughed, because I thought she must be teasing. She was not. There was no heat in it. It was said the way one reports the weather.

A week later I told her I had finally taught myself the new inventory software, after a weekend of muttering at the screen. "It took me forever, but it works."

"You have to be smart to figure that out," she said, and let the sentence sit between us.

It took me a moment to understand that I had just been told I was not smart. I, who had run a company for thirty years.

A few weeks after that, when I saw her in person, I mentioned that I was thinking of giving a wedding shower for a friend's daughter, the way I used to, with paper bells and a dozen women and too much cake. I wanted her to say, Of course you should.

Rosalie did not answer. She looked at me, rolled her eyes, and let the silence tell me the idea was not worth a reply.

I looked at her and tried to find the daughter who had once cut out paper dolls with me at the kitchen table, and could not. Even a small thing was no longer safe in her hands. Once, when one of her little ones took a tumble in her kitchen, I said, without thinking, "Oh my, he fell down."

"Why is everything a tragedy!" she snapped, and the friend standing by the stove looked down into her cup.

After a while, I stopped sharing my plans with Rosalie. I missed being able to call my daughter with a small piece of good news, knowing she would be pleased for me. Now, before picking up the telephone, I found myself wondering how she might respond.

The relationship between us went cold.

When Rosalie gave birth to her third child, Robert called to let me know.

"A girl, Abigail. Everyone is fine."

"Mazel tov, Robert," I said. "How are Rosalie and your precious new baby daughter doing?" We made some small talk and I asked if he needed anything.

I hung up and stood in the kitchen with the phone in my hand. Lately Rosalie had added a new word to the old ones: stubborn. I had begun to wonder whether I was stubborn precisely because I could not see how difficult I was, when everyone else could.

On the day she came home from the hospital, I put on my coat. I walked to the front door and took hold of the knob, and I could not turn it. I could picture the door opening, the baby in her arms, my granddaughter's tiny fingers. I could picture just as clearly the look on Rosalie's face: So now that there's a baby, my mother shows up. I was not strong enough yet to be looked at that way in a doorway. I took off my coat. It was the first time in my life I had not gone where I was needed, and it frightened me.

I should at least have sent two dinners. I could not manage even that. I had always been the woman with not a lazy bone in her body, and in those weeks a cup of coffee was sometimes beyond me. Every ounce of strength went into getting through the day, and at night there was nothing left. In the end I sent no gift, and I did not call. I prayed I would find another way to reach her.

I have gone back to that doorknob many times. I tell myself it is unfair to judge the woman I was then from where I stand now. I still wish I had turned it.

About two months later, I stepped out of the house one morning on my way to work, and there was Rosalie on the sidewalk, pushing a carriage. I do not know whether she had planned to meet me or was simply out for a walk with her baby. It was the first time I had seen her since the birth.

I looked at her face, and the first thing that caught my eye was a sadness. She seemed to carry a deep anguish. After a year of barely speaking, I could not begin with what had happened. So much could have happened in that time. Instead I greeted her warmly.

"Rosalie. Mazel tov. She is beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I know you are busy, and I don't want to keep you."

I yearned to connect, and I had no idea how. Rosalie did not say she was busy, and she did not walk on. Instead she forced the words out.

"Mom, stop this pain. Nothing is as important as this pain. I can't take it anymore."

I looked at my daughter, standing beside the carriage, and wished I knew what to say. She was hurting. That much was clear. I wanted to put my arms around her, but I didn't know whether she would welcome it. I wanted to ask what she needed from me, yet I was afraid that another question would only make things worse.

"I wish I knew how, Rosalie," I said quietly.

She nodded, and pushed the carriage on down the sidewalk. I stood there with my keys in my hand.

Everything was a mystery.

* * *

Dalia was the exception. One afternoon, without preamble, she looked at me and said, "Mom, I didn't know it would be temporary."

I understood her at once. She had seen me at my most overwhelmed, in the weeks of my father's surgery and after Eleanor walked out, worn thin and overwound, and she had taken that frayed woman for the mother I was. She had placed her trust in her siblings, and for most of a year she had treated me as someone who could not manage. Now she was telling me, warmly and with regret in her face, that she saw a capable mother again. I took it for what it was, an apology.

Nothing I could see had prompted her to speak just then. I can only imagine that, living at home, she sensed how much I was hurting, and that her own coldness had been part of it.

The days that followed reassured me that her trust was back. I did not press her with questions about how she could have done it, or what she had meant. I wanted to know what had changed her view, and what the year had been like for her, but I knew that asking would only keep the wound open. I was glad to close it, above all for Dalia's sake. She had had more than enough pain.

Things were better between us after that. I was fortunate that the distance had not lasted long enough for her to build other loyalties, as Rosalie and Noam had, loyalties that now left little room for their mother.

On Friday afternoon Dalia braided challah with the twins at the kitchen counter, flour to her elbows and a streak of it across her nose. Penina's loaf came out looking like a surprised octopus, and Dalia declared it the finest in the house. I stood in the doorway longer than I needed to. Nobody noticed me watching, which is exactly how I wanted it.

A year later, when Rosalie agreed to sit down with me at a quiet café, I walked in hopeful. She sat across from me, her posture rigidly guarded, her arms folded tightly, her gaze darting around the room.

“Rosalie,” I said gently, “a wall has gone up in our family. You are treating me with a distance that I simply do not understand. Have I done something to hurt you?”

“Mom, you’re just so difficult,” she blurted out, her voice tight and defensive. “You don’t realize how threatened we feel by you.”

I sat back, my mind reeling. “Threatened? Afraid of what?”

“Just of you. Your personality.” She looked away.

“Rosalie, please help me understand.” I leaned forward and kept my voice soft. “Can you give me a single concrete example of a time when I was frightening or unkind to you or your siblings? Just one.”

She opened her mouth to speak, and then stopped. Her brow furrowed. She looked genuinely frustrated, searching her memory for an event that would fit the word. She could not find one. The fear seemed to be a feeling without a single memory to hold it up. When she finally spoke, she turned to a different complaint.

“You just never understood me,” she said, her voice rising slightly. “You don’t respect me. No matter what I accomplish, you will never respect me.”

“I have always respected you,” I said, bewildered. “I’m so proud of you: your writing, your mind, the mother you’ve become. Where is this coming from?”

She had no answer. She merely shook her head.

“If the family truly wants to heal this pain,” I asked gently, “why hasn’t anyone simply sat down with me and asked, ‘Mom, how can we help you?’”

Her expression hardened. “We are innocent,” she said flatly. “Nobody planned to gang up on you. We want the best for you. This is simply the way you see things.”

“Grandma only wants what’s best for you, Mom,” Rosalie said. “She always has. She watched us every afternoon. She paid for Dalia’s piano lessons for two years. She is good to you, and you can’t see it.”

Every word was true. I could not answer any of it, because I could not say what came after the piano lessons without becoming the woman who said such things about a grandmother. I had told Dalia only that our budget could not cover them. I said nothing of that now.

"How can you say that, when you warn the other children away from me?"

Rosalie looked down at the table, and then back at me. Her chin lifted, with a certainty I did not recognize.

"I consulted with someone," she said.

The words hung in the air between us. I did not know who that someone was. A friend? A counselor who had heard only one side? Eleanor?

"Who did you consult, Rosalie?" I asked, with a quiet urgency. "If I could speak with them, perhaps we could clear up this misunderstanding."

"You are just making things difficult again," she said. "You always do this."

She stood, gathered her bag, and walked out of the café. I sat alone with my tea going cold, watching the door she had left through.

I had spent my entire life believing that truth was an anchor, that if you remained honest and devoted, fairness would eventually prevail. But watching my firstborn walk away, I felt a new weight settle over me. The young woman who had sat across from me spoke as a stranger might, and I could not find in her the child I once knew, the girl who used to beg me, "Mom, quiz me. Please. It's tomorrow."

I had always believed I was a good mother who had raised her children with kindness, and that belief kept insisting this could not be happening. Yet it was. I had no idea where the damage was coming from, and even less how to undo it. What I had taken for small, scattered troubles was something huge, and I had been right to question it, but the size of it was too much to take in. I kept working, because I had to, and the work at least gave me something solid to stand on.

It woke memories of other stories I had heard, of people living with difficult children. I never imagined I would one day be the parent in such a story. Yet here I was, the mother of a grown child who treated me with disdain, with no idea how it had happened or how to fix it.

I searched my memory for times I might have hurt Rosalie or Noam. I had certainly made mistakes. Once, I had scolded Noam for being late to school when it hadn't been his fault, and I had apologized when I realized it. There must have been other moments when I was too impatient or expected too much. I had never claimed to be a perfect mother. I asked the children to tell me what troubled them, and I apologized for any hurt I had caused. I did not believe that a bad moment here and there could be enough to steal my children's hearts, and I still couldn't understand how our relationship had become so distant, or what I could do to bring us closer again.

At that point I still believed that Rosalie had simply lost sight of who I was, so I wrote her letters. I apologized in them if I had ever hurt her, and I told her I never intended to. In one I asked, "Do you really want me to jump onto the bandwagon that is treating me disdainfully?" She did answer, but we got nowhere. All that came back was that they only wanted what was best for me, and that I needed to recognize that I had wonderful children.

It was the third time I had heard that sentence in nearly the same words, and I began to wonder where it came from.

More than once, as gently as I could, I asked whether someone else was behind this.

"No one told me anything, Mom," Rosalie said. "It's my own idea."

The answer never changed, whichever of them I asked. These were their own thoughts, they said, and this was simply how they saw me. The question itself only made things worse. They looked at me with even more disdain, as if I were imagining things: a woman with so much good in her life who was choosing to be sad.

All day I thought about how to reach Rosalie, with no idea that things could get even worse. Within two years, they did.

PART THREE

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THE WITHDRAWAL

CHAPTER 13

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THE MANILA FOLDER

San Diego, 2014–2015

The children I had painstakingly raised had pulled away, leaving me financially stretched and lonelier than I had ever been. Some days it felt as though I were holding up the walls of my business alone, while the people I loved most watched from a distance. Michael was home and quietly absorbed in his research. The older children were grown, and the wall of silence between us had hardened.

The strain showed. A friend, meeting me in the market, said gently that I looked tired, and I laughed and agreed. The pressure of the finances and the family's coldness took its toll, and now and then my hands trembled when I signed a check. To my children, sadly, that looked like instability.

I still did ordinary things, like holding a baby, taking a walk, or visiting a friend, but with less ease than before, and I longed for normalcy. I was saddened by the increasingly businesslike gestures from my family, and by their uncertainty about whether they could trust me.

I even reached out to my two brothers, hoping for a little warmth from my own family. But once again they dismissed my pain, reminding me that Eleanor was an esteemed woman who meant well. I was entirely on my own.

I had not expected them to confront Eleanor. I had hoped they would listen. I knew how generous Eleanor could be, and I had lived on that generosity for years. That was part of what made it so hard to explain.

The woman they admired was also the woman whose recent behavior had left me deeply troubled.

I then remembered that a few years earlier, one of my brothers had needed a doctor for one of his children and had been looking for someone to guide and direct him. He had called Eleanor, and she had been ever so gracious and helpful. He could not thank her enough. It was hard to reflect on this and to realize that Eleanor seemed to have secured friendships that might otherwise have been mine, using her community connections to do so.

I chose to pull through on my own, but not without much heartache. I went out to far fewer weddings and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs than I once had. That only added to the notion that "Mom is difficult and moody." Even at the celebrations I did attend, I felt very alone.

Sometimes I wondered how a woman could belong to so large a family and still be so alone. When Rosalie married, the phone had not stopped ringing, with grandparents, aunts, and uncles all calling for the latest news. Now it hardly rang at all. Part of that was my own choice. To protect Michael, I had told almost no one about his illness, and a sorrow you cannot name is a sorrow you carry by yourself. The only ones who knew the whole truth were my children, and they were the ones who had turned away.

Those years were extraordinarily hard. Creditors called constantly while I juggled the workers, the layoffs, and the bills. I did not turn to my parents. They were not wealthy people, and they had a great deal on their plate by then.

I did not yet understand that something deeper was at play. I was the mother, and I felt it was my place to make the first move. While I was still deciding how, the phone rang.

"Hi, Rosalie," I said, smiling, and wondering what she had in mind.

"Mom, it's been a long time since you were here. I'd like you to come by. Benny barely knows you."

"I'd like that," I said. "Is Friday night good, while the men are at synagogue?"

"That would be perfect."

That Friday, after lighting the candles, I put on my good shawl in honor of the Sabbath and walked to Rosalie's. It was no more than fifteen minutes, just long enough to wonder why she had called. I was afraid it would be the same play once again: a daughter who wanted her mother, and who was certain her mother had been too limited to give her the childhood she deserved.

I had barely tapped on the door when it opened.

"I heard you on the stairs, Mom. I'm so glad you came." She turned to the little boy on her hip. "See, Benny? That's Grandma. She came to see you."

Benny looked me up and down and held on a little tighter to his mother. He turned his face away, as if to hide, but his eyes stayed fixed on mine. He was precious. It was sad that he lived so close and did not know me.

We sat on her couch, and Benny slid down to the floor and went back to his matchbox cars.

The baby was asleep in a bassinet near the couch. I leaned over to look at her. She looked peaceful and well cared for, and I told Rosalie so. There was so much more I wanted to say, and so much more I wanted between us, but for now I was still testing the waters.

"Your house smells wonderful," I said. "It feels just the way a home should on the Sabbath eve. I can see how much you put into making it warm."

"Yes," she said, looking down. "But it's too quiet. We'd love to have more family here, to feel more like a family."

She said it as though I were the reason the house was quiet. I was not surprised. For all the coldness between us, I knew she wanted her mother. She simply could not see past her certainty that her mother was not capable.

We talked about her neighbors, where she did her shopping, and what she planned for Benny when he reached nursery school age.

"Right, Benny?" I said, looking down at his long train of cars. "Soon you'll be big enough for nursery school, and there'll be even more toys to play with."

Benny stared at me and went back to his game.

I lowered myself to the floor beside him. "What are you building?"

"A highway. It goes far, far, to the park."

I found a few stray cars at the edge of the rug and played along for a few minutes, waiting for him to look up at me. He didn't.

"It's okay if he doesn't want to talk to you," Rosalie said. "He's only a baby. He doesn't know how to make friends yet." A moment later she added, "I'm taking very good care of him. I'm reading all the parenting books." She gave me a look that said the rest: that I was the one who had failed her.

I felt the tears coming, and I reached for my shawl before they could.

"I guess I'll be going," I said.

On the walk home I thought that next time, if I had the courage to come again, I might bring a storybook, or a few sweets for Benny. At least this time he had seen that I was safe, even if his mother had not.

I did not invite Rosalie to my home. To do so would have signaled that I accepted her behavior as it stood, and that was not a message I was willing to send. When I went to her, at least the fragility of our relationship was acknowledged, and I judged that so long as I remained the keeper of my own boundaries, there was a better chance that the balance between us might one day shift back.

At some point Rosalie seemed to make an effort to be pleasant, and for a few months, when she reached out, I reciprocated. One summer she held a small birthday celebration for one of her children, and I spent the day with her. It was a pleasant enough day. The letters continued, but we only went around in circles, and the gap was never bridged. I remained the mother who had not been there for her. She continued to find friends who gave her solace for the mother she should have had. That hurt deeply.

About a year later Rosalie held an Upsherin for her second son, Benny, the ceremony in which a little boy's hair is cut for the first time when he turns three, and he begins to wear the skullcap our people wear. He was a dream of a child, all smiles, greeting everyone and showing off his new embroidered skullcap with his name on it. "See, Aunt Shira? I'm big now. Same like Daddy," he told Robert's sister. It was impossible to stay sad around him, and for a moment it helped.

Now I was standing at a celebration in her home, surrounded by people who loved her. I smiled at the guests, admired Benny's skullcap, and kept my attention on the joy of the day.

I watched Rosalie surrounded by friends, smiling and laughing. She had so much to celebrate, and I was happy for her. I remembered the little girl she had once been and wished I could tell her how proud I was of the family she had built. But I couldn't find a moment when it felt natural to approach her. I stood watching the celebration, pleased to see her so happy and saddened that I no longer knew how to share that happiness with her.

* * *

Those were the early years of Michael's recovery, and recovery, I learned, is not a straight road. It is a long hallway with many doors, and for every step forward there were days when he stood still, and days when he seemed to step back. No one had warned me how slowly the body and the mind return after a dependence that had deepened over years. I had expected a man coming home from treatment to be a man restored. What came home was a man learning, one hour at a time, how to live inside his own skin.

Mornings were the hardest for him. He woke early, often before the light, with the restlessness of a body that must learn to hold itself up without what it has leaned on for so long. Some mornings he could not make himself leave the bed. Others he came into the kitchen gray and tight-faced and held a cup of coffee he never drank. He would stand at

the window with his two hands pressed tightly together, as though he were holding himself in place, as though something would come apart if he let go. I learned not to ask how he was. I learned to read it in his hands.

He wanted to talk. I could see it in the way he opened his mouth and searched for the first word. But the strength was not there. A sentence begun in the morning would trail off before it reached its end, and he would look at me with an apology so bare that I would reach across the table and say, "Later." Often later did not come, and I understood that too.

Evenings brought a different kind of weariness. The house grew quiet in the way a house does when everyone is listening for one person's mood. Dinner was brief. He ate little, and the cravings, he told me once, rose in waves that came without warning, often with the dark. He would retire early to the study or to the couch, as he often did these days wrapped in a blanket, and I would hear him pacing in the small hours. In the morning he would say he had slept well. I did not argue. I knew the truth, and I knew why he said it.

He would barely leave the house. Invitations went unanswered, and then they stopped coming. The thought of a crowded room and its polite questions, "How have you been? Where have you been?" filled him with a dread I could see. His shame was a heavy coat he wore even indoors. When we had to attend a family event, he stood near the door and watched the clock, and I found a reason to leave early. In the community where he had once been the friendly physician who could mimic anyone, he had become a man people were careful around. I was careful around him myself.

The children felt it before they understood it. Michael, who had once sat cross-legged on the carpet for hours officiating their board games, no longer had the patience for them. A question asked at the wrong moment brought a sharp word, followed at once by a silence that hurt him more than it hurt them. Penina and Tamar, nine now, learned to speak softly and to slip away when his hands tightened. They grew quiet and a little sad, and I could not bear it. Dalia and Daniel, young

adults by then, came and went with the careful courtesy of people who did not know what to say to their father, or to me.

I did what I could to fill the gap for the twins, but it was never enough to bring back the life and cheer we had once had.

With Michael home and unwell, Sundays and holidays grew dreary. Penina and Tamar wanted the parks and museums they had once visited with their father, who had loved taking the children out. I was a poor substitute, since I had almost no spare time. Still, I tried to find an hour or two on a Sunday to drive them to a department store or a toy store, where we could browse and sometimes buy a family game or a puzzle to enjoy together. It never held the excitement of riding in the car with Michael, who sang with a carefree spirit and told the children stories and interesting facts about science and geography. He simply seemed to know it all.

Not every Sunday was dreary. One rainy afternoon the twins turned the kitchen into a restaurant. They wrote menus in purple marker ("Soup. Maybe soup. Ask Mommy."), set the table with the good napkins, and posted Tamar at the door in my apron as hostess. To my astonishment Michael came out of his blanket, sat down, and ordered a cup of coffee in the voice of a French waiter so grave and so absurd that Penina forgot her lines and the three of us dissolved. He did not drink the coffee. It did not matter. I tucked one of the menus into the back of my ledger, with the things I intend to remember.

On the rare occasions when I did join them in earlier years, one outing stays with me. It was a spring weekend when Michael was still himself. Penina and Tamar were three, Dalia was fifteen, and Daniel was fourteen. We drove up the coast to the Birch Aquarium in La Jolla. The little ones squealed with delight at the sea turtles and the jellyfish, while the older two peppered their father with questions about tides and ocean currents. With a twin by each hand, we went from tank to tank, marveling at the variety of creatures in G-d's world and at the human ingenuity that had found such beautiful ways to display them. We ate lunch on a bench overlooking the Pacific, with the sun and the sea breeze on our faces.

After a long day we started home along the coast, but an accident had closed the highway, and a drive that should have taken forty minutes stretched into four hours. I am a doer by nature, and I rarely sit still. Yet I remember that day clearly, because I cannot recall another time when I was so calm. The outing was a balm for a hectic mother, and I felt it. We sat in the traffic perfectly at ease, sharing the day, singing a little, and at the head of it all was Michael, giving each child a mental task to challenge their quick minds, or a riddle to solve.

I have kept that day close ever since, the way one keeps a photograph in a wallet, worn at the corners.

In those same years Michael moved, slowly, slowly, back into life. First came the short walk to the end of the street, and a week later to the corner and back. Then a meeting, and then a second. A phone call returned. An article read all the way through. A joke, once, at the dinner table, so quiet that only I heard it, and I laughed too loudly, and he smiled. These were small things. I learned to honor each one as though it were a milestone, because it was.

In 2015 his first paper was accepted by a journal. He printed the first page and pinned it above his desk, and more than once I found him standing there, simply looking at his name.

One evening that spring he stood in the kitchen doorway and held out his hand. "Walk with me," he said. We went to the end of the street and to the corner, as we had before, and then, to my astonishment, he kept going, around the block and past the house with the barking terrier, which he addressed in the exact voice of its owner, a retired judge, so that a dog and a man twice my husband's age were suddenly conducting a conversation about the proper hour for dinner. I laughed until I had to hold on to a mailbox. He laughed too, a little rustily, like a gate that had not been opened in years. Daniel, who had been left in charge of the twins, met us at the door with one raised eyebrow, and I put the evening away carefully, the way one puts away something one hopes to need.

There were ups and downs. A good week would raise my hopes, and then a bad night would lower them. Recovery does not run on a calendar. It does not care that the mortgage is due, or that a daughter has a rehearsal, or that a wife has spent fourteen hours on a warehouse floor. It takes the time it takes. I learned to take each day as it came, and to ask for nothing more than that we be kind to one another by evening.

All the while I carried nearly everything: the business, the house, the twins, and a husband who was learning to walk again. I did not yet know how far beyond our walls the different story about me had already traveled.

* * *

I was in my warehouse office, staring at a cash-flow projection, when Eleanor's name appeared on my telephone. Apart from one cold call about my visit to Rosalie, I had not heard from her in two years. In all that time I had never quite stopped expecting her to call. Every silence between us had ended, sooner or later, in a warm return, and I told myself this one was only a longer quarrel. I had been far too busy holding everything together to notice how much I was waiting. For a moment I simply watched the phone ring. Part of me wanted to let it go unanswered. But I remembered the good years, and I thought of the children. Perhaps she was calling because she wanted things to be different. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Eleanor."

"Abigail, darling." Her voice was soft with maternal concern. "We all see how much you are carrying. The business is navigating rough waters, and with Michael unable to work, it is simply too much for one woman to shoulder alone. My heart aches for you. I want to help you stabilize."

Her words caught me off guard. I had been managing the business and the household for so long that I scarcely knew how to respond to

someone offering help. I remembered the afternoon she had told me never to contact her again, but I also remembered the years when we had been close. She was Michael's mother and my children's grandmother. I wanted to believe that, despite everything, she still cared about what happened to us.

"You want to help?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes," she said smoothly. "Let's meet for coffee. We need a sound strategy."

Over the next few weeks we met at a quiet café downtown. Eleanor was attentive, warm, and collaborative. I admitted how bad our supply delays had become, and asked her honestly whether she thought the company might fold.

"I wouldn't worry, darling," she said, patting my hand. "You are too capable to fail. We will find a way through." It had been so long since anyone had called me capable that I could have wept into my coffee.

Over those weeks I told her more than I had intended. I told her about Dalia's crying spells and her sudden silence, about Daniel begging not to be made different from his siblings, about the long coldness of Rosalie and Noam. She listened, her head tilted, her cup untouched. It felt so good to be listened to that I did not stop to notice how little she offered in return.

"I have been thinking of finding a family counselor," I said. "Someone who could sit with all of us. Perhaps a mediator."

"A therapist?" Eleanor set down her spoon. "Why would you need a therapist, Abigail? I can speak to the children."

"Would you?"

"Of course I would. Leave it to me."

A few weeks later she came to our table looking grave and satisfied, like a woman who has completed an errand.

"I have spoken to Noam," she said. "I told him quite plainly that it is not his place to play the peacemaker, or to choose between his mother and his siblings. Children should not be made to choose."

I looked at Eleanor, puzzled. "Choose?" I had never asked Noam to choose between me and his siblings. I had hoped he could be close to all of us. But Eleanor seemed pleased with the conversation, and I wondered whether she knew something I didn't. I wanted to ask what Noam had said, but I was afraid of turning a hopeful meeting into another disagreement.

That night I told Michael about the meetings. He listened from the couch with his blanket around his shoulders.

"Do what you think is best, Abigail," he said, with an absent smile, and turned back to the paper he was writing. When I had said his mother's name, his pen had stopped for a moment; then it moved on.

Eleanor's proposal, when it came, sounded sensible on the surface. She suggested that our eldest son, Noam, who possessed a sharp analytical mind, return to San Diego and join the firm. He could take on the administrative burdens on the warehouse floor, freeing me to focus on high-level accounts. It was presented as a natural succession plan that doubled as a family reunion. There was only one detail that gave me pause: Eleanor's insistence that Noam not stay under his mother's roof, but have an apartment of his own downtown. This would only add more financial pressure to a floundering operation. It didn't add up.

I thought of the boy who had once built a whole city of Lego across my living-room rug, with a hospital where I must not step and a school under the couch. He had always loved to build. Perhaps, I let myself hope, he could build this with me.

"I have a large home with empty bedrooms," I reasoned during one of our planning sessions. "Noam would be welcome here, and he could be at the warehouse in ten minutes."

"Abigail, a young executive needs his independence to thrive," Eleanor said, her smile never wavering. "You want him to feel respected, don't you? Do not trouble yourself over it. The apartment will be my gift to him."

It was her money and not ours, and I saw no reason to quarrel with a grandmother over a gift. I noted only that my son's return to San Diego would begin at an address that was Eleanor's doing. Before uprooting Noam, Eleanor suggested bringing in a corporate consultant, a professional associate of hers, to evaluate the enterprise. I handed over several years of financial statements. The consultant's report came back glowing; he confirmed that the underlying company possessed exceptional potential for growth.

It was I who first said the word contract. "Perhaps we should put it on paper," I said at one of our meetings, "so everyone knows what is expected." Eleanor liked the idea at once. For weeks we talked through the details: where Noam's duties would end and mine begin, who would sign what, the hours, the titles. After a while the talking seemed to be the work. I noticed that she welcomed every suggestion of mine that was about paper and dismissed the ones that were not. My idea that Noam live in our house was brushed aside at once. A written agreement was approved without a murmur. I took what I could get, hoping it would bring me back into my family.

I wrote an outline of Noam's duties and my oversight, and asked Noam, who had studied accounting, to draft the agreement from it. Because tensions had run so high, I asked him to add one more clause: if Noam and I ever disagreed, Eleanor would step in as an informal peacemaker. I had thought it through. For my own protection, I wanted a third party between us. But the only person Noam would trust to be fair was his grandmother, so the choice was Eleanor or no one. I made my calculation. Better Eleanor, who had no reason to harm my business, or so I believed, than no one at all.

Two weeks later, Noam arrived in San Diego with his studies behind him and his wife Erica and their children beside him, to walk the floor and see the business for himself before anything was signed. I had hoped that working side by side to protect our family's livelihood would soften the distance between us. I was glad to see him, but I soon sensed that we had very different expectations about how we would work together. He did not come as an eager son coming home to

support his mother. He walked the floor like a corporate savior inspecting a failing project, with an air of cool entitlement and a list of demands.

"Tell me, Mom," he said, on his first morning on the floor, scanning my desk, "how many hours a day do you think about the business?"

"As many as it needs, Noam."

"You never take our advice anyway."

"Whose advice, sweetheart?"

He shrugged, and said nothing more. It was shocking to hear him take the role of adviser. I had built a business from the ground up, raised responsible children, and kept good relationships with the people in my life. Something was upside down.

Noam continued in the same vein, speaking as the one in charge. On no account, he said, should I share our family's struggles with his wife Erica, or I would lose her friendship too. Then he added, "Go, go, take comfort from the little ones. That's your speed, Mom, right?" It struck me that he was speaking not like himself, as if the child I knew had been replaced by someone else. I looked at him, searching for something familiar in his expression. I had expected us to discuss the business together. I had not expected to feel like a stranger in my own warehouse.

Some weeks later I asked him to come to the house, hoping that away from the telephone and from Eleanor's table we might simply talk. He sat across from me in the living room with his hands between his knees. I told him I was not asking him to take sides. I asked only one thing. "Can you tell me one thing I did?"

He looked at the carpet for a long moment. "We don't argue or gossip, Mom," he said. "Not in our family."

Then he sat very still, like a wall. I waited. I tried again, as gently as I knew how, and the tears came, running down his face without a sound. I stopped talking. I could not bear to add cold and insensitive to the list of what I already was, a list that was destroying me.

When he spoke again his voice was thick. "Mom, I really don't think it's my place to listen to this," he said. "You should talk to a therapist."

Not my place. I had heard those words before. Eleanor had told me she had said almost exactly that to him, that it was not his place to play the peacemaker. I believe his hurt was real. I believe it still. What I could not tell, sitting across from my son, was whether the tears were grief or a signal that would get me to lower the temperature in the room, and I have never been able to tell.

A few months later, I told Eleanor that things with Noam had only gotten worse since her talk with him.

"So why didn't you call me?" she said, all innocence. "I would have spoken to him again."

There was something strange in her tone, and I could not place it. Was there a trace of victory in it? Could she be expressing concern for me while feeling nothing at all? As quickly as the thought appeared, I put it away. How could a woman who was so kind, and who spent so much time with me, be anything but devoted to my family? The sum did not add up, and again I let it go.

The following Tuesday, I arrived at the downtown café early, to finalize the paperwork. Eleanor had said she would join us, but she was not there yet. Noam was, alone at a corner table, with a coffee he was not drinking and a thick manila folder in front of him. He slid it across the marble tabletop toward me.

"It's all drawn up," Noam said. "Take your time."

I opened the folder. It was not the memorandum I had outlined. As a businesswoman who had negotiated dozens of commercial contracts, I did not skim. I read every line of the fine print. And as my eyes moved across the typed pages, a cold wave of shock rushed through me. The document on the table was not a collaborative partnership. It was a takeover. The first terms that caught my attention were the financial ones. Only a minimal, fixed stipend would be allocated to me, while the overwhelming majority of company profits would be transferred to Noam. Furthermore, it required me to train him in every

operational system, client relationship, and supplier contact, effectively making my presence unnecessary within twelve months.

Then my eyes landed on the dispute resolution clause, and I saw how the arrangement had been built. On paper, Eleanor had kept herself clear. The contract was drawn between me and my son. Her name was not listed as an owner or an officer. She was named solely as "neutral negotiator" and binding arbitrator for any disagreement. It was my own goodwill clause, the one I had offered in good faith, grown teeth. If an outside attorney ever examined the document, Eleanor would appear blameless, merely a devoted grandmother volunteering to keep the peace.

I sat very still. The noise of the café faded into a sharp ringing. I could not say who had wanted Eleanor to hold that authority, or what anyone wanted beyond it. I could say only what the paper said. I thought of the consultant she had introduced, and of all our meetings about the proposed partnership. For years the fog around me had refused to clear, and now one thing in it had hard edges. How had the agreement I outlined become this document?

"Noam," I said, keeping my voice level, "did you write this?"

"I did," he said. "It is a standard structure."

"It is not what I outlined."

"It is what makes it work." He turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "Read the stipend clause again."

I did not read it again. I sat with my hands flat on the folder and waited for Eleanor, because in thirty years I had never faced a hard page without her.

She arrived ten minutes later in her camel coat, greeted Noam warmly and patted me on the shoulder, and asked whether the coffee was any good. I held out the folder.

"Eleanor, would you look at this? I do not know what to make of it. I would like to know what you think."

She took it. She did not read it. She turned the whole stack face down on the marble, the way one sets aside a menu, and laid her palm on it lightly.

"Paperwork," she said. "That is between you and Noam, darling. I would not trouble myself over the details."

Noam set down his cup. "Mom, I am going to be direct. If you want me in this business, you will sign it, as it is written. Without a signed contract there is no plan."

It took me a moment to understand that he had said it to me. He was not angry. His voice was level and stern, the voice of a man who has rehearsed.

"Noam." I could hear my pulse in my ears. "Do you honestly believe that I, your mother, would hurt you? That I would betray you?"

"That is not the point."

"It is exactly the point. I am handing you something very valuable. I built it from nothing, and you would have it free. All I ask is that you work beside me and let me teach you." I turned to the page with the stipend. "And in exchange you want me to sign that I will do exactly as this says. I will teach you every system, every client, every supplier, for a small stipend, and everything else becomes yours. In a year, when you know what took me years to build, you will not need me. And you want me to put my name to that."

"Yes."

I looked at my son and could not find the boy who had once fallen asleep in the warehouse on a stack of tablecloths. I could not find the child who loved surprising his mother with things done around the house that I would notice, and thank him for, only days later. I could not understand how he believed I would sign. I could not understand how anyone could ask a mother to subjugate herself in writing and call it a plan.

"I cannot sign this, Noam."

"Then there is nothing to discuss," he said, quietly and sternly, and he did not look away. "No signature, no me."

I was shaken to the core. Under the table my hands had begun to tremble, and it felt as though the floor of the café had been quietly taken away.

"Abigail?" Eleanor's brow furrowed slightly as she watched my breathing turn shallow. "It is a very generous offer, darling. It will solve all your problems. You have no one else who can help you."

I did not reach for my pen. Eleanor's eyes narrowed. She leaned in slightly across the table.

"And if you think your friend Susie from college will be there to catch you, perhaps you should know that I ran into her recently at a fundraising gala back East," she added, in a tone that was conversational and sharply calculating. "I shared how difficult your life has been lately, that you were truly caving in under the strain and desperately needed support. I wish I could tell you that she offered to step in, darling, but she said the timing simply wasn't right for her."

The blood drained from my face. Susie? My roommate from college, who lived three thousand miles away? Why was Eleanor telling people across the country that I was caving in? I sat there with my hands shaking. My mother-in-law had reached into a corner of my life I had not known she could see, and she was looking at me with that calm, polite smile. No matter where I turned, I thought, an advance account of my incompetence might already have arrived.

I looked from the contract to the woman across from me. For over thirty years she had been a mentor, an ally, a loving grandmother. Now she was calmly asking me to sign away my independence.

"I don't think you want to help me, Eleanor," I said quietly. "I think you want to own me."

Eleanor's posture snapped upright. The smile vanished, replaced by anger.

"Who do you think you are?" she hissed, in a low, biting whisper that cut across the table. "You are a terrible mother. Who drove a wedge

into this family? I am the only person who has ever protected you. I am the only one who has ever offered you anything. Without me, you are nothing."

Noam stared at the sugar bowl. He did not look up.

"You say yourself that you were busy with the business and with taking care of Michael," Eleanor continued. "Of course you were not there for them. So why do you claim to have been a good mother?"

I could not believe my ears. She knew how my children had been treating me, because I had told her myself, over coffee. She knew how busy I had been. Whom had I been caring for? My own family. I had been trying to keep a roof over their heads and help their father heal, so that they could have a father. How could this, too, be held against me?

I looked down at the contract. Without Noam's help, I would still have the warehouse to run, the bills to pay, and Michael's recovery to manage. I had no easy solution to any of it. But I could not agree to these terms. I closed the manila folder and pushed it slowly back across the table.

"No, thank you," I said, my voice steady. "I will manage on my own."

I had known for years that Eleanor could not be relied upon. I had not known that she was against me.

I stood up, smoothed my jacket, and turned my back on the table. I walked out of the café into the warm California sunshine. Yet as I stepped out into the daylight, an ache settled into my chest. Knowing that I would never again share a connection with my husband's family hurt deeply. On the sidewalk I stood for a full minute, unable to remember where I had parked. When I found the car I sat in it with both hands on the wheel and did not turn the key. She had been my mentor and my children's grandmother for more than thirty years, and in the space of one cup of coffee I had lost her, and I had learned what she was. I put my head down on my hands and wept, as I had not let myself weep in front of anyone in all those years. The loss was immense for me, but it broke my heart even more for my children.

Noam did not follow me out.

A few months later I heard that he had taken a job as an accountant at a real estate firm. We had little contact after that, and I truly know no more.

I could have accepted their family's human flaws. I could have absorbed the demeaning slights and learned to navigate around their grandiosity, because to me family was sacred. I would have endured almost anything to keep our family whole. There was one line I could not cross: to be set against my own children, and to watch them be set against me. I understood that I had walked away to save myself, that it had to be done to keep my sanity and to remain a healthy mother for my family. But knowing I had done the right thing was no comfort in the midst of the damaged family I called my own.

That night, after the house was quiet, I opened the ledger by the phone and turned back to the page where, five years before, I had written one word on its own: Why? There was still nothing beneath it.

Under it I wrote what had happened at the café: The folder. Eleanor named arbiter. Susie: "the timing wasn't right." Then I wrote the one thing I knew for certain, because it had been typed on the page in front of me: The contract gave her the last word. It was not an answer. But for the first time in five years, something stood beneath the question.

Months later, in smaller letters, I added a second question, one I did not like to write: Did she know about Michael? I thought of that January afternoon in her front room, the square footage, and the remark about my projecting my anxieties onto my husband. I have never been able to answer it.

CHAPTER 14

* * *

MY OWN TREMORS

San Diego, 2015–2016

I had expected grief. I had not expected my body to rebel.

It began the morning after the café. I woke at four with my heart pounding as though I had run up a flight of stairs, and I lay in the dark waiting for it to slow. It did not. At five I gave up, went down to the kitchen, and filled the kettle. When I lifted the cup to my mouth, the saucer rattled against the porcelain with a thin, nervous chatter.

"Mommy." Penina stood in the doorway in her pajamas, ten years old and unnervingly observant. "Your cup is dancing."

"It's the coffee," I said. "Too strong."

"You didn't eat dinner either," said Tamar, appearing behind her sister.

"I'm not hungry, sweetheart. Go and get dressed."

They went, but not before exchanging a look that said they had filed the matter away. I put the cup down and pressed my hands flat against the counter until the tremor passed into the wood.

The trembling reminded me of Michael during the worst months of his illness. I had watched his hands shake so many times, and I had called it craving, and I had been patient with it. Now I looked down at my own and wondered how long it would take before they were steady again.

For two years I had not lost her, not really. She had been angry, and she was Eleanor, and she would come around. Now I had closed the door myself, and my body seemed to understand it before I did.

The days that followed were not days so much as a series of tides. In the mornings I was nauseous and could not eat. By noon I was cold, and by evening I was sweating through my blouse. At night I lay awake with my skin prickling and my mind running through every conversation I had ever had with Eleanor, and the worst of it was not the fear or the anger. It was the pull.

It came at four o'clock. For most of thirty years, four o'clock had belonged to her: the kettle, the porcelain cups, the first half hour in which she wrapped me in praise. My body, it seemed, had not been told that the appointment was canceled. On the first Tuesday after the café I was at my desk in the warehouse office, and the clock reached four, and my whole body leaned toward a kettle that was not there.

"You've been staring at that clock for ten minutes," my supervisor said from the doorway. He was a tactful man, and he said it quietly.

"I'm waiting for something to pass."

"What?"

"A habit." I tried to smile.

He did not press. He took the invoices off my desk and carried them away himself.

I rehearsed the reasonable things. Perhaps I had misread the clause. Perhaps she would reach out herself, say that she had been hurt and frightened and had spoken in anger, and invite me for honey cake on Sunday. I could hear her saying it. I could feel, in my chest, the way the knot would loosen. That was the cruelest part. It was not Eleanor I missed so much as the minute after she smiled at me, when the room warmed, and the world made sense, and I belonged to something. I knew I could not accept the agreement she had proposed, but that did not make thirty years of affection disappear.

I could remember those afternoons so clearly. I would arrive burdened by some problem at the warehouse or a worry about the children, and Eleanor would listen as though nothing mattered more than what I had to say. Sometimes she had an answer. Sometimes she simply made me feel capable of finding one myself. Now I could no longer turn to

her, and I found myself missing the very person from whom I was trying to recover. That contradiction embarrassed me.

The craving came in waves that week. Each time one rose, I did what I could. I walked the warehouse floor and counted bolts of cotton. I recited the clauses of the contract under my breath. I was a grown woman, and I knew that a feeling, however strong, is not an instruction. My heart wanted that warm half hour. My head had read the arbitration clause. Each time my head won, my hands shook harder, and I understood that I was paying for a thing I had not chosen to buy.

That Sunday I called Susie at six, as I always did. I did not ask her about the gala. I was afraid of the answer, and more afraid of what asking would make me: a woman checking up on her oldest friend because her mother-in-law had taught her to doubt. We talked about her grandson's birthday party, and I hung up no wiser, and glad I had not asked.

On the fourth night I could not sleep, and I went downstairs at three in the morning. Michael was at the kitchen table in his robe with his laptop open, reading about receptor sites by the light of the screen. He looked up. I stood in the doorway with my arms wrapped around myself.

"You're up," he said.

"I'm shaking, Michael." I pulled out a chair across from him. "I haven't slept. I keep wanting to hear your mother's voice. I miss her, and I know I shouldn't."

He closed the laptop slowly. "Abigail." He said it kindly, in the voice of a physician, and I knew before he finished the sentence what he was going to say. "You're overthinking this. No one is out to get you. She's my mother. She was trying to help."

"Michael, I read the contract. She was going to be the arbitrator. Noam would have everything, and I—"

"I'm sure there's an explanation," he said. "You're exhausted. You've been under a great deal of stress. Things always look worse at three in the morning."

I looked at Michael, hoping he would ask to see the contract. I wanted to show him the words that had frightened me so badly. But he seemed ready to end the conversation, and I could not bring myself to begin explaining everything again.

His eyes dropped to my hands on the table. They were trembling. He looked at them for a long moment, and for an instant I thought he saw. He knew that shake. No one knew it better.

Then he looked away.

"Try to get some sleep," he said, and opened the laptop again.

I went upstairs, and I held on.

* * *

In the turmoil that followed, I did not know where to put myself first: Michael, the business that paid our mortgage, or the children. I often forgot to call my parents. I did not want to burden them, because I knew my mother had plenty on her plate caring for my father. After more than a week without a call, I saw that my mother had tried to reach me. I picked up the phone.

"Abigail, is everything okay?" she said. "Where are you?"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry, Ma. It's been hectic with the business. Everything is fine."

"You don't sound very fine, Abigail. What is it?"

That was all it took. Everything came pouring out. I told her about Michael, how hard I was having it, how alone I felt. I did not tell her about the folder or the café. I was still too shaken to make sense of them myself, let alone describe them fairly.

"Oh, my girl," my mother said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You have enough, Ma. You have Dad."

"I have you," she said. "Tell me about the children."

I was relieved to hear her concern, although there was little she could do. After that she checked on me almost daily, and it felt good to have someone to talk to. Her voice at the other end of the line was the oldest comfort I had, and I held on to it the way you hold a railing on a steep stair.

What I did not expect was that a few weeks later she told me she had met Eleanor at a community wedding.

"She was so sweet to me, Abigail," my mother said, over the line. "She asked about your father's health. She told me all about the children, how beautifully they are growing."

"Did she?"

"She wants to take me out one Sunday to see the new Botanical Garden. Wasn't that thoughtful?"

"Very thoughtful," I said.

"She asked after you, too. She said you have been under such strain. She worries."

I held the receiver a little tighter. "I'm sure she does."

I didn't want to spoil my mother's pleasure. She had enough to worry about with my father's health, and Eleanor had always known how to make people feel special. Still, I found myself wondering why Eleanor had reached out to her so soon after our confrontation. I had no answer. When I put down the telephone, my hands were trembling again.

I lay awake for much of that night, too. I had walked away from Eleanor, but I was beginning to understand how difficult it would be to live without her.

* * *

One evening, Rosalie and Noam asked me to sit with them in the kitchen. They could see I was hurting, and they could see, too, that I

did not accept their view of me as the difficult one. They had decided it was time to talk.

It was a heavy conversation. I tried to explain that I was doing my best under very difficult circumstances. I told them how hard it was to carry so many pressures alone, and that realizing Eleanor was not the friend I had believed her to be had been a great loss in itself. They listened intently, but there was no meeting point. They could not understand how I could say such a thing about a woman whose character, in their eyes, was very nearly perfect.

Then Rosalie looked at me sympathetically and said, almost in exasperation, "We're not judging you, Mom, but you need to see that you're the problem here."

"You're the one who isn't coping," Noam added gently, the way a doctor gives a diagnosis. Something in the phrase sounded familiar, though I could not have said why.

There was nothing left to discuss. They were completely certain, and certainty leaves no room for a conversation. I had come to the table thinking we would talk. They had come to tell me what they had already concluded, and to wait for me to agree. I do not think they meant to be cruel. I think they believed they were helping me.

CHAPTER 15

* * *

THE CURB

San Diego, 2016–2018

Despite the folder and the café, as a mother I could not bring myself to give up my children. I knew the distance between us was wide, and standing outside their lives was excruciating. But Passover was approaching, and the thought of weeks turning into months without my children knowing they still had a mother who loved them broke my heart. I decided to lean on what I had always known: generosity, consistency, and quiet affection.

I did not buy gifts under any illusion that a package wrapped in ribbon would heal our family. I simply wanted to leave a physical, undeniable reminder of my care. I spent days choosing beautiful holiday gifts for each of my older children's households. Penina and Tamar, eleven now, helped me tie the ribbons and carry the boxes to the car. Dalia now shared an apartment with two members of her ensemble, and Daniel was away at school, so that I had four separate households to think of.

"Is this one for Rosalie?" Tamar asked, holding up a box with a gold bow.

"For Rosalie's family," I said. "And that one is for Noam."

"Will they like them?" Penina asked.

"I hope so, sweetheart." I did not tell them that I had rewrapped the first box twice.

When the time came to deliver them, I did not presume to knock on their front doors or ask to come inside. Instead I drove to each home

on a Sunday afternoon, parked along the curb, and called to let them know I was outside. At the first two stops, the exchanges were brief and stiff. They thanked me politely, with a small, pitying smile, but there was little conversation. I was determined to keep showing them that they still had a mother who was well and who loved them, and I returned to my car wishing we could have spent even a few pleasant minutes together.

It hurt, but at least the connection had not been entirely severed. Then I pulled up outside Noam's apartment. It was the downtown apartment that Eleanor had given him; he had never joined the company, and I had run the warehouse alone, as I had told her I would. I called him, stepped out of the car, and waited on the sidewalk with the gift in my hands. He walked down the exterior steps with his hands shoved deep into his pockets and stopped several paces away. He looked down at the silver wrapping paper, and then up at me, his expression tightening with irritation.

"You always have to buy expensive presents, Mom," he said, with an edge of mockery. "That's not what we need a mother for."

I stood on the pavement, holding the box, absorbing the unexpected sting of his words.

"Noam, sweetheart, it is simply a holiday gift," I said softly, keeping my posture straight. "I was thinking of you and your family."

He crossed his arms, and made no motion to reach for the package.

"Anyway, the kids would rather go to Grandma Eleanor's. She never tries to buy our affection with presents."

I stood there, momentarily breathless. I looked down at the silver-wrapped box in my hands. I had spent so much time choosing something I thought his family would enjoy. Eleanor showered them with lavish meals and shopping sprees, and no one called that buying affection. Why, I tried to understand, was my buying them a gift condemned as a bribe?

"I am not trying to buy anything, Noam," I said quietly, struggling to keep my voice from shaking. "I am simply trying to be your mother."

"Well, maybe you should stop trying so hard." He rolled his eyes. "You're always looking for someone to feel sorry for you. It's exhausting."

He took the box, walked back up the stairs, and disappeared inside, leaving me alone on the sidewalk.

I stood there for another moment, looking at the steps he had just climbed. I had come hoping for something so small—a smile, a few friendly words, perhaps a question about how I was feeling. I had only hoped to feel, for a moment, that I was still his mother.

I remembered the little boy who used to call me to see whatever city he had built. I could not tell when speaking to me had become something he did reluctantly.

I walked back to my car and set the empty gift bag on the passenger seat. I had tried to respect the distance between us while reminding Noam that I loved him. Now even that small gesture seemed unwelcome. I did not break down where anyone could see me, but inside I knew that whatever I did would be entered against me. If I stepped back to give them space, I was cold and neglectful. If I reached out with love, I was manipulative and needy. I drove home wondering how I could remain part of my son's life without making things worse.

The months moved on with little contact. I was lost as to where my family had gone, and the sadness did not lift. Summer ended, and the High Holidays came: the beginning of the Jewish year, a season of contemplation, prayer, and joy.

Rosalie and Noam both called to wish me a happy New Year. The calls were quick, but they came. I could feel in them a wish to be closer. But as they saw it, I was the stubborn one, still failing them by refusing to see my own weaknesses, and none of us knew how to cross that distance.

On Rosh Hashanah I went to synagogue and sat in the women's section. Dalia sat beside me. Penina and Tamar stayed with us for part of the service and then slipped out to find their friends.

The prayers were beautiful, and the cantor had a voice that pulled at the heart. Mine did not need much pulling. I felt that if anything dared to soften me, I would fall apart. The music did what it was meant to do. The pages of my prayer book are swollen from that morning to this day.

Dalia looked at me with great sympathy. She was kind, and I was sorry she had to see me that way. She was suffering too. We all were, and none of us knew how to stop it.

A week later came Yom Kippur, when we ask forgiveness of anyone we may have hurt. I waited for a call, as I had every year since the rift began. Each year, in the weeks before the holiday, I let myself imagine (fantasize is the more honest word) that one of my children would suddenly see that they had been played, that another would follow, and then another, until my children were at my table again, as they should be.

The call never came.

We spent a quiet Sukkot with Michael and the children. My parents came by, and we visited them too. Rosalie spent the holiday with her in-laws, and Noam was out of reach once again.

* * *

I had not given up larger family gatherings entirely. When the occasion was a wedding or a milestone, I sometimes went.

Those occasions, and the twins' school functions, could not always be avoided, and they were torture. I was carrying so much pain in those years, and I was trying, slowly, to find my way back to wholeness. But every time I met my children's mixture of pity and coldness across a room, something inside me broke again, as if I had made no progress at all.

At one of them I sat among my children, carrying the weight of their coolness around me, when Noam piped up to tell a story.

"There was a community," he began, "where someone was emptying the ATMs every night."

"Every night?" someone asked.

"Every single night. A detective firm watched every machine in town for weeks. And in the end it turned out that one of their own people had been pulling the levers the whole time."

Everyone around the table laughed and shook their heads at what fools those people were for taking so long to spot it.

A thought crossed my mind, about how easily intelligent people look everywhere except at the hand on the lever, and I put it down again. There was no one at that table I could have said it to.

It was at gatherings like that one that I began to notice how people looked at me. Eleanor greeted everyone with a nod or a warm word, the children first. When her eyes reached me they softened into a pitying smile, the kind one offers someone who has had bad news. Others took their cue from her, and I was given the gentle voices people use with the unwell. Nothing about it could be objected to. It looked like kindness.

Not long afterward, during one of our talks, I tried to explain to Rosalie why I was keeping my distance from Eleanor. I told her that Eleanor had a way of overpowering me, and that it had become very uncomfortable for me to be part of her circle.

"Actually, Grandma cares about you," Rosalie said. "She told us to be kind to you."

It hit me hard. Kind to me, the way one is kind to someone fragile. Was that what Eleanor had been telling my children? Had that been her aim? If it was, she had succeeded. I felt something inside me tear open, like a surgeon searching for the source of a pain and suddenly finding it staring back at him.

There was no one I could say this to, least of all Rosalie. Her devotion to Eleanor's nobility and kindness was fierce, and I could not crack it simply by telling her that I was not the pitiful woman Eleanor had

made me out to be. My children's minds were set, and my role in their lives was already defined.

* * *

I had an old school friend, Hazel, whom I kept up with a few times a year. We were both busy mothers with jobs, and we would occasionally grab a quick bite at a local café and enjoy each other's company. Little by little, she became aware of the difficulties with my children. She truly cared, and she offered to approach them. Of course, I put my hopes up once again.

One day she walked into my warehouse office, all smiles, certain that she had found the miracle cure for what ailed my family.

"Abigail, I spoke to one of your children," she said, almost breathless. "They told me they love you, and that they want you in their lives!"

Her face changed when she saw mine. I could not hide the grief, and I could not tell her that the news she had brought as a gift was the very thing that hurt.

"Hazel," I said slowly, "that was never the problem. The problem is who they think I am. Yes, they want to love their not-so-stable mother. But do I want that kind of love?"

She stood there, frowning, and I could see her wondering whether she, too, would come to see me as unbalanced. I had the thought that I might lose another friend.

I missed being able to talk with them comfortably, to share ordinary family moments without feeling judged.

I wanted to be happy about what Hazel had told me. I wanted to embrace her and thank her for bringing such wonderful news. But the words had landed in a place she could not see.

Of course I wanted my children to love me. I wanted them to call, to visit, to share their joys and disappointments with me. But I also

wanted to speak without feeling that every word would be measured against an image of me I did not recognize.

I wondered how to explain to Hazel that being loved and being understood had become two very different things.

Months later, Hazel called. She asked how I was faring, and then she told me she had met Rosalie while shopping downtown, and that the conversation had turned naturally to how our relationship was doing.

"I wish I could share better news, Abigail," she said. "I don't know where Rosalie is getting her ideas from, but what came through was that the children feel you are looking for pity."

"I see."

"I wish I had better news," Hazel said again, and left it there.

I was grieving, and what came back to me was a label. Looking for pity. My real grief was still sitting where I had left it, and I was expected to thank them for the diagnosis.

* * *

I often think back to how I stayed sane in those years. I did try to find a therapist for myself, but the ones I saw either blamed me or looked at me as though I were a misfit. After all, I cried. The pain was enormous. No one suggested anything, or even that I come back.

One visit stands out. I made an appointment with an organization that works with people in toxic relationships. I was sure it would be the rescue boat I had been looking for.

When I stepped in, the director and I exchanged small talk. Then, in one brisk moment, the temperature in the room changed.

"Who was your husband? How long have you been divorced? Are you seeing a therapist? Where do your children live now?"

I was stunned by the coldness. Wasn't this the place where people came with broken hearts? And why was he speaking of my husband in the past tense, and assuming I was divorced?

“I’m not divorced,” I said. “My husband is at home. He is unwell. I came because of my children.”

“I see.” He wrote something down without looking up. “Your husband’s name?”

Then, after those cold questions, he got up, walked out of the room, and said that his assistant would continue with me. I had not been given a moment to tell him that I had a good marriage and was a devoted mother. I had been judged before I could say a word.

I left without having told him why I had come. I had hoped that someone there would listen long enough to understand what was troubling me. Instead, I felt more alone than when I had arrived.

I made it as far as the car. I sat behind the wheel with the key in my hand, and I could not turn it. It came up through me from somewhere I had kept it shut for years: a low, racking sob that bent me over the steering wheel. I cried for the daughter with the carriage, for the boy on the steps with his hands in his pockets, for the girl who had said I can’t help anymore, for the husband under his blanket, for the woman I had been. I cried until my ribs ached and the windshield blurred and there was nothing left to come. For the first time in years, I let myself grieve without explaining to anyone why I was allowed to.

When I got home, it was dark. Penina and Tamar were at the kitchen table, and the kettle was already on.

“We made tea, Mommy,” Penina said. “You look tired.”

“We made you toast,” said Tamar.

I looked at the two of them standing beside the table, waiting for me to sit down. They did not ask where I had been or why my eyes were swollen. They had seen that I was tired, and in their own quiet way they had decided to take care of me.

I sat down and wrapped my hands around the warm cup. For the first time that evening, I felt my shoulders relax. I wished I could tell them how much their small kindness meant to me, but I was afraid that if I tried to speak, I would begin crying again.

So I smiled and reached for the toast.

I could often be found saying, "Thank G-d for Penina and Tamar." Though I loved all my children, the twins were not caught up in the rift. By the time they were old enough to be drawn in, so much of life had moved on that adding fuel to the fire no longer interested anyone. They were warm, loving girls, full of cheer. They were popular in school and often chosen to head projects, and I loved working beside them on presentations they were proud to display. The warmth I thought lost from my home was coming back through my later-born children.

But the empty seats around my table took up the most space in my heart. I learned to live with the joy of the present while the past lived painfully inside me.

CHAPTER 16

* * *

THE PARKING LOT

San Diego, 2017–2018

Through all of this, I brought very little to Michael. He was not brushing it aside, but he did not understand how deeply it was hurting me. The children were easy with him. It was only me they held at a distance, and from where he stood, there was little to see. When there is no proof that anyone has done you harm, the one who is hurting is usually the one who gets the blame, and that was what Michael saw too. I could not bear to face that again and again from the person who meant the most to me, so I did not confront him. I decided I first needed someone outside the family, a friend, a professional, anyone, to see what I was seeing. Then I would try again to bring him with me.

Two of my closest friends, Leah and Dina, were therapists. I had known them for twenty years. I had carried every worry to them and had always left lighter. If anyone could help me make sense of what was happening in my family, I thought, it would be them. I had put off asking for years, unwilling to turn friends into clinicians, but I had run out of other doors. I invited them both for tea one afternoon in the spring, and I told them everything, carefully, the way I would present a case: the piano lessons, my father's surgery, the pills and the rehab, the café, the folder, the curb.

They listened, and when I finished, Leah set down her cup.

"Abigail, I am so sorry. I can see how much you are hurting. May I ask you something, as a friend?"

"Of course."

"In my practice, when a grown child pulls away from a parent, there is almost always an injury somewhere. Something that was said, or done, that never got repaired. Is there anything you can think of?"

"I have thought of nothing else for years," I said. "I have apologized for every harsh word I can remember. I scolded Noam for being late for school when it wasn't his fault. I told them I was sorry."

"I'm sure you did," said Dina. "But you have to understand, their perception is their reality."

"A perception has to come from somewhere."

"Sometimes it just comes from the child." Dina smiled at me gently.

"You've always been so hard on yourself," said Leah. "Maybe it's time to give yourself a chance to be loved."

I looked from Leah to Dina. They were trying to help me, and I knew they cared. But I had told them about the piano lessons, my father's surgery, and the contract, and neither of them had asked much about those events. I wondered whether I had failed to explain what troubled me most.

"What about Eleanor?" I asked. "What about the pattern, the things she said and did?"

"She is a pillar of the community," Leah said, almost apologetically. "She has done so much for so many. I can't imagine she would want any harm to come to your family."

"I'm not saying she wants harm," I said. "I'm saying that the same things keep happening to me."

"Of course." Dina patted my hand. "It's a very hard time. We're here for you."

They hugged me at the door, and meant it. And I drove home alone, with the odd feeling of having been comforted by two people who could not see the thing I was holding.

Time passed. I waited, and in the quiet I held on to the one idea I had: that if an impartial professional could hear us all in the same room, the truth would show itself.

But even sharing the idea was hard, because Rosalie, Noam, and I hardly spoke. My chance came at a school dinner for mothers and grandmothers. I sat with my friends a few tables away from Rosalie, who sat with hers. I tried to keep an eye on her without staring, so I would know when she was leaving, and as it happened she rose right after the first speech. I followed her out into the hallway and said hello.

She was warm and kind, as she naturally was, so long as I did not ask anything of her. I asked anyway. I was desperate to end the drama in my family.

"Rosalie," I said, "I know you want a warm relationship with your mother—"

"It's impossible," she said. "Whatever I do is always wrong."

"No, Rosalie. You're a responsible, accomplished young woman. Why would I say everything you do is wrong?"

"Because you're always difficult. I can't talk to you."

"Then let's go to a third party. A therapist. You say your part, and I'll say mine. I think it's time."

"So someone will say you're right. That's all you ever say. We're tired of it."

I stood still. There was nothing left to say. I was at her mercy. If only she would agree to go, there was hope. Or so I thought.

I asked again in the months that followed, and again. It took two long years of mostly cold silence, or of being treated as though I did not quite understand, before Rosalie finally agreed to attend a joint session with a counselor.

I arrived at the clinic hopeful. Perhaps, with someone to guide the conversation, we could begin to understand each other. I expected the counselor to ask the obvious question: how a mother who had worked around the clock for her family could suddenly be treated as someone to fear.

We sat at opposite ends of a sofa in the therapist's office. The counselor, a pleasant but conventional family mediator, opened the

session with standard exercises, instructing us to use "I feel" statements.

"Abigail, would you like to start?" she asked.

"I feel that my children pulled away from me when I needed them most," I began, speaking slowly, looking at the counselor. "And I feel that someone outside, my mother-in-law, has come between us."

The counselor's expression shifted. A faint coolness seemed to enter her eyes, as if she had categorized me as an uncooperative client looking for someone else to blame. Beside me, Rosalie let out a sharp breath and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

"See? This is exactly what I mean. My mother thinks Eleanor has nothing on her mind but to meddle in her life and cause her problems," Rosalie said, turning to the therapist with an air of long-suffering patience. "She always blames Grandma Eleanor. Grandma is calm, supportive, and generous, and Mom can't stand it. I honestly feel bad for my mother that she truly thinks a saint could be the problem."

The counselor nodded sympathetically at Rosalie. Then she turned to me with a gentle tone.

"Abigail, let's look at your daughter's perspective. Can you acknowledge that your stress over the years might have created an overwhelming atmosphere for your children?"

My heart plummeted. The counselor seemed to be treating this as an ordinary mother-daughter personality clash, and she did not appear to see what lay beneath it. She was listening to a daughter's well-rehearsed case against her mother, and instead of asking for a single example, she seemed to accept it.

"My stress came from running a business and caring for a sick husband on my own," I said, my voice firm despite the rising panic in my chest. "Instead of asking how they could help me carry it, my daughter made herself the family's protector, with the rest of them on one side and me on the other."

The counselor offered a blank, placating smile, and steered the conversation back to communication templates. For sixty minutes we ran in futile circles. Rosalie remained entrenched in her cool disdain, and the counselor's pen kept moving.

When the hour concluded, we walked out into the bright afternoon sun of the parking lot in heavy silence. I stopped beside my car, looking across at Rosalie before she reached hers. I felt a desperate, maternal urge to reach through the armor she had wrapped around herself.

"Rosalie," I called softly, hoping that I could reach her, one adult to another.

She stopped, with her hand on her car door, and turned around. Her face was not angry. It was serene, with the confidence of someone who believed she held every card. She took a step toward me and delivered an ultimatum I will carry for the rest of my days.

"If you will not recognize that you truly have wonderful and loving children," she said, her words slow and deliberate, "you will lose the love of all your children, and you will be entirely alone."

She paused, letting the silence press down between us.

"Do you want to be all alone, Mom?"

I looked at my firstborn daughter and remembered watching over her bassinet, waiting for her to wake and smile at me.

There had been years when she came to me with her troubles, expecting that I would listen and somehow make things better. I had treasured her confidence in me, and it had felt natural for us to turn toward one another.

Yet I could not think of a single sentence that would bring us closer.

Now she stood beside her car, asking whether I wanted to be alone. She was asking me to call their distance love, or lose them. I wanted to tell her that I already missed her terribly, that I had been trying for years to find a way back to her. But I could not agree to what she was asking.

"I already am alone, Rosalie," I said quietly, my head held high though my chest ached. "But I will not accept a lie just to keep you company."

I opened my car door, sat behind the wheel, and drove away. I made it around the corner before my hands began to shake.

I was on my own. And I finally understood that truth and love, on their own, were not enough to bring my children back to me.

CHAPTER 17

* * *

THE WEIGHT OF AN ARMY TRUCK

San Diego, 2018–2019

After the parking lot, the fog came down, and it stayed.

I woke each morning, dressed, ate what was put in front of me, drove to the warehouse, signed invoices, answered the telephone, and came home again. From the outside, I imagine, I looked like a woman who was managing. Inside, it felt as though an army truck had been parked on my shoulders, and I was expected to carry groceries up the stairs beneath it.

"Mom, are you okay?" Penina asked one morning, when I had been standing at the kitchen counter for several minutes with the butter knife in my hand.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Just thinking."

"You were thinking for a long time," said Tamar.

I had always relied on thinking my way through problems. Now I read everything I could find about troubled family relationships, searching for something that might explain what had happened to us. Some accounts sounded painfully familiar. Others did not fit at all. I kept reading, hoping that if I could understand what had happened, I might finally find some peace.

One night, at the back of the ledger, I turned to a clean page and did what I would have done with any account that refused to balance. I listed every explanation I could think of, so that I could test them one at a time.

Possible causes.

1. Something I did. Asked the children. No one named it.

2. Michael's illness. Showing by autumn 2009, the same autumn the coolness began. Cannot be told apart.

3. Money. The lessons stopped that same autumn. The dates run together.

4. That I am what they say. Asked Leah and Dina, the mediator, the director. Each handed the question back to me.

I left room beneath the fourth entry. I thought I would need it.

I kept returning, in my thinking, to the silences. For years I had been told, from every direction and in a great many words, that I was difficult, that I had trouble managing my life, that I was something to be feared. Those voices were loud, and a loud voice can be answered. But there was another kind of exclusion, made of silence: the question no one would answer. Silence gives you nothing to work with. What I had needed was not a shout of welcome. It was an explanation. I cannot say that Eleanor ordered any of it. I can say that, without a word, she was part of it. I should have seen it sooner, but I did not, because so much of the noise was coming from the children.

A subtler silence was harder still to name, because it arrived looking like kindness. When I tried to ask my children what had happened, their answers were gentle, and each one ended the conversation. In one of our conversations I tried to help Rosalie see that I was a loving mother, that I wanted only to understand. "We aren't judging you, Mom," she said, and sighed as she said it, as if my asking had tired her. "All we want is for you to be happy." My question was gone, replaced by a wish I had not made. Other sentences came and went. "You don't get it." "Stop looking back." Each sounded reasonable, and each left me with nothing to answer.

I have thought a great deal about why they spoke this way, and I will not claim to know what was in anyone's mind. Here is what I could see. They had one another, and they had support. I had a question, and very little standing to ask it. Their hurt was real. They believed I had hurt them, and to a child who believes that, a mother who keeps asking

is a mother who keeps hurting. My asking had become the offense. Their trust in me was coming apart, and they could not see it. I could see it, and I had no one to tell.

I know some people heal by keeping busy. To me, busy was torture. It meant doing what had to be done without the hydraulics to carry the load. The weight never yielded in those early years. Unwinding my attachment to the woman who had hurt me, after thirty years, was the hardest work I have ever done.

After my visit to the director and the encounter with Rosalie in the parking lot, I began to think about writing down my experiences. I had spent years trying to explain them in conversations that seemed to go nowhere. Perhaps on paper I could finally say everything I needed to say, without interruption.

One night I could not sleep, and I sat at the kitchen table and began to write. I did not know what I was writing, or for whom. It came out as a plain account of what had happened to us, with the dates and the conversations set down in order, as I would have recorded an inventory. I posted it to a blog that I had set up and told no one about. Michael was in the next room, writing his papers, and I did not tell him either. When I pressed the button the house was so quiet that I could hear the refrigerator hum, and I sat with my hand over my mouth, as though someone might have heard.

The messages that came in stayed with me.

Wow, one wrote. That is exactly my story.

I keep reading your post again and again, wrote another. It's so very similar to my own.

I can't believe how well you put it, wrote a third. This is my sister's story. She has not seen her children in almost a decade. You described the emotion brilliantly, and thank you for acknowledging this kind of suffering.

I had not known there were others. I read each message slowly, the way a thirsty person drinks. That night I copied the first message into the

ledger, in my own handwriting, beside the other entries. They were the first lines in that book that came from people who believed me.

I read the messages again the following morning, half expecting that I had misunderstood them in the excitement of the night before. But the words were still there. Somewhere, people I had never met had recognized something of their own lives in mine.

For a few days after each message, I felt lighter. Someone had understood what I was trying to say. But the relief never lasted. Strangers could tell me I was not alone. They could not tell me why, and the blame still sat on my shoulders. I closed the ledger and wondered whether I would ever have an answer.

CHAPTER 18

* * *

A NAME FOR IT

San Diego, 2019

I had spent years trying to understand one question: How could four grown, highly successful children raised on warmth, sacrifice, and honesty believe their mother was someone to be feared?

I began to jot my thoughts on scraps of paper wherever I could find them, in the hope of solving the mystery. Sometimes the notes were questions to myself, sometimes a comment. The scraps began to accumulate.

Why were they pushing me away?

If a child is upset, does it mean the fault is the mother's?

How do I function in a personality attributed to me that is not mine?

How do I accept a situation where, if I speak coherently, I am ignored, and if I accept it, I am a fool? Do I fight it?

What hurts the most is the loss of trust.

I had read a great deal by then, but what I found described people in general. One night at two in the morning, sitting at the kitchen table beneath the hum of the fluorescent light, I opened my laptop to see if there was a name for what I was experiencing. I typed in the phrases that haunted my waking hours: sudden child rejection, grandmother interference, false accusations of instability. That was when I found the book.

The book was written by a clinical psychologist who specialized in high-conflict family dynamics. As I read, certain passages brought back memories of Eleanor's warmth, the sudden silences, and the children's

growing distance. Not everything matched my experience, but enough of it felt familiar that I sat back, trembling. For the first time, I wondered whether someone might understand what I had been trying to describe. I wrote to the author, asking for guidance.

By morning, my inbox chimed. The author offered a compassionate note and the contact information of a colleague in San Diego who worked with families under coercive pressure. His name was Dr. Aris.

I walked into Dr. Aris's office with a tightness in my chest so acute I wondered if I had enough breath left to cross the room. Would this simply be another wasted consultation? Another professional observing my frayed edges and cataloging me as someone weak? I feared being seen as a woman who could not stand on her own. A small clock on the bookshelf ticked louder than it had any right to. I sat on the edge of the sofa with my handbag upright on my knees, as though I might need to leave.

"I keep running the ledgers," I said, staring at the muted geometric patterns of the Persian rug beneath my feet. "In business, if an account dips into the red, there is a reason. A missed invoice. A bad shipment. A simple clerical error."

I finally looked up.

"But I have spent nearly ten years staring at the ceiling in the dead of night, trying to find the deficit in my own home. And the math simply does not add up."

Across the coffee table, Dr. Aris sat quietly in a wide leather armchair. His office was filled with the gentle morning light of coastal California. Outside the large window, palm trees swayed in the mild Pacific breeze—utterly indifferent to the private ruin I carried through his door. My hands trembled faintly in my lap before I folded them together to keep them still.

"I gave those children everything," I continued, fighting the ache tightening my throat. "I built a thriving business with my own hands. When my husband became ill and could no longer work, I carried our

entire financial world. Eight hours a day on the warehouse floor, and often another six hours stretching through the night."

I paused to steady my voice.

"And through it all, I made sure the house was warm and the children were protected. Yet today, my older children speak to me with a cold, guarded distance. They treat me like an unstable liability. And my mother-in-law—the woman who stood by and watched us drown—is their hero."

I met his calm, attentive gaze.

"I knew something was wrong for years, but I couldn't find the language for it. Every so often, Eleanor would look at me with this quiet air of authority, paired with a perfectly polite smile. It was nothing I could criticize outright without sounding paranoid. But every time it happened, my stomach dropped. It left me with a deep, persistent discomfort, like someone was quietly rearranging the foundation beneath my feet."

I drew in a shallow breath.

"My brothers tell me there's nothing fundamentally wrong. My friends say someone with Eleanor's community standing could never harbor ill intent. Tell me honestly, Dr. Aris: did I bring this on myself? Am I losing my grip on reality?"

Dr. Aris was quiet for a moment. "That is the right question," he said, "and I would like to answer it properly. That means I would like to hear all of it first."

So I told him, from the garage that smelled of motor oil to the parking lot. I had asked for two hours, and I used every minute. I laid the ledger on the table between us, open to the page with the terms of Eleanor's contract. When I finished, the morning light had moved across the Persian rug, and I did not know what I wanted him to say.

"Thank you for telling me all of that, Abigail. I have only your account, and I have not met Eleanor, so I can speak only to what I have heard. But you asked me two questions, and I can answer them."

Dr. Aris set his pen down on the arm of his chair. He didn't offer a generic platitude, nor did he look at me with the pity I had come to dread from outsiders.

"Nothing you have told me suggests that you are at fault, Abigail," he said plainly. "And nothing suggests that you have lost your grip on reality."

The words hit me like a physical shock. I let out a long, quiet breath.

"I don't understand why," I said at last, leaning forward as the tears I had held back for years finally fell. "I didn't steal. I didn't abuse anyone. I worked fourteen hours a day to keep our home standing when Michael collapsed. Why would Eleanor do this? And how could my own children believe I am dangerous, when not one of them can name a single harmful thing I ever did?"

Dr. Aris sat quietly for a moment, letting the grief settle in the room.

"You have been looking for an ordinary family dispute," he said gently. "Nothing you have described fits one."

"What does it fit?"

"Researchers such as Amy Baker have studied adults who were turned against a parent as children. I use that work only as a starting point, because your children were already grown and the influence came from a grandmother. But your account has a shape. Warmth, then withdrawal, then warmth again. Gifts that left a debt of loyalty. And shocks that came when you were most stretched."

"The piano lessons," I said, before he could give me an example. "My father's surgery."

"Yes. Each time, you were left to deliver the disappointment or to carry the strain alone, and your children watched you do it."

"What did they see?"

"A mother who was stretched past her limit, who dropped a glass, who sounded frantic. And beside her, a grandmother who was always calm and generous. No one needed to tell them anything untrue." He

leaned forward. “That may be why they insist that no one told them what to think. I suspect they sincerely believe it.”

“So they were never lied to,” I said slowly.

“Not necessarily in words. I do not know what was said to them privately. I am describing what they saw.”

“There is one more thing I would offer, with caution,” he added. “With you, Eleanor appears to have lowered her guard, so that you would feel free to confide in her. With your children, she may have kept her polished image firmly in place, so that they would look up to her. I cannot say it was deliberate. But in effect she held the whole playing field.”

“She always made me feel I could tell her anything,” I said slowly.

“Yes. I would only add that I do not know what she intended.”

“There is a pattern in your account that I would like to name,” he said. “After each withdrawal she came back, and each time the repair was stronger than the injury. Clinicians sometimes call that hoovering, as in a vacuum drawing someone back in. It does not mean the remorse was false. I cannot know that. It means the return does as much work as the withdrawal.”

“The bakery box,” I said. “She cried. She looked ten years older. Her face was bare.”

“And on the morning of the umbrella, years before, she came up your walk undone, and you opened the door before she could knock. Both times she let herself be seen at her weakest, and both times you gave something back.”

“I have wondered whether the bare face was part of it.”

“People who are truly undone look like that, and so does a performance. From the outside no one can tell the difference. I would not ask you to try.”

“Whatever she intended, I think you were the person this pattern landed on,” he said. “Not because you were weak. Because you were loyal, and fair, and worked very hard, and you valued peace in a family

enough to keep paying for it, and those are the qualities such a pattern feeds on." He let that settle before he went on. "And I would not want you to leave this room thinking those qualities were the mistake. Loyalty, fairness, and hard work are what most people of your generation were raised to value, and they are good qualities. They are the reason your business survived and your household held together. It is wrong for anyone to take advantage of them."

I turned that over for a long moment. "Are you saying that if I had stopped her at the bakery box, if I had said, 'I don't want your apologies, I don't trust you,' she would have left me alone?"

"I cannot know whether she would have left you alone," he said. "Influence of this kind sometimes finds a second door, or a third, if the person is determined to keep control."

"So my choice was to keep the peace and let her feel she was in charge, or to keep watching my back for how she would break into my life next?"

"It may well have been, and I would like to say more about it, because I think you have been judging yourself unfairly." He leaned back. "When a gracious woman comes to your door with tears and a bakery box, there is not one voice in your head. There are several. One says, she is old, she has apologized, and family is family. One says, she is Michael's mother and the children's grandmother, and they will live with whatever you decide. One says, perhaps you are the hard one, because that is what you have been told. And beneath those three, very quiet, there is a fourth that says, something is not right. It is almost never the loudest. In most families it should not be, because in most families the first three are right."

"And the fourth?"

"It was telling you something you could not prove. I think you sensed that a refusal would not end the matter. It would have cost you something. You would have been called unforgiving. You would have been told, kindly, that you were proving what people said. You did not have to hear it to know it was coming."

I thought of Harriet in the school corridor with her chin lifted, delivering it like a verdict. There's talk that you're cold. Stone cold to your children. But I had learned in that corridor how a word travels: how it can be said once, kindly, by a woman who means well, and then become true in every mouth that repeats it. A mother who refused an apology from an old woman in tears would not have been principled. She would have been exactly what people already said she was. I had felt that standing in my own doorway with Eleanor's hands in mine, long before I could have put a name to it.

"Stone cold," I said aloud. "If I had sent her away with her bakery box, that is what I would have been, in one more mouth."

"Yes." He nodded. "And when you finally did refuse, at the café, that is very nearly what you heard. That you had no one else. That you would lose every child and be entirely alone."

"I sensed it," I said slowly. "I could not have told you what I sensed."

"No one can. We feel the price of a refusal before we can name it, and we pay for peace in advance. That is not weakness, Abigail. It is a sensible woman choosing the best option she could see."

"Dr. Aris, can I prove any of it?"

"What would you offer?"

"Nothing. There is no paper trail. Only what happened around me and how it made me feel. There is the contract, but Noam drafted the final version, and I do not know whether Eleanor was ever consulted about a word of it. All I know is that Noam trusted her. It is a million assumptions that happen to fit together too well."

"Yes," he said. "That is how it looks from inside, and it is how it is built to look. Nothing here survives being examined one piece at a time. The nearest thing you have to an admission is her sentence at the café: 'You have no one else who can help you.' Said innocently, that is kindness. Said after twenty years, it is a description of what had been accomplished."

"And what my children say? 'Stressed out.' 'A hard time handling pressure.' 'Everyone knows.' Taken one at a time, they sound like concern."

"They are concern, taken one at a time," he said. "Side by side, they are a portrait."

He did not need to ask the next question. I was already hearing it, in my own kitchen, in her husky voice. "Most women would crumble under that volume of freight," I said aloud. "And Rosalie says I am always so stressed out."

He said nothing. I went on, because I could not stop now. "I would have gone to pieces. And Noam: a hard time handling pressure."

My voice had gone very quiet. "You feel everything so deeply, Abigail. It is your gift." I looked up at him. "Why is everything a tragedy."

"A compliment, turned over, is a diagnosis," he said. "I do not know whether she meant it that way. I know she said these things where only you could hear, so they were never a charge against anyone, and that your children have been repeating them back with the kindness taken out."

A hush fell over the office. My mind raced through the years: Dalia and the denim jacket, Noam at the curb, Rosalie in the kitchen doorway. The pieces moved closer together.

Dr. Aris glanced at the clock on the bookshelf, the one that had ticked so loudly when I came in, and I saw with surprise that two hours had gone.

"I would like to stop here," he said. "This is a great deal to carry out of a room, and I would rather you carried it slowly. Come back in two weeks. Until then, I would ask only that you notice what you notice. Do not confront anyone. Do not write to anyone. Just notice."

"And if I notice nothing?"

"You will not," he said, with the first real smile I had seen on him.

On the sidewalk the palm trees were swaying in the mild California light, as they had been when I went in. I stood a moment with my

handbag over my arm and noticed, as I had been told to, that I was breathing all the way down.

CHAPTER 19

* * *

ORDINARY DAYS

San Diego, 2019

Nothing in my house had changed when I got home from Dr. Aris's office, and everything looked slightly different, the way a room does when someone has moved a single chair.

On Thursday I was at the warehouse by six. The thermos of tea was waiting on my desk, as it had been every morning for years, left by someone who would never admit it. My supervisor met me at the dock with a bolt of cotton in his arms, the color of weak tea, and asked whether I was seeing what he was seeing. I was. We unrolled ten yards under the lights and found the uneven dye running through it like a watermark, and we sent the whole shipment back. It was the most satisfying forty minutes of my week. I said so, and he said that I was the only owner he had ever known who got that happy over a defective bolt. I told him I would take it as the highest compliment of the year.

At four o'clock Rosalie telephoned about a cousin's engagement party. I had a small question about the seating. My aunt Lena and her sister had not spoken since a wedding in 2003, and I thought it wise to keep them from the same table.

"Mom, don't make it a tragedy," Rosalie said. "It's just a seating chart."

I had not called it a tragedy. I had called it a question. For a moment, I remembered Eleanor's voice in my kitchen, years earlier: You feel everything so deeply, Abigail. It is your gift. I held the receiver a little away from my ear, and I said, "You're right, sweetheart. It's a small

thing." We spoke about her youngest's new teacher, and when we hung up I sat very still with my hand on the desk.

That night I opened the ledger by the phone. Tucked into the back, where I had put it years before, was the twins' menu in purple marker: Soup. Maybe soup. Ask Mommy. I smiled at it. Then I turned to the page where I had once written one word on its own, and under the word Why? I wrote, for the first time, a line of an answer. Because a compliment, turned over, is a diagnosis.

I looked at it for a long time. I did not feel clever. I felt like someone who has been leaning on a door for years and has just been handed the key.

I did not sleep much that week. Lying in the dark, I replayed Dr. Aris's words: Nothing you have told me suggests that you are at fault. I had waited nearly ten years to hear something like that, and I returned to it again and again. Then the memories came: the cold Thursday, Andrea's party, the morning of my father's surgery, the bakery box, and the café. I had lived through each incident separately. Once, at a red light, I had added up the first three. Now, for the first time, I counted all five, and considered what they might mean together.

The questions came faster than the answers. If it was so plain laid out in a row, why had it been invisible while it was happening? Had she done it to others? To Leon? To Michael, long before me? I thought of Andrea's wedding, and an eyebrow lifted across a Friday table. Was it better to know, or not to know? I could not tell whether what I felt was relief or grief, and I suspected that it was both. And under all of it ran a strange, bright impatience, the feeling I used to have as a girl on the night before a school trip. Fourteen days, I thought, and caught myself counting them. That night I wrote my three newest questions on an index card and slid it into my handbag, so that I would not lose them.

On Friday the house smelled the way I have learned to love. The soup had been simmering since morning, and the challah dough rose under a dish towel on top of the refrigerator, where it was warmest. Penina

and Tamar, fourteen now and serious about everything, argued over the music. Penina wanted something with a cello. Tamar wanted the radio, and informed her sister that no one had ever been improved by a cello. Then Tamar set the table, counting the forks with the gravity of a customs officer, and Penina ironed the tablecloth and hummed the cello piece to herself in spite of everything.

Four places were not set. For a moment, out of habit, I laid out four extra forks, and then I picked them up again and put them back in the drawer. I have learned that a person can carry a sorrow and a soup at the same time, if she is careful with both.

Michael came in from the study in a tie. He had taken to wearing one on Fridays again, a small thing, and I noticed that I noticed. He lifted the lid of the pot, tasted, and pronounced the soup "adequate, with reservations," in the voice of the French waiter, so grave and so absurd that Tamar had to put down the forks and hold on to the counter. "The reservations," he told her, "concern the salt." There was exactly enough salt. He knew it, and I knew it, and that was the joke.

At sundown I lit the candles and covered my eyes. I prayed for each of the six by name, and that my home might be whole again, as I always did. This time I added something of my own: that I, too, might become whole despite the heavy pain I carried, and be able to experience joy again.

After the meal, when the twins had gone up and the dishes sat where they were, as they do on the Sabbath, Michael and I went out and sat on the back steps. The air smelled of jasmine and somebody's barbecue. He was quiet for a long time.

"You went to see someone," he said.

"Yes."

"Is it helping?"

"It is giving me words."

He nodded slowly. "I never had the words," he said. "I only had the pills." He looked at his hands. I did not say anything. Neither of us said anything more, and it was enough.

There was a question I had not yet asked Dr. Aris aloud, and I had been carrying it for years. I did not ask it that night. Some questions can wait until the Sabbath is over.

CHAPTER 20

* * *

WHAT A KINDNESS COSTS

San Diego, 2019

Two weeks later the clock on the bookshelf ticked as loudly as ever, but I set my handbag on the floor beside the sofa and leaned back into the leather. "What did you notice?" Dr. Aris asked.

I told him about the seating chart, and the voice beneath the voice, and the line I had written under the word Why? in the ledger. He listened with his pen capped.

"That is a good first line for a page," he said. "Where would you like to begin?"

"After the café," I said, "I shook for weeks. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. At four o'clock every afternoon, I felt like a woman who had been cut off from something. I thought I was losing my mind."

"I don't think you were." His voice was careful. "Two researchers, Dutton and Painter, described something they called traumatic bonding. When warmth and generosity alternate with coldness and withdrawal, and one person holds more power than the other, the attachment can actually deepen. It is the kind of bond people describe as hard to leave, and when it is cut, many describe something very like withdrawal. I offer it only as a lens, because their work concerned a different kind of relationship. But your body was telling you something real."

"It felt exactly like what Michael went through."

"I'm not surprised." He added, "I would not call them the same thing. The body's alarm system answers the loss of a powerful attachment in ways that can resemble withdrawal, but they are different experiences."

"Are you saying," I asked slowly, "that Eleanor read somewhere how to overpower someone and weaken her, the way traumatic bonding is described, and then used it on me?"

"Not necessarily," Dr. Aris said. "I cannot tell you whether Eleanor acted deliberately, or even whether this framework fully explains her behavior. But a relationship can develop an imbalance of power without anyone openly announcing it. When one person's approval, generosity, or assistance becomes especially important, the possibility of losing those things can make disagreements difficult. Repeated changes between warmth and withdrawal may deepen that uncertainty."

"I understand it so much better now," I said. "I can see it clearly. I just never imagined it could come from a woman of Eleanor's stature. It is so hard to know whom to trust."

"It should not be," Dr. Aris said, "but sadly, it sometimes is."

I let out a breath I had held for years. "And Susie?" I asked, after a moment. "Why would Eleanor speak to my college roommate on the other side of the country?"

"I cannot say. It is possible she wanted to be sure you had few people to turn to. It is also possible she believed she was being helpful. But the effect was that you were left with fewer people to ask."

After a moment he asked, "In all those years, was there anyone you could talk to about how it felt?"

"I didn't think there was anything to say. Everyone adored her. My brother asked who would hear a word against her."

"When someone is so well regarded, it can be hard to find the words, and harder to find listeners. I do not think that is a small part of how this worked." He folded his hands. "And notice who has been asked to explain herself. For years, you have explained yourself to your children,

to your friends, to every professional you saw. As far as I can tell, Eleanor has not been asked to explain anything to anyone."

"No," I said slowly. "Not once."

Then he asked whether anyone had ever been near enough to hear the small things: the question about my black dress, the compliments at the sink. No one had. She never said anything where anyone could hear.

"That detail matters," he said. "Behavior of this kind tends to be small, deniable, and private. Any single remark can be called a joke, or a misunderstanding, or your sensitivity. I cannot tell you what she meant by any of them. I can tell you that you had no witness. And when she kept your children at Anaheim, they had a witness. They saw who decides."

I thought of the folder lying face down on the marble table.

"But why would Eleanor want my business?" I asked. "She is a wealthy woman. She has no need of the money."

"It may not have been the money at all," Dr. Aris said. "I have wondered whether it was about standing. A valuable business secured for Noam, with no strings to his mother, would leave him deeply indebted to Eleanor, and that would raise her place in the family and the community. Status often sits underneath this kind of pattern."

I thought about that. I turned the ledger over on my lap.

"I don't think that's right, Dr. Aris," I said.

He tilted his head. "Tell me."

"Eleanor already had all the standing there was. No one in that community outranked her. She chaired the galas. People wept with gratitude on the sidewalk. A business would not have raised her one inch." I searched for the words. "What I think she couldn't bear was to be unnecessary. When I went looking for a nanny, she took the baby. When I had my own accounts, she needed to be the one who had advised me. When I said I would manage on my own, that was the one

sentence she could not forgive. She did not need my business. She needed me to need her."

He was quiet for a while. Then he nodded slowly.

"That is a better reading than mine," he said. "You knew her for thirty years, and I have known her for none. I will keep it as a hypothesis, and not a conclusion. We are both inferring."

"Yes," I said. "We are."

"Then let me offer something smaller," he said, "and less about Eleanor than about the family. May I say something about respect? It is not a comfortable subject."

"Please."

"In many families respect follows resources. No one decides that. The person who holds something the others need, a house, a job, a way into the future, is rarely spoken to the way the rest are. For your children to have treated you with the regard you were owed, they would have needed to see you as holding something they could not do without."

"Something over them. Like what?"

"Like buying a house and letting them live in it. Or offering them a job. People do not degrade someone they depend on."

"Like the apartment for Noam," I said slowly, "and the business he would have had."

"Exactly. And the piano lessons."

I thought of a Tuesday afternoon, a foil-covered casserole, a woman lifting my daughter out of the bassinet. It is already settled. "That is how she got in," I said. "She took nothing. She gave me an afternoon, and then another, and I admired her for it. I loved her for it."

"It works on nearly everyone. You were not foolish." He paused. "I am describing how this family kept score, Abigail. I am not advising you to do it. No one sat down and decided it. Your children were not calculating. They learned, as children do, who held the gifts."

"I gave them everything," I said, "and it never counted."

"A mother's giving is the weather. No one thanks the weather." He let that sit. "You could have done what she did. I do not think you would have wanted to."

"Over them," I said. "That is what she did. I would have had to become her."

"Yes. That is why you could not compete. It is also to your credit."

I told him about Rosalie's wedding, and about Noam across the room, his eyes fixed on Eleanor's face while the whole hall moved around them. "I could not understand it," I said. "I still can't. He looked hooked."

"From what you describe, she made each of your children feel uniquely important to her," Dr. Aris said. "For a young man still finding his way, that kind of attention is very hard to look away from. I would not call it a weakness in Noam. Attention given that way is meant to be hard to look away from."

"And the twins?" I asked. "Eleanor never bothered with Penina and Tamar. Why not?"

"I cannot say what was in her mind," Dr. Aris said. "But consider where things stood by the time they were old enough to matter. Your older four had already been drawn into her orbit, and they were carrying the message themselves. Look at how it went in your own house. Rosalie and Noam drew away first, and Dalia and Daniel followed, as though no one had to ask them. She may no longer have needed to create a break in your family. She may have felt confident that the older children would do the work for her. Clinicians sometimes describe this as influence by proxy."

I let out a slow breath. "So the twins were not spared. They were simply not needed."

"I would put it more gently," he said. "They were spared the part of the story that required an audience."

"And Michael?" My voice cracked. "Why didn't my own husband step in to protect our home?"

"Michael was fighting an illness of his own, and shame is a heavy thing to carry," Dr. Aris said. "I do not believe he abandoned you by choice."

I nodded, grateful.

"There is one more possibility I would offer, with caution. A family that prizes its reputation can find it very hard to see a flaw in one of its own. When a son collapses, it can feel easier to look for someone else to blame."

"Me."

"It is possible."

"Dr. Aris, there is something I have wondered since the café, and I have never said it aloud."

"Please."

"When Michael collapsed, did she already know? I went to her in January of 2010 and told her what I was seeing, the pallor, the pupils. She talked about square footage, and then she told me I was projecting my anxieties onto my husband." I heard my voice shake. "If she knew, then I think I understand something about the years that followed. A wife who is thought to be unsteady is a wife nobody would believe if she said her husband was ill, or if she ever decided to leave him."

"I cannot tell you what she knew," he said, "and I would be wary of anyone who claimed to. It may be that she knew everything, or nothing, or that she knew something and could not let herself look at it. What I can tell you is what the pattern does, whatever she knew. It makes one person the problem. And when the people who matter to a family have agreed on who the problem is, no one looks at the illness."

"I will never know," I said.

"Probably not," he said gently. "You may have to learn to live beside the question."

"There is something else I have wondered," I said. "Leon was the gentlest man I knew, and he deferred to her in everything. I remember how he would begin a sentence at the table and watch her face to see

whether to finish it. And Michael, as a boy. Do you think she did to them what she did to me?"

"I do not know, and I would be wary of anyone who claimed to. A gentle man who defers to his wife is not evidence of anything. Many good marriages look like that. I would ask you to hold the question lightly, and to notice that you asked it kindly."

"Leon was already slipping when Michael got sick," I said. "He has never really known what happened. I miss who he was."

"Then you have what he gave you," Dr. Aris said. "It does not depend on the answer."

"I can only imagine how sweet she must have been to Leon when she was courting him," I said. "I wonder what his early years were like. Did he wait for her sweetness to return after each coldness? It seems to me that after a while he, too, stopped waiting."

He said nothing, and I went on. "I have wondered something else. Andrea and Debby always leaned toward her. I remember how they sighed when Leon began a story, and how Eleanor smiled. If I had been scornful of Leon, would I have been spared? But of course I never would have."

"I can't tell you that, and I won't pretend to," Dr. Aris said. "It may be that a person who will not join in is a person the pattern cannot use, and so is the person it turns on. I don't know. But a cost is not a fault. Refusing to scorn a man for the sake of your own safety may have been expensive. It was still the right thing."

He paused. "Someone stood outside before you, and someone would have after. From what you tell me, the position was already there, and you were the one standing nearest to it. I would not let you leave here believing that you should have been someone else."

I sank back into the plush leather sofa. The weight of decades of confusion, discomfort, and isolation began to ease. For a long time I had felt like a woman trapped in a darkened room, struck by an invisible force while everyone around me insisted the room was empty. Now someone had turned on a light. There was a name for the pattern

I had lived through. I had not failed my children. I had not destroyed my marriage. My devotion and my work ethic had simply been taken for granted, I thought, by a woman who could tolerate nothing less than being necessary.

"It is staggering," I whispered. "To finally see how it could have been done."

"It is," Dr. Aris said gently. "You have come through something extraordinary, Abigail. Now that the fog has begun to lift, we must ask the hardest question of all: where do you go from here?"

"So what do I do now?" I asked, looking across the coffee table. "How do I reach my children? Do I tell them what was in that contract? Do I write them letters explaining the medical timeline of Michael's illness? How do I get them back?"

Dr. Aris set his notepad down and leaned forward.

"You don't," he said gently.

I stared at him, my breath catching. "What do you mean, I don't?"

"If you try to force the truth on them right now, I think it is likely to deepen their defenses," he said. "Any explanation you offer may be heard as defensiveness. Any tears may be heard as manipulation. If you push, they may pull further away."

He paused, letting the reality settle into the room.

"For now, I would ask nothing of them, and I would step back."

The words felt like a physical blow.

"Walk away? They are my children, Dr. Aris. I sacrificed my health for them. How can a mother walk away?"

"You are not walking away from your love for them," he said softly. "You are stepping out of a cycle. Some clinicians describe a pattern of fear, obligation, and guilt, sometimes called the FOG. When you stop reacting to it, it loses much of its power. You can leave the door open without continuing conversations that cause you pain. Stepping back does not have to mean giving up hope."

"And if they never come back?"

"I cannot promise that they will. What usually helps is maintaining your dignity, building your own stability, and declining to accept mistreatment." He leaned in, his eyes steady. "You are also giving them something: a proud, stable, healthy mother to look back on someday. You will be the healthy one. I should say that this is my view. Thoughtful professionals differ, and you are the one who lives your life."

You will be the healthy one. I repeated the words silently, but they offered little comfort. I had not come to learn how to look like the healthy one. I wanted my children back. Still, I understood that they were adults with lives and decisions of their own. I could not make them listen. I could choose how I responded. I would not plead for their affection or accept mistreatment. But whenever there was an appropriate opportunity, I would let them know that my door remained open.

"Was it me?" I asked him. "Did I give them a reason?"

"Every parent gives their children something to hold against them," he said. "You were tired. You were stretched. You were sometimes short with them. That is called raising six children. The question is not whether there were cracks. It is who found them, and what was poured into them."

It was our last session. He felt I had what I needed. In my case, he said, the work had never been to fix myself so that my family could work again. My trust had been exploited, and he had helped me see it.

He took a few minutes to prepare me. "This may hurt for a long time," he said, "and I want you to understand why. There is an old saying that a person needs three things to be content: something to do, someone to love, and something to look forward to."

"I have all three," I said. "I have my work. I have my family."

"You have them now," he said gently. "Think back to the morning of your father's surgery, and the years that followed. You had something to do, but it was no longer work that gave you pleasure. It was survival, from dawn until past midnight. You had people to love, but the ones

you reached for had turned cold. Love that cannot be given or received is a weight, not a comfort. And something to look forward to? Each day brought more strain. There was nothing ahead of you but the next blow. The months when you snapped at a saleswoman and cried in a nurse's office were not a flaw in your character. That is what a person looks like when all three are gone at once."

He let that settle. "Most people lose one of the three at some point in their lives, and they lean on the other two. You lost all three at once, and for years. That is a heavy trauma, and the body remembers it long after the mind understands what happened. So when the hurt comes back, it will not mean you are broken. It will mean your body is still carrying those years. Be patient with it. You have every right to grieve."

He was kind and respectful, and before I left he told me that if I ever wanted to talk, his door was open. Those words were the beginning of my healing.

"You have been remarkably composed in this room," he said, as I reached for my handbag. "You are allowed not to be."

I nodded. I thought I understood him. I did not, quite, but I would.

I took a deep breath, stood up, thanked Dr. Aris through a blur of tears, and stepped back into the world. Penina and Tamar were waiting on the front steps when I got home, and they ran down the walk to meet me with a warm hug. It was just what I needed. Tamar had drawn a heart on the back of a cereal box, with the words "I love you, Mom" in her newly acquired artistic handwriting, and I propped it against the fruit bowl, where it stayed for weeks.

Sometimes I felt guilty that my grief over the older children took up so much of my heart while these two gave me so much love. I never wanted them to feel their affection counted for less because I was mourning what I had lost. I could not make the sadness disappear. But I could make sure Penina and Tamar knew how deeply I treasured them.

CHAPTER 21

* * *

A QUIET HOUR

San Diego, 2019

For ten years I had walked into the warehouse, the grocery, the synagogue, and the school pickup line with my shoulders back and my voice pitched to cheerful, and I had been good at it. A woman who looks put together is rarely asked how she is. Somewhere in the weeks after my last session with Dr. Aris, I noticed the effort, the way one notices a hum that has been in the house for years only on the day it stops.

On Tuesday morning my warehouse supervisor stopped beside my desk with a clipboard he did not need. "Everything all right, Mrs. Winters?" he asked. He had asked it a hundred times, and a hundred times I had said, "Fine, thank you," and asked about the shipment. This time I opened my mouth and said, "No. Not today."

He did not blink. He set the clipboard down, went away, and came back with the thermos and a clean cup, put it in front of me, and said that the dock could run itself for an hour. I sat with my hands around the cup. I did not cry. I only sat, without arranging my face, and it was the first hour in years in which I did not pretend to be anyone.

That afternoon I drove home with the radio off, and in the empty kitchen I said aloud a word that I had never allowed myself. "Abuse." I had expected it to sound too large for a woman with a sewing machine and a casserole dish in the story. It was not a large word at all. It was exactly the size of what had happened. I stood with my hand on the counter and waited for the floor to tilt. It did not. Something in my chest simply sat down.

I let myself be sad then. It was not the sharp grief of the café or the sidewalk. It was slower, and it had more room in it. I thought of the girl with the spiral notebook of poems and the young wife with the paper bells over the cake, and I mourned them a little, the way one mourns someone one has outlived. I had been cheerful for so long out of habit and out of fear. If I smiled, no one could say I was not coping. If I broke, the word that had been put on me, unstable, would be proved. Now I understood that I had been holding up not only my house but my own good name, and that I was allowed to put one of them down.

I had been a victim of abuse, and I would have to heal from it, the way one heals from any wound. No one could do it for me, and no one could do it quickly. That was perhaps the hardest part for a woman who had spent her life fixing things by Thursday. That night I took out the ledger and wrote under the first answer, in ink: Because I was targeted. Not because I was weak.

On Saturday, at a neighbor's Kiddush lunch, I sat at a long table with a dozen women I had known for twenty years. The talk went the way it always went: the kugel, someone's son in Israel, a brisket recipe that required a bottle of ketchup and a confession. Someone's mother-in-law had rearranged her pantry, and the table laughed. I laughed too. But for the first time I looked around and asked myself, quietly, whether any of these women had ever sat across from a person like Eleanor. Which of them had a daughter who no longer called? Which of them had spent a decade explaining herself to people who had already decided? It would have been a comfort past words to know.

And I understood why I would never know. It is not the sort of thing one brings to a Kiddush table. I was not walking around telling anyone either. I had told my brothers, who changed the subject, and Dr. Aris, who is paid to listen, and now a page in a ledger. If one of the women at that table had been through it, she was passing the kugel and laughing, exactly as I was. We might all have been wearing the same

careful face. The thought was lonely, and yet, in an odd way, it was not: it meant that the silence I lived in might not belong to me alone.

That night Michael found me on the front porch, at a rare moment with my hands idle, only sitting. He sat down beside me. "You are not smiling," he said.

"No."

"Good," he said, and smiled at me, a little stiffly, like a man relearning how. I had not seen that smile in a long time. We stayed there until the stars came out.

On the index card in my handbag, under my three questions, I wrote a fourth in smaller letters: Why do I still feel so broken, if I know that I am free? There was no session to bring it to now. But when I read the question back, I realized that Dr. Aris had already answered it. I had heard him then. Now I understood him.

Something to do, someone to love, something to look forward to. For years after my father's surgery, I had lost all three at once. My work had become nothing but survival. The people I loved most had turned away from me. And the future I had looked forward to for thirty years, a long table crowded with my children and their children, had given way to dread. My mind had finally understood what happened. My body was still carrying it.

Not broken, he had said. Grieving. I wrote it on the card, under the question, and put the card back in my handbag.

CHAPTER 22

* * *

THE PATTERN IN MY OWN HANDWRITING

San Diego, 2019

In the weeks after my last session I did what I have always done with a puzzle. I stopped trying to feel my way through it and began to set it in order. Dr. Aris had given me the words. What I did not yet have was the sequence, and sequence is what I understand.

On a Thursday night, after the twins were asleep, I took the ledger down from the shelf by the phone. I turned past the columns of my business life, past the pages I had written in anger, past the one word standing alone on its page, to a clean sheet.

I did not write what Eleanor had done. I do not know what she intended, and after Dr. Aris I had promised myself that I would not pretend to. I wrote what had happened to me, in the order in which I had met it, as though I were leaving a note for someone who had not yet walked into the house. I thought of myself years before, at the kitchen table at two in the morning, typing phrases into a search box. The page was for her, and for anyone like her.

I wrote eleven lines, one beneath another, and under each one the scene it came from. Read in order, they told a story I had lived without seeing. It began with generosity that arrived before I asked for anything: a velvet box, a casserole, a pair of hands lifting my daughter from the bassinet. The generosity became help I could not repay, and the help became a debt I felt but was never asked to settle. Alongside it

ran praise, given only in private, that had a second edge when it was turned over.

Then came warmth that vanished without a reason, and returned as though nothing had happened. Words that had once been said to me in private came back to me from my children's mouths. Help began to carry a price, and in the end I was told that no one else could help me, and blamed for the very pain I was in. Through all of it I doubted myself most when I was most right, because each step, taken alone, looked innocent. A casserole is a casserole. A compliment is a compliment. Only side by side did they become something else.

When I had written the eleventh line I put down the pen and read the page through once, slowly, the way I would read a contract. Then, at the bottom, in smaller letters, I added a note: I do not know why she did it. I know only what it was like to stand on the receiving end of it, and that it had an order, and that the order can be learned.

I did not feel triumphant. I felt tired, and a little grieved, and, for the first time in ten years, something close to steady. I had spent so long being told that my account of my own life could not be trusted. Here it was in my own handwriting, with a scene and a date behind every line. I tore nothing out. I closed the ledger, set it back by the phone, and went up to bed.

CHAPTER 23

* * *

THE ROOM ABOVE THE LIBRARY

San Diego, 2019

A few weeks after my last appointment with Dr. Aris, I learned through a local publication of a support group for parents whose grown children had turned away from them. It met only occasionally, in a community room above a library. I could hardly wait for the first meeting I would be able to join. Would I truly meet people who understood me? On the night, I climbed the stairs above the library with my heart in my throat and stood outside the door for a full minute before I went in.

For the first time in years, I was not the only one in the room who, apparently, "didn't get it." There were a few dozen chairs, all filled with eager-faced mothers, like me, looking to understand. No one touched the cookies on the small side tables. When someone proposed an idea, we voted on it. And more than once, I watched one woman begin a sentence and another finish it, because she had lived the same thing.

That first evening, the speaker was a counselor. When his talk was over, we turned to a topic that I would learn came up at almost every meeting: whether to write an amends letter to our children.

"Write it," the speaker said. "Own whatever you can. It's all right not to have been a perfect parent. Children are resilient in the face of everyday flaws."

A woman near the door raised her hand. "You won't believe this, but my son is still upset with me for nagging him about leaving his socks

on the floor. I don't believe I ever yelled or insulted him, and I certainly didn't do it more than a handful of times."

"Exactly," said the speaker. "That is my point. It happens in every household. Children are not damaged by it."

I listened to the woman with the socks, and I thought of my own "sins": an occasional scolding about being late for school, or a request to turn down the music so that I could think. None of it had been the injury. I was beginning to understand that the injury is rarely what a rift is about. I did not say so aloud. Dr. Aris had advised me to ask nothing of them, and this speaker advised a letter. I did not know which of them was right, and I filed the question away.

Several women said they had written the letters and received nothing in return. They were left holding a load that only grew heavier, for nothing weighs more than absolute silence.

On other evenings the talk turned to therapists, and whether they had come between us and our children. It could grow heated. I listened without joining in. I had heard only one side of every story in that room, just as others had heard only one side of mine, and Dr. Aris, who was a therapist too, had been careful to say that he had only my account. A warm voice in a quiet room can do a great deal of good. It had done good for me.

When the speaker left, we broke into smaller groups to play what we privately called the judgment game: did he understand us or not?

"Do you think he gets it?" the woman beside me asked, stirring her tea.

"Maybe a little," someone said.

"He was kind," I said. "But I don't think he understands."

That was usually where the discussion ended, that night and after. Our speakers were polite and sensitive, but we could not feel that they understood what had happened to us. Occasionally a speaker was a parent like us, and those evenings drew us all in and left us feeling connected. Their stories offered companionship, though not necessarily answers.

No one had answers. Yet as the women gathered their coats and handbags, I noticed a little more energy in the room. It was as though batteries drained by years of grief had begun, however briefly, to hold a charge again.

The woman beside me stays with me still. Her name was Shelley. Her two grown daughters were in college, and her husband had recently left her. The girls stayed in touch with him but refused to speak to her. Afterward, over the cookie tray, we got to talking about the power other people hold in our lives, how much it hurts, and whether there was anything we could do. Then she asked me, "You're Jewish, right?"

"Yes, I am," I said. "You are too, I think, with your name."

"I am," she said. "Only we're not religious. But you are, am I right?"

"Yes, we're observant."

"So how is it," she asked, "that your children are cold to you? Isn't there a commandment that children must respect their parents? Didn't the teachers drum that into them in Hebrew school?"

"Of course they did. Only it's not so simple."

"Why not? It's a commandment. Did you go to your rabbi?"

"Yes. Many times."

"And what did he say?"

"He listens, and asks how things are now. When he hears that the children are very close to Eleanor, he shrugs and offers compassion. I can't tell whether he understands how a family member used her power to hurt me, or whether he pities me because, in my sadness, I appear unable to earn back my children's trust. I fear it's the latter."

"Does he not offer to speak to your children?"

"When I think about it, the reality is that I don't really have anything for him to go on. How do I explain that Eleanor buys gifts, offers piano lessons, and takes the children to Disneyland, and that she is pulling my family apart? It's a difficult situation, and I don't have the words to explain it. And the bottom line is that the children seem okay, and that is what usually concerns people in leadership positions."

“I understand perfectly. It’s always about what’s best for the children. But is it really best for them to feel their mother is not competent? The loss for them is huge, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And it hurts so much that I am alive, and well, and cannot reach them.”

“That is exactly how I feel,” Shelley said. “My daughters have connected to my husband and his family, and they seem to want me out of the picture. I feel their trust in me is being lost. I’m scared that they’ll pull away from me completely.”

As she spoke, I recognized, faintly, the outline of something I knew: a family with standing, a generous welcome, a sudden turn. I did not say so. I had a hypothesis, not a diagnosis, and I had learned the difference.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “There is nothing as painful. But let’s not give up. We have to keep hoping.”

“Yes,” Shelley said. “We must.”

Before we parted, I wrote the title of the book I had found on a paper napkin and slid it across the cookie tray. “It helped me,” I said. “It may not help you. But it helped me.” She folded the napkin once, carefully, and put it in her purse as though it might break.

We wished each other well, and I left with the odd sense that I had made a friend. It was not the magic I had hoped for, but there was healing in sharing, even among strangers.

Nobody had to introduce a grievance. Someone would say, “My daughter hasn’t called since the spring,” and a dozen heads would nod, and for an hour nobody had to explain anything. I would drive home beneath the same truck, a little less alone beneath it, and for the first time I knew what it was made of.

CHAPTER 24

* * *

TEN PLATES

San Diego, December 2019

A year after the message, I took the good plates down from the cabinet. Penina counted them, the way she had that November. "Ten," she said, and looked at me.

"Ten," I said.

I had grown stronger in that year, and I had decided to take back my place as their mother. I had written to each of them to say that I would be hosting again. I did not know who would come. I grated the potatoes myself and set the two skillets on the stove, and at eight o'clock on the second night of Chanukah, the doorbell rang.

Everyone came. The holidays I had not hosted had sent a message after all. It was not the one I had wanted, but it was a message: I had boundaries, and disdain would not be welcome at my table.

But boundaries have a price. They made the room heavy. The ease that had once filled my house on Chanukah was gone, and everyone was walking on eggshells. My children were polite and pleasant and careful. I understood that they were behaving so as not to add to the turmoil, and perhaps, now that there were spouses at the table, to show them a happy family. I played along. I knew all the while that it was a mask. Eleanor was not there. This was an evening for our own family; we celebrated with the grandparents at other times. But watching my children choose every word, I felt that she did not need to be.

Still, there were good moments, and I will not pretend there were not. Michael sat at the head of the table and welcomed everyone, happy to

be back at the heart of our family circle. We played games, and there was real laughter. Michael led the singing with great vigor, the boys joined in, and for a few minutes the room sounded the way it used to. The men gathered at one end of the table, deep in talk about community affairs, and the women at the other. There was plenty of food, the table was beautifully set, and the house felt warm.

The grandchildren were the true delight of the evening. Penina and Tamar had baked little cookies for their nieces and nephews, and Rosalie's and Noam's children decorated them with marshmallow cream and far too many sprinkles. The best part came when Benny, Rosalie's son and not so little anymore, handed me a cookie he had decorated with tiny hearts made of sprinkles. "Grandma, this one for you," he said. Oh, how I loved him in that moment, and he earned a well-deserved kiss on his forehead. It was not a silver bracelet, but it was worth far more.

That was what made it so hard. Surrounded by so much love, even love that was partly an act, it was easy to forget the hurt. And then the same scene would show me exactly what I had lost, and how much richer this evening could have been if all were well. I spent the night on a seesaw, rising and falling, when all I wanted was to stay at the top, in that warm room, forever.

When the evening was over and the candles had burned down, I washed all ten plates myself and carried them back to the cabinet, one stack at a time. Nothing had been solved. But I had set the table, and I had taken my place at it. It was where I would begin.

EPILOGUE

Some years later, I stood before a large group of women to speak about alienation. I had come to bring awareness to the community, so that more people might understand that this is happening.

Over the years I had not stayed silent. I knew I might lose friends by speaking, and I spoke anyway, because the silence weighed too heavily. In time I became known as the woman who speaks up about alienation, and with blogs and WhatsApp groups, word travels fast. One day I received a call asking whether I would speak to a group of mothers of adult children at a weekend retreat.

After the session, one woman's comment has stayed with me. She approached me as I was leaving the room.

"I had always thought that if children did not speak to their mother, there must be something very wrong with the mother," she said. "After hearing you speak, I see now how an innocent mother can lose her children."

I thanked her. On the drive home I thought of the woman at the kitchen table at two in the morning, typing phrases into a search box, and wished I could tell her that one day a stranger would look at her and say this.

Awareness has also come, slowly, from closer to home. At the time I was entirely alone with it. Only years later did some family members read articles or hear stories similar to mine, and a few said to me, "It was hard to understand what you were saying back then, but I'm beginning to realize that something happened." They add that it still makes no sense to them why anyone would do such a thing, yet they are hearing more and more such stories, and they are beginning to see.

One of them was Benjamin, the brother I had always been able to talk to and rely on. He could not see the whole picture, but the coolness had gone out of him, and he was willing to listen.

I wish I could say that my relationship with my children is now one of trust and affection. It is only partly repaired. A real conversation about the rift is still not possible. It ends the way it always has: I am told that I look back too much, that I want to be right, that I think too much. Even an offer to listen comes with a condition: "Okay, I'll listen, but only tell me what applies to me."

That condition shuts out the very thing they would need to see. Each child plays a different part, and only when the parts are seen together does the pattern come into view.

People have asked me, and I have asked myself, why I kept trying to speak with my children about the past when I was told so often to let it rest. It was never because I needed them to tell me I was a good mother. That was not the point. The point was that two stories were living in my children's minds, and they could not both be true. In one, their grandmother was a woman of great kindness who only ever wanted to help. In the other, their mother was a good woman whom someone had hurt. As long as the first story stood whole, the second could not. If Eleanor could do no wrong, then she could not have drawn me into a bond that kept me off balance, or lifted my children onto a pedestal above me. And if she had done none of that, then the trembling mother they had watched for years had made herself that way, and there was nothing left to respect. I did not need them to stop loving their grandmother. I needed them to see what she had done, because only then could they see me.

My heart broke for them. They had a mother who was healthy and steady, who loved them and wanted nothing more than to be part of their lives, and they could not see her. What they had watched in those hard years was not who I was. It was what had been done to me. They were losing so much, and I had no way to give that mother back to them as long as they believed their grandmother could do no wrong.

I understand why it is so hard for them. To see it, they would have to give up the grandmother they adored, and admit that they had been part of it without knowing. And it would cost them more than that. Over the years they had built their lives around the story of a difficult

mother. Friends had comforted them through it, and mentors had guided them past it, until it became part of who they were. To accept their mother as the woman she really is, they would have to untangle all of it, and they might find themselves alone. At some point I stopped knowing what I was hoping for. It is a great deal to ask of anyone.

I do not pretend the rift has healed. I still hope that it will.

Today, each of my children stands in a different place.

Rosalie does connect, but the relationship remains on the surface. We speak a little about general matters, like what she bought for the children, or which painter she has hired for the house. She rarely consults me with something on her mind. She has other people in her life for that.

Noam remains the most distant. He has moved to another state with his family, and I rarely hear from him. He seems convinced that I am drawn to the world of sadness. Still, he does not ignore me when we meet at family events.

Daniel finished graduate school, married, and lives in another state. He calls, and he visits when he is in town, and our time together is pleasant as long as I do not ask about the family rift.

Dalia is the only one of my children who has apologized. I have never questioned her about her own position, or about the part her siblings played in her life, and I am careful in the little I say to her about it. I know it pains her. Thankfully, she is thriving.

The twins are grown now. They were never involved in the coldness, and they have always been warm, sweet, and trusting. They remain so today, and they warm my heart every day. They are the balm for the pain I carry.

Whatever the difficulty in my children's lives, whether financial or as small as a cooked meal, if I know they need help, I will be there. It is a risk. I look for the places where I feel safe, and I make an effort to show up there.

There is one blessing within the sadness: although my older children, in their loyalty to the story they were given, took part in the distance, their spouses have remained respectful, warm, and loving.

Not long ago I was feeling low and had almost decided to skip a family celebration. Then a text arrived from Erica, saying how much I would be missed. It gave me just the lift I needed, and I went. True to her nature, she was kind and gracious to me the whole evening.

Leon is still there, but the man I knew is not. His dementia is advanced, and he has round-the-clock care at home. His warmth used to greet us the moment we stepped through the door, and he always took a loving interest in me. Now it is as if a light has gone out, and the house is colder for it.

Eleanor is older now, and frail. The pitying smile is gone. She no longer has the energy for long visits, and little holds her interest, but when she sees me, her eyes light up, as they would for a familiar face she cherishes. She seems grateful for the company of my family, and even of me. The vow I made outside the café, that I would never again share a connection with Michael's family, has softened with her age and with mine. It wore away the way it was made, one small kindness at a time.

One evening I went to see Leon. He did not know me, but he reached out and took my hand, and I let him hold it. Eleanor sat across the room with a cup of tea she did not drink.

"He always liked you," she said, when the aide had taken him in. It was the first thing she had said to me in years that asked for nothing.

I thought of the velvet box, the casserole, the folder face down on the marble. I could have said any of it. "I know," I said. "I liked him too."

I sometimes wonder how I can sit across from the woman who did so much harm to my family. If I am honest, part of the answer is not noble. Somewhere deep inside me is an unkind little voice that says, Look, Eleanor. Now it is your world that has grown small, and mine that is growing again. I am not proud of that voice, but I would not be telling the truth if I left it out. And there is another hope, quieter still: that one day she will look at me and say, "I know I hurt you." I do not

know what I would do with those words. I only know that this time I would be strong enough to see them for what they are.

The Eleanor of my youth is gone, and mostly I see the sadness of what can become of a powerful woman as she grows old. Does she know the damage she caused? I believe she does. How she sits with it is hers to carry.

The damage she has done, though, lives on.

Michael is still not strong, but slowly his spirit is lifting. He has not returned to medicine. He gives his time to research instead, and his work is in demand. We have better days now, and I hope he will fully recover. Some evenings he sits with me on the back steps, and neither of us says a word, and it is enough. He has never spoken against his mother, and I have never asked him to. But once, when I told him I had begun to write down the answers, he looked at me with such quiet understanding that I felt warmed by it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Can I forgive the person who took my children from me? How do I face each morning with a loss this large? I still ask myself both questions, and I do not yet have an answer to either.

What I have instead is understanding. I know now how it happened, even if I will never know why. I do not condone what was done. To me it was deeply wrong. But I no longer need to explain it, and I no longer look over my shoulder for the next blow.

I also carry my own share. I trusted that the family I had served for decades would be there for me when I needed them, and I assumed that a person of standing would also be a person of care. Given how I was raised and the world I came from, I would be hard-pressed to fault that assumption. It was still mine.

I was advised to step back and ask nothing of my children. I could not always do it. I kept looking for new ways to reach them, and more than once I lost ground for trying. In time I learned to put my strength where it could do some good: into my work, my health, and the people at my table.

The shock is gone. The tremors have waned. The grief remains. Some mornings I wake at peace. On others, a photograph or a remembered laugh brings the sadness back with surprising force. I have learned that both can be true. Rebuilding, I have come to believe, does not mean restoring everything as it was. It means living fully while leaving room for what is still unresolved.

I am not the person I was before the shock and the losses. I am far more sensitive to others now, and the small things no longer weigh what they once did. If the carpenter does not come when he promised, I live with the loose hinge another day, or another month. If I order a blue sweater and a black one arrives, black will do. I have learned what a true loss is. Next to it, almost everything else is small.

I did not write this book out of bitterness, or to settle a score. I wrote it so that therapists, clergy, community leaders, and friends might learn to recognize how one person's influence can quietly divide a family, before it happens in another home. Above all, I wrote it for Rosalie, Noam, Dalia, and Daniel, and for Penina and Tamar.

If the day comes when my older children want to know what happened, this record will be waiting for them. They will find that their mother never stopped loving them, never gave up her dignity, and kept the door open the whole time. The good plates are still in the cabinet. There are always enough.

Clinical Commentary: The Architecture of Covert Control and Family Fracture

A Psychological Analysis of Abigail's Narrative

To the outside observer—and often to the victims themselves—healthy families and quietly abusive families can look remarkably similar for years. In both, there are shared holidays, lavish gifts, milestones celebrated, and grandmothers holding infants on sunny afternoons. The critical difference does not lie in the presence of generosity or conflict; it lies in the unspoken *currency* that governs the system.

In healthy families, love and assistance are given freely, disagreements are addressed directly, and an individual's worth is never conditioned upon their absolute compliance. In coercive family systems, however, warmth is an instrument of leverage, vulnerability is cataloged as future ammunition, and connection is held hostage to a central figure's need for control.

What Abigail navigated across four decades is not an ordinary story of mother-in-law friction or communication breakdown. It is a textbook, longitudinal case study of **covert interpersonal abuse, systemic scapegoating, and alienating coercive control by proxy**.

Below is an analysis of the psychological mechanics at play throughout Abigail's account: how the dynamic began, how it

evolved, how the children were recruited, and why it took decades for the true nature of the system to become clear.

1. The Onboarding: Strategic Ingratiation and Incurred Indebtedness

Psychological entrapment rarely begins with cruelty. If a toxic dynamic opened with hostility, the target would simply walk away. Instead, it almost invariably begins with **strategic ingratiation** (often called *love-bombing*).

When Abigail first entered the Winters family, Eleanor did not criticize her; she elevated her. She placed Abigail on a pedestal, giving her an expensive silver bracelet, toasting her as a rare peer, and inviting her into a private circle of confidence. This serves two vital psychological functions:

Lowering Defenses: By treating Abigail as an equal and an intellectual partner, Eleanor bypassed Abigail's natural boundaries.

Creating a Baseline of Profound Trust: The target files this initial warmth away as the "true" character of the person, spending decades trying to return to it whenever the temperature suddenly drops.

Crucially, Eleanor quickly embedded herself into Abigail's domestic infrastructure by offering free, dedicated childcare. When Eleanor declared, *"It is already settled... one does not send a bill to family,"* she was not merely being generous. She was establishing an asymmetrical debt. In high-conflict relational systems, unrequited favors are never truly free; they are emotional promissory notes. By stepping in to save Abigail from the cost of a nanny, Eleanor secured unrestricted daily access to Abigail's home, Abigail's children, and Abigail's private vulnerabilities.

2. The Seeds of Destabilization: Intermittent Reinforcement and Double Binds

Once Eleanor established structural importance in Abigail's life, the second phase began: **intermittent reinforcement**.

Human beings bond most intensely not under conditions of steady warmth, but under conditions of unpredictable, alternating warmth and withdrawal. We see this early on:

Abigail returns home jubilant after securing a career-defining distribution contract. Instead of sharing her joy, Eleanor turns to cold glass, looks right through her, and walks out without a word.

Less than twenty-four hours later, Eleanor calls in euphoric high spirits, completely ignoring the previous day's freeze-out and offering a lavish, hand-embroidered smock dress for baby Rosalie.

This whiplash is profoundly disorienting. It forces the target into a psychological state known as the **double bind**:

If Abigail demands an explanation for the cruelty, she risks looking petty, ungrateful, and aggressive toward an older woman who just bought her daughter a beautiful gift.

If Abigail remains silent, she normalizes being treated with contempt.

Abigail chose silence and grace—the natural response of an emotionally healthy, peace-seeking person raised on mutual respect. But in a manipulative dynamic, every swallowed boundary teaches the power figure exactly how much mistreatment the target will absorb.

3. Semantic Weaponization: Compliments as Latent Diagnoses

One of the most sophisticated tactics detailed in the narrative is the way Eleanor quietly planted semantic seeds decades before they

sprouted in the children's mouths.

When Eleanor told Abigail in the privacy of the kitchen:

"Most women would crumble under that volume of freight."

"I don't know how you hold it together; I would have gone to pieces."

"You feel everything so deeply, Abigail. It is your gift."

These remarks sounded, on the surface, like maternal admiration. In reality, they were **covert framing**. Eleanor was subtly reframing Abigail's high-capacity competence as chronic precariousness.

Decades later, when the family entered severe crisis, these exact concepts reappeared, stripped of their soft wrapping:

Rosalie: *"You're always so stressed out... you make everything a tragedy."*

Noam: *"Everyone knows you have a hard time handling pressure."*

This demonstrates how a power figure builds a case against a target over years. By repeatedly characterizing Abigail as high-strung, emotional, and always on the brink of falling apart, Eleanor created an interpretive framework. When genuine crises arrived, the family did not see a capable woman carrying an impossible burden; they saw a woman whose inherent instability had finally caught up with her.

4. The Leveraged Crisis and Scapegoating

A defining hallmark of a family system dominated by high-conflict or covertly narcissistic dynamics is that **the family facade must be preserved at all costs, and systemic failures must be projected onto a designated scapegoat.**

When Michael's long-standing prescription drug dependency escalated into collapse, the Winters family faced an existential threat to its polished public standing. A distinguished physician son with an addiction was an unacceptable reality for Eleanor's social orbit.

The psychological defense mechanism that followed was swift and brutal: **projection and scapegoating.**

When Abigail approached Eleanor about Michael's physical symptoms, Eleanor deflected to real estate square footage and told Abigail she was *"projecting her anxieties onto her husband."*

When Michael entered treatment, Eleanor's reaction was not grief for her son, but rage at Abigail: *"My son is not an addict... You have driven my son to this. To invent an addiction to cover your own shortcomings as a wife is utterly disgraceful."*

By framing Abigail as demanding, unstable, and hysterical, the narrative was rewritten. Michael was not an ill man requiring systemic accountability and deep medical recovery; he was a fragile victim of an impossible wife. This absolved Eleanor of any maternal oversight, protected the family name, and gave the older children a convenient, singular explanation for their world falling apart: *Mom is the problem.*

Eleanor's decision to abandon the family on the very morning of Abigail's father's bypass surgery was the ultimate weaponization of vulnerability. By looking Abigail in the eye and stating, *"I am done,"* Eleanor executed a calculated withdrawal at the exact moment of maximum logistical and emotional pressure. It ensured that Abigail would be pushed past human capacity, guaranteeing that she would look overwhelmed, exhausted, and frayed in front of her children.

5. Hoovering and Performative Remorse

When Abigail survived the surgery year and began finding her footing through sheer grit, Eleanor reappeared with the bakery box, tears in her eyes, and an unpainted face.

In clinical terms, this is known as **hoovering** (derived from the concept of being "vacuumed" back into the relationship). When a

dominant figure senses that their target is detaching, they often perform an astonishing display of vulnerability. Eleanor's apology was masterful: she took full blame, called herself foolish, and claimed to have prayed for Abigail's father every day.

Why do targets forgive so readily in these moments?

Because the target is genuinely empathetic and values family unity above personal pride.

Because refusing the apology would immediately cast the target as hard-hearted, validating the narrative that they are "cold."

Because the target desperately wants to believe the nightmare is over.

Yet, as the narrative reveals, genuine remorse produces sustained behavioral change; performative remorse merely re-establishes access. Once Eleanor was welcomed back inside the perimeter, the dynamic did not soften—it accelerated toward its final, structural objective.

6. The Contract: Structural Takeover and the Final Mask Slip

The proposed corporate agreement brought to the downtown café is the narrative's central piece of documentary evidence. It moves the dynamic from subjective emotional impressions into undeniable objective reality.

The document revealed the true, long-term end-state of this psychological pattern: **total subjugation.**

Abigail was to surrender the operational infrastructure and financial proceeds of the company she had built from scratch.

Noam, thoroughly aligned with Eleanor, was to be granted control.

Most tellingly, Eleanor was written into the contract as the sole, binding arbitrator for any internal disputes.

Had Abigail signed, she would have been economically disenfranchised, professionally replaced within a year, and legally subordinated to her mother-in-law's final judgment on every aspect of her life.

When Abigail refused to sign, the social mask collapsed. Eleanor did not respond with business logic or maternal compromise; she hissed: *"Who do you think you are? You are a terrible mother... Without me, you are nothing."*

This is known as **narcissistic mortification and rage**. The moment a power figure realizes their target cannot be bribed, flattered, or manipulated into surrender, the illusion of benevolence vanishes entirely.

7. Coercive Control by Proxy: How the Children Were Turned

Perhaps the most agonizing element of Abigail's journey is the estrangement and condescension from her four older children: Rosalie, Noam, Dalia, and Daniel.

How does a devoted mother lose the regard of intelligent, well-raised children without ever abusing them? The answer lies in **coercive control by proxy** and **parental alienation dynamics**:

Splitting the Parental Images: Eleanor presented herself to the grandchildren as an unblemished figure of fun, lavish outings, and unconditional validation. Abigail was left to enforce bedtimes, manage shrinking budgets, monitor homework, and absorb the grinding realities of their father's illness. Eleanor became the "fairy godmother"; Abigail became the "harried taskmaster."

Triangulation and Enlistment: Eleanor did not need to instruct the children to hate their mother. She merely needed to share her "deep, pitying concerns" about their mother's stability with them. By

confiding adult concerns in Rosalie and Noam, she elevated them to adult status while infantalizing their mother.

The Scripting of Reality: The older children adopted Eleanor's exact worldview and vocabulary. When Rosalie stood in the parking lot and delivered the ultimatum—*"If you will not recognize that you truly have wonderful and loving children, you will lose the love of all your children, and you will be entirely alone"*—she was not speaking as an autonomous daughter. She was reciting a scripted doctrine of compliance. In her mind, she was the noble protector of a benevolent grandmother and a fragile family, and her mother's refusal to accept the script was the sole impediment to peace.

Why Daniel and Dalia Followed: Younger siblings in high-conflict systems take their cues from the eldest. Daniel's quiet plea—*"Mom, please don't make me be different from my siblings"*—reveals the intense peer pressure operating among the children. Belonging to the sibling unit required adopting the group consensus: *Mom is difficult.*

Why the Twins Were Spared: Penina and Tamar were never drawn into the alienation campaign for a simple logistical reason: **they were unnecessary.** By the time they reached adolescence, the older four had already solidified the narrative. The system was self-sustaining; the proxy war had already been won.

8. The Somatic Price: Traumatic Bonding and Withdrawal

The physical symptoms Abigail experienced after walking away from the café—trembling hands, heart palpitations, nausea, cold sweats, and a phantom urge to meet Eleanor for coffee at 4:00 PM—are not signs of mental weakness. They are the classic physiological hallmarks of **breaking a traumatic bond**.

When an individual spends thirty years operating within an unpredictable cycle of reward and punishment, their nervous system becomes neurochemically conditioned. The brain adapts to the high-stakes adrenaline of the crises and the sudden dopamine surges of the reconciliations.

When Abigail finally severed the link, her nervous system entered a state remarkably similar to chemical withdrawal. Her body was physically grieving the sudden loss of an organizing attachment, even as her rational mind recognized that the attachment was dangerous. Understanding this distinction is critical for survivors, who frequently mistake their intense somatic distress for a sign that they made a mistake by leaving.

9. Systemic Gaslighting and the Community's Complicity

Throughout the memoir, Abigail seeks help from people who should have recognized the truth: her brothers, close friends, a school acquaintance, her rabbi, and several counselors. Almost all of them failed her.

Why? Because the system operated behind two impenetrable social shields:

The Halo Effect: Eleanor was a civic institution—a philanthropist, a gala chair, a woman who dried tears in charity lines. Society struggles profoundly with the concept of the *communal narcissist*—an individual who uses public benevolence to feed their need for power and adulation, while privately destabilizing those under their domestic roof. Outsiders could not conceive that a woman who funded children's coats could quietly destroy her daughter-in-law.

The Symptom as the Cause: Because Eleanor's attacks were private, verbal, and psychological, they left no bruises. What outsiders *did* see was Abigail: exhausted, tearful, hyper-vigilant, dropped glasses, trembling hands. The community observed Abigail's acute trauma response and mistakenly labeled it as her baseline personality. They mistook the symptom for the cause.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Books

The journey Abigail documents is ultimately one of profound, hard-won psychological liberation.

In high-conflict family systems, the price of inclusion is the surrender of one's own reality. Abigail was given a clear, repeated choice: agree to be the defective, unstable villain of the Winters family story, or be cast out into the cold.

For years, her innate loyalty and desire for familial peace led her to absorb the blame, searching her own ledgers for an error she did not make. But when the price of keeping her children became signing a contract that would dismantle her integrity and legal independence, she drew a line in the dust.

Dr. Aris's counsel—to step back, stop pleading for understanding, and become *"the healthy one"*—offered the only clinically sound path forward. You cannot reason someone out of a perception they were manipulated into holding, and you cannot heal a relationship with people who require your self-erasure as the price of admission.

By setting the ten plates on Chanukah, Abigail accomplished something monumental: she established a boundary rooted in self-respect, while leaving the door unlatched for truth. She ceased playing the role of the beggar in her own living room.

For clinicians, clergy, and families, this memoir serves as a vital diagnostic blueprint. It illustrates that emotional abuse does not

always announce itself with raised voices or broken furniture. Sometimes, it enters in a tailored navy blazer, carrying a foil-covered casserole, offering a silver bracelet that clicks shut like a handcuff.

About This Book

Nobody ever told her children to turn away.
That is what made it so hard to see.

Abigail built a business, raised six children, and welcomed her husband's mother, Eleanor, into her home with open arms. Eleanor was generous, admired, and a pillar of the community. She gave gifts, offered help, and made Abigail feel chosen.

Then, one by one, the warmth began to turn. A piano fund that stopped without a word. A mother-in-law who walked out on the morning Abigail's father went into surgery. A tearful apology and a bakery box, arriving just when the door seemed closed. Years later, Abigail's grown children look at her as a stranger and describe her as a woman who has difficulty managing her life. And the woman who stood by is their hero.

No one ever forbade them to speak to their mother. There was no paper trail, nothing to point to. There was only a pattern.

Wrapped in Silk follows that pattern step by step, from a velvet box at the first family dinner to ten plates on a Chanukah table, and shows how a family can be divided from within by someone it trusts.

For anyone who has asked, "How did I not see this?" and for anyone who has been asked to help.

A memoir of
a family divided from within.

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ISBN 978-1-736482-00-0

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