



# Silent Echo

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** No parent should ever have to face the loss of their child . . .

A year after the tragic death of her four-year-old son, Charlotte Fleming is sleepwalking through life, trapped in a spiral of devastating grief. Then, she sees something online that jolts her awake: her son, Sebastian, alive and well . . . in a stranger's social media post.

Charlotte desperately wants to believe that what she sees is real, that her son is out there somewhere waiting to be brought home. After all, Sebastian's body was never recovered from the accident that supposedly killed him. But what horrific circumstances could have led him to another child's birthday party halfway across the country? Frantic to find out the truth, Charlotte obsessively looks for any indication the accident that took her son from her was not what it seemed. As she bypasses the police and uncovers red flag after red flag, she starts to suspect that something—or someone—nefarious is at play.

Charlotte's relationships with her husband and preteen daughter were already hanging by a thread, and now it's starting to feel like her sanity is too. But someone has abducted her son; she knows it. And she'll stop at nothing to get him back.

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## PROLOGUE

The day began like any other. Charlotte Fleming grabbed her coffee from the kitchen and rushed into her son's room, cursing as the hot liquid sloshed from the mug and stained her silk shirt. Shit, now she was going to be late.

"Sebastion, come on, we need to get a move on," she called as she raced down the hallway.

No response from her four-year-old son. Exasperated, she walked into his room and saw he was still in bed.

"Sebastion! Why aren't you up? We have to leave for school."

He looked up at her, his blue eyes wide. "My tummy hurts."

Not this again, she thought. Ever since she'd gone back to work full-time, Sebastion had been complaining of phantom illnesses. They'd made several trips to the pediatrician, and there was nothing wrong each time. She wasn't unsympathetic. She hated being away from him for so many hours every day, but today, she couldn't coddle him. Of all days for Eli to have a job interview. She sighed, walked over to the bed, and sat on the side. She put a hand on his forehead. He didn't feel warm.

"Honey, you don't have a fever. And you've been looking forward to the field trip all week. Do you think you're just hungry?"

He shook his head, his blond curls catching the sunlight. "I wanna stay home."

“Does it hurt here?” She pressed on his side, and he shook his head. “Tell you what, special treat, you can eat a Pop-Tart on the way to school and see if you feel better.” A stab of guilt pierced her for bribing him, but she couldn’t miss her client meeting this morning.

“Okay, Mommy.” He slid from under the covers and she helped him dress quickly, then ran to her room to change her blouse. She grabbed her briefcase, a strawberry Pop-Tart, and a juice box, and they flew out the door. As she drove, she glanced in the rearview mirror and was relieved to see him eating. He was fine. If Eli landed the job today, that would take the pressure off her. She could scale back her hours and spend more time with Sebastian. At least the Thanksgiving holiday was coming up, so they’d have four whole days together.

“Feeling better, sweetie?” she asked.

He shrugged his little shoulders, put down the Pop-Tart, and leaned his head back against the booster seat.

She had missed drop-off and had to park and walk him in. His pre-K teacher, Penelope Watson, gave Charlotte a withering look when she entered the classroom with Sebastian. She was a stickler for punctuality, and this wasn’t the first time they’d been late.

“So sorry we’re late. It’s been a morning.”

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Charlotte’s leg. “I wanna go home.”

Penelope knelt at eye level with him. “What’s wrong, Sebastian? I thought you were excited to go to the Audubon Center today.”

“Tummy hurts.”

She stood and gave Charlotte a concerned look. “Is he sick?”

Charlotte leaned down and embraced Sebastian. “I need to talk to Ms. Watson for a moment. Go play, and I’ll see you later.”

He reluctantly walked into the classroom and joined some boys playing with cars.

“He’s been a little needy lately. Things are a bit upside down at home. His doctor says it’s a coping mechanism and not to coddle him. I’m sure he’ll be his old self once you’re on your way.”

“It’s going to be a long day. Are you sure he’s up to it?”

“Yes, I know he’d regret missing it. Once I’m gone, he’ll be fine.”

Mrs. Watson arched a brow, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll keep a close eye on him.”

“Thanks.” She looked over and saw Sebastian laughing with another boy. Relieved, she slid from the classroom and took off for work.

The morning flew, and she didn’t have time to give Sebastian another thought as she made her ad presentation. When she returned to her office, she was alarmed to see that she had four missed calls from his school but no messages. She dialed the school’s number from her office phone with a shaking hand. When she gave the receptionist her name, she was put on hold and transferred. Finally, the headmaster’s voice came over the line.

“Mrs. Fleming?”

Her hold on the phone tightened. “Yes?”

There was a pause and then, “I’m very sorry to inform you that there’s been an accident.”

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The blood began pounding in her ears, and she couldn't get a deep breath.

"Is Sebastian okay?"

"There's no easy way to say this. The bus he was on collided with a truck and went over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. I'm afraid there were no survivors."

### PART ONE

### CHARLOTTE

### CHAPTER ONE

#### 10 Months Later

Charlotte shielded her eyes from the harsh sunlight with her pillow. "Eli, what the hell?" She was still half asleep but thoroughly irritated.

"It's almost noon, Charlotte. We need to talk. I can't live like this anymore."

"It's Saturday. What's the big deal?" she said.

"I'm dropping Harper off at the mall with her friends. I'll be back in half an hour. Please make sure that you're up." He slammed the bedroom door as he left.

She'd been in bed for almost twelve hours, yet she was still exhausted. She was always exhausted. Pushing herself to a sitting position, she forced herself to get up,

shuffled to the bathroom, and turned the shower on. The last thing she wanted was to have another argument with Eli. She already knew she was being a shit mother to Harper and an even worse wife to him. But he wasn't the one who sent their four-year-old son to his death because of a fucking meeting. Of course, she wouldn't have had to if Eli's mistake hadn't forced her to return to work full-time. The only person she hated more than herself was him. She grabbed the prescription bottle from the counter and downed a pill, cupping her hand under the bathroom faucet to wash it down. Moving toward the shower, she put her hand in to test the water, then stepped inside and closed her eyes as the hot water beat down upon her.

When she finished, she threw her wet hair into a clip and put on sweats and a T-shirt. Most of her clothes hung on her these days. She was slim to begin with, and the extra twenty pounds she'd lost in the past year gave her a gaunt, haunted look. But what difference did it make? She rarely left the house anymore. She sighed when she heard the sound of Eli's car pulling into the garage. She opened the bedroom door and walked downstairs to the kitchen. Time to face the music.

"Glad you're up. Can I make you a coffee or tea?" he asked.

Charlotte nodded. "Coffee, thanks."

She observed him as he put the pod into the coffee maker, grabbed her mug, and added some creamer. These days she felt more like a spectator than a participant in her life, as if she were floating outside of herself. He put the mug down in front of her then took a seat and tented his hands. Clearing his throat a few times, he finally spoke.

"This is really hard for me to say, Char, but if you don't make some changes, I don't think I can keep going."

Heat rushed to her face, and her mouth fell open. "What are you saying?"

“Something’s gotta give. It’s been almost a year—”

She scoffed. “So what? I’m supposed to magically get over the fact that my four-year-old son died because the calendar says so? What is wrong with you?”

He stood up, pacing. “We’re all grieving. I’ll never get over losing Sebastion. But we have another child. I caught Harper drinking yesterday. Our thirteen-year-old, drunk! But why not?” His face was red now. “She has no mother to speak of. I can’t do everything around here and be there for her too. You need to get into therapy, a grief group, or something. But either you rejoin the land of the living, or we’ll need to take some time apart. And Harper will stay with me.”

A part of her knew he was right. She hadn’t been a mother to Harper since that horrible day. It wasn’t like she hadn’t tried. But every time she felt a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, she could go on with her life, that voice inside reminded her that if she’d let Sebastion stay home that day, he’d still be alive. She had put her job before her son, and it cost her everything. How was she ever supposed to laugh again, to feel good, to enjoy life when she had been responsible for her son’s death? For Harper’s sake, she was glad that Eli had found the strength to function, but a part of her couldn’t understand how he could so quickly resume his life. Whenever she heard him laughing or saw him doing something he enjoyed, it infuriated her. The urge to shake him and ask him how he could be so cold, so cavalier, burned inside her. But instead, she had disappeared inside of herself. She took a sip of her coffee and leveled a look at him.

“Fine. I’ll start seeing Dr. Morrison again. But I want you to know that I will never forgive you for threatening me this way.” She got up from the table and walked past him without another word.

## CHAPTER TWO



After two months of seeing Dr. Morrison, Charlotte grudgingly admitted that Eli had been right, even though she still resented his heavy-handedness. Her new meds were helping considerably. She was no longer comatose, moving through her day zombielike, and was starting to accomplish things. If she was honest with herself, she had to concede that accepting help was the only thing that had made her start trying again. She'd resumed taking Harper to school each day and forced herself to focus on her daughter when they were together. While she would never be the Charlotte she used to be, she was doing her best to be the mother that Harper deserved.

"Do you think you'll go back to work?" Harper asked as Charlotte drove.

She suddenly saw herself in her office, getting the terrible news. There was no way she could go back there. She shook her head. "No, that chapter of my life is over."

"Well, like, aren't you bored being home all day? You've got to do something, right? Madison says it's not good to have no purpose in life."

She bit back a sarcastic retort. Eli's assistant, Madison, had stepped in a lot over the past year, picking up Harper when Eli was tied up and Charlotte too depressed to leave the house. But she didn't like the idea of the woman talking about her, especially with her daughter.

"When did she say that?" she asked, keeping her voice even.

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Harper shrugged. “A while ago. After you went back to the doctor, I think. She said something like it was good that you were getting some help and that it would be good for you to go back to work.”

Now Charlotte was fuming. What the hell was Eli doing talking to his assistant about her? She didn’t want Harper to see that she was upset by it, so she simply smiled.

“One step at a time, babe. I’m just getting my footing again. Although I might do some consulting. One of my former colleagues reached out. She’s starting a social media business and asked if I’d be willing to work on a per-project basis.”

Harper’s blue eyes twinkled, and her face broke into a wide smile. “Mom, that’s awesome. You should.”

Maybe doing some consulting work would be a good distraction. A way to take her mind off the past. She’d text Patricia when she got home and tell her she’d give it a try. Nothing too arduous, a small job that would require only a few hours a week.

They pulled up to the school drop-off line, and Harper gathered her backpack and jumped out. “See ya.”

Charlotte watched as Harper’s shiny blond ponytail bobbed up and down as she ran toward her friends. Despite what had happened a few months ago with the drinking, Harper was an easy and happy child. She was popular and did well in school, her only failing being that she was too eager to please and, therefore, susceptible to peer pressure. They had grounded her for a month, and Harper swore that was the last time she’d drink alcohol. Charlotte wasn’t naïve enough to believe that her daughter would

never slip again, but she hoped for Harper's sake that she would stay on the straight and narrow.

She thought about Harper's question about being bored. The truth was, it took all her energy to get dressed, drive Harper to school, and take care of the necessities of their household. She still slept most of the day away and would set an alarm for when it was time to pick Harper up. Her depression wasn't gone, merely hibernating from pill to pill.

She contemplated doing a few errands, but only because she was stalling. Today was the day she'd promised Dr. Morrison that she'd pack up Sebastian's room, and she didn't feel ready to face it. But the reality was she would never be ready, so she drove straight home and marched into his room. She sat on his bed and brought his pillow to her nose, but it didn't smell like him anymore. Those first few weeks, she'd barely left his room, his teddy bear clutched in her arms as she cried herself to sleep in his bed. She looked around the room a final time. At the Toy Story wallpaper, the Hot Wheels cars lining his dresser, and the bookshelf holding his favorite books and stuffed animals. She closed her eyes, imagining for a moment that he'd be home soon, his little hand pushing the blond curls away from his eyes—cobalt-blue eyes that stole their color from the Caribbean. She picked up *Where the Wild Things Are* and clutched it to her chest, remembering the last time she'd read it to him and how he'd run around the room pretending to be one of the creatures from the book. A sob escaped her. She put the book down and ran from the room. She'd pack it up another day. She wasn't ready.

She flipped on the television and plopped down on the sofa. She'd doze until it was time to get Harper from school. Her phone buzzed as she was about to pull a blanket over her—a text from Eli.

Dinner tonight? I was thinking Dominic's.

She started to type back, then stopped. She wasn't in the mood to go out to dinner, but she had promised Eli she would make more effort. But she was still pissed about Madison's comments to Harper. She would talk to him about it at home tonight. She sighed. There had been a time when Eli was her entire world. Charlotte had been born into privilege, a third-generation member of the well-known Van Arsdale family. They'd been in Maryland since the 1800s, and her great-great-grandfather had invented the travel iron that was now in all the major hotel chains. Charlotte's parents were big believers in making your own way. They paid for her private schools, college, and her basic necessities. But they refused to give her a trust fund. She would inherit their money someday but it wasn't something she counted on. She had always had a job from the time she was a teenager, and after college, she went into advertising, where she worked hard and was promoted often.

When she met Eli, he was an up-and-comer at a prominent investment firm in downtown Baltimore. He came from a more modest background, and she felt sure when she introduced him to her parents, they would appreciate his work ethic and fall in love with him as she had. But they had disapproved. The things that she loved about him—his spontaneity, sense of adventure, and passion for living—they saw as unstable, reckless, and undignified. But when they realized there was no dissuading her, they gave her the wedding she'd always dreamed of. And when Harper, her honeymoon baby, was born, they embraced Eli with open arms, so enamored were they of their grandchild.

During those first few years, they were both rising stars in their chosen fields and their marriage thrived. Staring at his text, she recalled the day they'd looked at the house they lived in now. It wasn't on the real estate agent's list because it was way above their price range, but Charlotte had noticed the open house sign when they pulled onto the street to look at a different house.

"Let's just take a look," she'd said to Eli, and he'd smiled and agreed.

Charlotte hadn't believed in love at first sight until she stepped into that house. From the moment she set eyes on it, she was besotted. It was a white colonial that overlooked a large creek. The view from the bay window in the kitchen was spectacular; it revealed a rolling green lawn that led to a large dock on the water. Beautiful sailboats dotted the creek, and she felt like she could sit there and watch the sun spray diamonds over the water for hours. The kitchen was a dream too, with butter-yellow cabinets, top-of-the-line appliances, and a gorgeous custom-built island that could accommodate twelve. She could picture them having dinner here, then going on the boat that they'd have to buy. She would plant hydrangeas in all colors and teach Harper how to garden. They would fill the rooms with more children, laughter, and love, and it would be perfect.

They both had been quiet as they walked through, and Charlotte's heart sank as they left, knowing it was above their means and that everything else they looked at would pale in comparison.

Eli kept watching her face, reading her mind despite her best attempts at appearing blasé. "It's your dream house, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful, but it's too much. One day."

They spent the rest of the afternoon looking at other houses, but her heart wasn't in it. "Maybe we should just wait," she told him. "Rent a while longer."

"Whatever you want, babe," was all he said.

She had put the idea of moving out of her head. A month later, on a Saturday, he suggested taking Harper to the park. It wasn't until they drove past it that she realized something was up. "You missed the entrance," she said.

He looked over at her with a mischievous grin. "I just have a quick stop to make."

When they'd pulled onto the street, she couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. "What are we doing here?"

"Patience," he teased.

Her heart beat faster when he pulled into the driveway of the house she'd fallen in love with. "Why ..."

He got out of the car and opened her door. "Welcome home, Mrs. Fleming."

Grand gestures were a part of Eli's makeup and she loved him for it. He was always doing things to make her happy. And not just the big stuff. Whether it was a book she mentioned or a scarf she admired in a store window, he remembered and would surprise her with it. But this was over the top.

"I thought we couldn't afford it!"

"It's all taken care of—my bonus. I put a huge down payment on it. The mortgage payments will be more than manageable."

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And his bonuses were more than enough ... for a while. She should have known the returns Eli made for them and his clients were too good to be true. Everything came crashing down when Sebastian turned four. The SEC closed down the firm, and the CEO and CFO, and a handful of other executives, went to prison. Eli swore he knew nothing about the illegal activities and was never arrested. Charlotte believed in his innocence, but it didn't make the situation any easier. Some part of her found it hard to believe he hadn't known. He was an intelligent man; how could he not discern what was happening? Even though he was cleared, he couldn't overcome the stigma his tenure there had stained him with. His clients lost millions, and he became a pariah in the industry. That was when she had to return to work, all leading to that fateful day and an ignored tummy ache.

She started typing again.

Let's plan something for the weekend. I'm beat.

He'd be disappointed, but it was better than getting into an argument in public.

### CHAPTER THREE

She waited until Harper had gone to sleep before confronting Eli. He was watching a show when she walked into the living room.

"Mind pausing that a minute? I need to talk to you."

He grabbed the remote and did so, then looked over at her. "What's up?"

She took a seat on the sofa. “Harper said something today that concerns me.”

“What did she say?”

“Apparently, Madison thinks it’s appropriate to discuss my mental state with our daughter.”

“What?”

“She told Harper that it was good that I was getting help, and that I should go back to work so I have a purpose in life.”

“I don’t know what to say. Are you sure Harper got that right?”

“Why are you discussing me with your assistant? It’s none of her business what I do.”

He put both hands up. “Okay, look. She was out of line talking to Harper, I’ll admit that. But you can’t have it both ways, Char. When you took to your bed all those months, who do you think pitched in to help? It’s only been a couple of months since you’ve been up and around. All I did was let her know I didn’t need her help anymore because you were better.”

Charlotte deflated. He was right. Like it or not, Madison had been there for their family. At the time, she was too numb to care. But she cared now, and she wanted Madison out of their business.

“You’re right, she has been helpful. But it was inappropriate for her to talk about me to Harper. I don’t want her in our personal business.”

“Of course. Don’t worry.”



“But I do worry. I think we’ve crossed a line. In retrospect, we should have made some other kind of arrangement. And I know I let everything fall on you. But I don’t like that your assistant has been privy to our private life.”

He sighed. “It’s no secret that we’ve been through hell. No one is judging you for—”

“Who said anything about judging me?”

“Don’t twist my words. All I’m saying is that it’s public knowledge what we all went through. I went to some of those support groups with the other families. Everyone has handled this in their own way, and it’s been life altering. So, yeah, in normal circumstances, I’d keep my work and personal life separate. But in this case, it was unavoidable.”

She could never bring herself to go to those groups. Sharing her grief felt like diluting it. She didn’t want to commiserate with the other parents about what they’d lost. Her grief was all she had. It was hers and hers alone, all she had left of Sebastian. Eli was right. Everyone did grieve in their own way. “I see your point. But please talk with her and redefine the boundaries.”

He nodded. “I will.”

She let the subject drop despite still wondering how much Eli had depended on Madison emotionally. She couldn’t help but think about what else Eli had been discussing with Madison. Could anything be going on between the two of them? Were his late nights at the office comprised of more than work?

Madison had worked for Eli at his old company. He hadn’t started his new job until after the accident, so Charlotte had been too shattered to pay much attention. But thinking about it now, it struck her as strange that Eli had hired Madison to work for him at his new firm a year later. Surely she’d already gotten another job.

She had met Madison at Eli's previous company's Christmas party four years ago. Madison sauntered up to Charlotte and Eli with a broad smile on her pretty face, her long, dark hair reaching the middle of her back. The red silk dress she wore accentuated her curves in all the right places. "Stunning" was the word that came to Charlotte's mind. Eli introduced the two of them, and to Charlotte's surprise, the woman pulled her into a hug.

"I feel like I already know you. Eli talks about you all the time," she'd gushed.

Charlotte gave her a stiff smile. "So nice to meet you, Madison."

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“My gosh. Your pictures don’t do you justice. Has anyone ever told you that you look just like Charlize Theron?”

People had. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“Well, enjoy the party.” She’d given Eli a long look before walking away. At the time, Charlotte had been slightly disquieted, but Eli had never given her a reason to doubt him. Over the years, Charlotte learned that Madison could be intrusive and overly friendly, but left it at that. Now, her suspicions surfaced. Charlotte hadn’t been much of a wife to Eli this past year, and even though no one in their right mind could blame Charlotte for how the tragedy had affected her, the reality was that Eli was vulnerable. Had Madison taken advantage of that vulnerability?

If Charlotte wanted to save her marriage, it was time to open her heart to her husband again. But try as she might, finding that feeling of tenderness and attraction she’d once had was as difficult to recapture as trying to hold quicksilver in your hand.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Are we ever going to have sex again?” Eli asked after Charlotte rolled away from him.

A knot of dread wound itself in the pit of her stomach. Since their conversation about Madison last week, she’d been doing her best to be more affectionate, but her desire for sex was nonexistent. She reluctantly turned toward him. “Those are not exactly words to put me in the mood,” she joked weakly, but she felt guilty when she saw the hurt look on his face. “I’m sorry. I’m just not myself. I’m trying.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry too. It’s just that I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” she answered automatically, although it wasn’t true. She didn’t know if her desire for him would ever return, but she couldn’t tell him that. She’d asked her therapist if her marriage would ever recover. Dr. Morrison told her that if they could ride this storm out, she might find that her marriage would emerge even stronger. In the meantime, she just had to stall. “Dr. Morrison said the anti-depressants can diminish sex drive too. But I don’t think I should stop the medicine since it’s helping me to function better.”

He shook his head. “No, no. It’s fine. Your well-being is the most important thing right now.”

“Speaking of my well-being...Remember Patricia from my job?”

“I think so.”

“She started her own marketing company and wants to hire me on a project-by-project basis to do some social media. What do you think?”

His eyes lit up. “Char, I think that’s a great idea. What do you think?”

“As long as it’s not too demanding, I think it might be good for me to have something new to focus on.”

“I think so too.”

“Okay, I’ll call her tomorrow. Night.” She closed her eyes, clutching the pillow to her chest, and tried to empty her mind. Since she’d weaned herself from the sleeping pills, her nights had become restless. Calming thoughts, she reminded herself, but her brain didn’t listen. Unbidden, the image came again. The one her mind had made up

of the bus careening off the bridge into the icy waters of the Chesapeake Bay. She imagined the screams and looks of terror on the children's faces and then her sweet Sebastian, sinking, sinking until he was beyond rescue. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and she jumped up from the bed.

"You okay?" Eli mumbled, half asleep.

"Yeah," she lied. "Just can't sleep. Going to read in the other room for a bit."

She grabbed her robe from the back of the bathroom door and slipped from the room. Her breath came in uneven gasps as she ran into the living room and sat down. Putting her head between her knees, she practiced the breathing technique Dr. Morrison had taught her until her breath returned to normal. Would this torment ever end? She flipped the television on and pulled a blanket over her shivering body. She forced herself to focus on the movie she'd seen many times before until, finally, her lids became heavy, and she surrendered to the blessed escape of sleep.

A gentle nudge on her shoulder made her open her eyes. Sunlight streamed into the room.

"Rough night?" Eli asked, a look of concern on his face.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Didn't mean to sleep here. Guess I dozed off."

"I made a pot of coffee. I'll take Harper this morning. She's already in the car. I didn't want to wake you."

"Thanks." She got up, walked into the kitchen, and poured herself a cup.

Eli leaned down to kiss her. "Have a good day. Let me know how it goes with Patricia."

She nodded. Before she lost her nerve, she went into the bedroom, got her phone, and fired off a text to Patricia to let her know she was interested. Not five minutes later, her phone rang.

“Well, that was fast,” she said, laughing.

“You made my day,” Patricia answered. “I’ve been on pins and needles, hoping you’d say yes.”

“Don’t get too excited. I’m dipping my toe back in. I’m not ready to go full throttle.”

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“I know, sweetie. How are you? Really?”

Charlotte sighed. “Shitty. But less shitty than I was two months ago.”

“I guess that’s something. I won’t try to pretend to understand. I know it’s something you never get over. I just want you to know that I’m always here for you if you want to talk about Sebastian.”

Hearing his name was so refreshing. Everyone tiptoed around it. As if by not mentioning his name, Charlotte could forget the pain. But they didn’t understand that she didn’t want to forget. It was like losing him all over again. She wanted to talk about him, to remember him and the joy he’d brought to her life. “Thank you. You’re right. I’ll never get over it, but I’m trying to regain some semblance of a life. At least for Harper’s sake.”

“For your sake too, honey. You deserve it.”

But that was just it. She didn’t deserve it, and no one would ever convince her that she did. She didn’t want to hear worthless platitudes about how she should handle her grief. But at least Patricia was trying. “I tried to pack up his room yesterday. I couldn’t do it. My therapist is pushing me, but it seems disloyal. Like I’m trying to forget him.”

“You go at your own pace. I don’t care what your therapist says. You’ll know when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. Okay, enough about me. Tell me about this project.”

Patricia filled her in on the client she'd be working with. "They do custom book merch. They've been on Facebook, and I want them on Instagram too. You know, lots of authors there. You've got tons of experience with both, and they have a decent Facebook following, so they want to keep doing some ads and giveaways there. I'd also like you to create reels and grow their following on Insta. I'll set up a Zoom to introduce you."

"Sure, that sounds fine. I'll check out their website and current stats and develop a proposal. What's their budget?"

"Decent. I'll email all the details and send over some times for the Zoom. Sound good?"

"Yep. Thanks."

Charlotte felt a tiny spark of excitement. She was looking forward to the research and analytics that came with a project like this. After pouring another cup of coffee, she went to the room that used to be her home office. Everything looked the same. The only reason it wasn't dust-covered was thanks to Enid, who came twice a week to clean the house. She opened the laptop and plugged in the charger. This was good. Exactly what she needed. She returned to the bedroom to shower and get dressed. She might even have a little breakfast before she got started.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Charlotte hadn't been on social media since Sebastian died. She'd deactivated all her accounts, unable to bear the messages of sympathy and, even worse, the trolls who made hurtful comments about the accident being a hoax. Now that she was going to be managing the social media accounts for Book Brag, it was time she plunged back in so she could see what had changed. She opened a new Facebook account, sending friend requests to close friends and liking pages similar to Book Brag's. She did the



same with Instagram and TikTok and began to follow accounts that followed them. Not much had changed on Facebook, but Instagram reels had become more popular than static posts. She was surprised when two hours passed while she watched reel after reel. No wonder it was referred to as a rabbit hole. She couldn't deny the appeal of the rapid-fire promotions, catchy music, and colorful graphics. She had a lot of catching up to do. It suddenly occurred to her that rather than offering her the job because of her skills, Patricia might be trying to help her return to the land of the living. She sighed. She'd do her best not to let her friend down. She navigated to a search bar, looked up articles on current trends, and made a list of influencers and bookmarked videos to watch later. She'd promised Patricia that she'd have a proposal ready in two weeks. Now she wondered if that timing was too aggressive.

It was time to pick up Harper, and as she drove, she formulated her plan of attack. Spending the next three days reading and watching videos would give her a solid enough foundation to begin. Then she'd analyze Book Brag's top three competitors and compare their websites, followers, posts, and marketing campaigns. After that, she'd be ready to put together her proposal. Her mind was already exploding with ideas, and she felt alive for the first time since that horrible day. She had a smile on her face when Harper slid into the front seat. Her daughter's face broke out into a grin.

"You look happy," Harper said.

"I had a good day. How about you? School good?"

Harper shrugged. "School's school. But I did get invited to Farrah's slumber party, so that's awesome."

"Oh, honey, that's great. When is it?"

"This Saturday. I have to make sure my present is really cool."

“Okay, we’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“Um, Mom, I was wondering ...”

“What?”

“Well, my birthday’s next month, and, um, I don’t want my friends to see Sebastian’s room with all his stuff in there.”

Charlotte stiffened. “Why? What does that have to do with your friends?”

“Like, don’t get mad, but Hayden was over the other day, and she went in. She said it’s morbid. Like a shrine or something.”

The heat rose to Charlotte’s face. “I don’t want your friends going in there. Do you understand? And you can tell Hayden that it’s none of her fucking business.” She couldn’t stop the words from flying from her mouth. She never used profanity in front of Harper. But she was furious at the thought of anyone going through her son’s things.

“Mom!”

“I’m sorry. But Hayden had no right to go in there.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:10 am*

Harper didn't answer, and when she glanced over, Charlotte saw that she was crying.

"Harper ..."

"I miss him too, you know. You're not the only one."

Charlotte reached out to pat her hand, but Harper snatched it back. "I know you do. I'm sorry if seeing his room still there makes you uncomfortable, but can you understand? I'm not ready."

"Whatever."

They rode in silence the rest of the way home, Charlotte's short-lived feeling of well-being completely gone. She couldn't seem to do anything right anymore. She pulled into the driveway, and Harper bolted from the car and went into the house. Charlotte rested her head on the steering wheel, breathing deeply, telling herself it would all be okay. At times like these, she wondered if her family would be better off without her. Eli could find some nice woman to marry who would give Harper the attention she deserved. Bake cookies with her, take an interest in her hobbies, and do more than pay lip service half-distracted. "Don't be stupid," she said out loud. Tomorrow. She'd pack up the room tomorrow. It was the least she could do for her only remaining child.

The next day, still thinking about her conversation with Harper, she stopped at the grocery store. She'd bake chocolate chip cookies. They were Harper's favorite. When was the last time she'd baked anything? She walked down the baking aisle and grabbed flour, baking powder, and chips. As she was about to push the cart forward,

she looked up and froze. Her heart began to pound furiously. She dropped the bag of chocolate chips in her hand and ran toward the little boy at the end of the aisle. It was Sebastian! She touched his shoulder and he turned around.

“Can I help you?” A woman ran up to her.

Charlotte swallowed the lump in her throat. Of course it wasn't him. “I'm sorry. I thought your son was someone else. I apologize.” She backed away. The woman was still looking at her with suspicion. Then the tears came, and she ran from the store, leaving her cart in the middle of the aisle. It was happening again. Just when she began to feel somewhat normal, her mind played tricks on her. Would it ever end?

## CHAPTER SIX

She got as far as taking down the posters on the wall. But when she went to the closet and pulled one of Sebastian's sweaters down, she began to cry uncontrollably. Eli had offered to do it with her, but she needed to go at her own pace and sort through things herself. He would just pack it all up efficiently and she couldn't bear that. She sat down on the bed and looked around the room. It felt wrong to dismantle it. This was too hard. She couldn't do it. So instead, she drove to the hardware store, bought a deadbolt lock, watched a video on YouTube on how to install it, and did so. She'd always been technically inclined, much more so than Eli, who couldn't hammer a nail properly. She felt a sense of accomplishment when she put the key in and locked the door. Problem solved. Now none of Harper's friends would go in there.

She was behind on her research, so she went into the office with a strong cup of coffee and opened her laptop. Navigating to Facebook, she saw that she had some friend requests from old colleagues and high school and college friends. She accepted them and spent some time looking at their pages. Then she remembered the other reason she'd gotten off social media. Everyone seemed so happy and complete. Beautiful pictures of family holidays, babies being born, vacations. It made her loss

feel even larger. Sighing, she shut the laptop and leaned back in her chair, summoning the memory of their last family vacation.

They'd gone to Rehoboth Beach the last week of summer. Every year, they rented the same house right on the beach. Charlotte loved sleeping with the sliding doors open and listening to the crashing waves. Both Harper and Sebastian loved the beach, and they'd spend all day building sandcastles and playing in the surf. Harper had brought a friend with her, and the two girls walked the beach every day, shyly smiling at cute boys, trying to act older than their twelve years. Sebastian, only four, was happy digging in the sand and playing in the small wading pool Eli would bring down every morning and filled with ocean water. It was simple and wholesome, and Eli insisted she take some time to read her book while he watched over Sebastian. He was great in that way, so unlike many of her friends' husbands, who believed childcare was the mother's responsibility. Her friends always came back from their vacations needing a vacation. But she and Eli had worked out a rhythm and balance that gave them each time to relax. Sebastian had been delighted when his digging yielded sand crabs, and he'd run over to her, excited.

"Mommy, Mommy, crabbies. Can we cook them?"

She laughed. Even at his young age, he was a true Marylander who'd had his first taste of steamed blue crab at age two.

"No, sweetie, those are different kinds of crab."

"Oh, I'll put it back."

They'd had their photo taken by the young guy selling telescope photos. It was the last picture ever taken of the four of them.

She stood up and stretched, pacing briefly to try to center herself. She needed to

focus. She watched two more videos on social media trends then picked up her phone and opened Instagram. She was following a little over four hundred accounts right now—a mix of authors, bookstores, and publishers, to get a sense of what the ads targeted to that segment looked like. She scrolled through posts of book covers, writing advice, television series, quotes, and more books. She liked the book-related posts to see how that would affect the algorithm and narrow down the sponsored content she saw. After an hour, her eyes began to blur as she clicked on a story from a bookstore in Florida. Her heart sped up, and it took her a minute to absorb what she was seeing. She scrolled back down and stared. A group of kids sat in a circle, being read to by someone in a Cat in the Hat costume. Her eyes rested on a little boy half turned away. Could it be?

She took a screenshot and enlarged the photo. It looked exactly like Sebastion. His hair was shorter and his face thinner, but otherwise he was a dead ringer for her son. But of course, this wasn't the first time she thought she saw him. It seemed like she saw him everywhere. She'd been told that was common. She studied the picture again. A surge of hope soared through her. They had never found some of the children's bodies, Sebastion's among them. Had he somehow survived the crash? The boy in the picture was wearing shorts and a T-shirt she'd never seen. She zoomed in farther and that's when she noticed the strawberry birthmark above his knee. At least, she thought that's what it was. Enlarging it made it a little bit blurry. Yes, she was sure, it was the same shape as the one on Sebastion's leg! It was him—a little older, but undeniably her Sebastion. She broke out into a cold sweat. Grabbing a pad of paper and a pen, she clicked on the account's profile. The Sunshine Bookstore in Rosemont, Florida. It looked like a small independent bookstore. There was a username on the bottom of the photo; @rebeccabronson had tagged the bookstore. She opened the laptop, found the bookstore's website, and dialed the number.

"It's a beautiful day at Sunshine Books."

"Hello, yes, may I speak with your social media person?"

“That would be me. Social media person, manager, owner. How can I help you?”

“Well, this may sound crazy, but I just saw the picture on your website and I was hoping you could tell me when it was taken.” Charlotte didn’t know why, but something kept her from disclosing the truth.

“Which picture?”

“The children being read to by the Cat in the Hat.”

“I’m sorry, who is this?”

“My name is Charlotte Fleming, and my son has been missing for a year. He was in that photo.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s horrible. It was a birthday party last week. I don’t feel comfortable giving out the name of the person who booked it, but if you call the police, I’d be happy to release the information to them. You understand, I have to be careful these days.”

Charlotte resisted the urge to press, realizing it might do more than good. “Okay, I understand. Of course. The police.”

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She hung up, still reeling. She called Eli.

“You need to come home. Something’s happened.”

“What? Are you okay?”

Suddenly, she couldn’t catch her breath again. “It’s Sebastian. I think he’s alive! I saw his picture. I’m going to call the police.” She filled him in on everything she’d just discovered.

“Whoa, whoa. Hold on. I’m coming home right now. Don’t call anyone.”

She heard the skepticism in his voice. “I’m not imagining this, Eli. It’s him!”

“Okay, okay, just wait until I get there. Let’s take this one step at a time. I’m leaving now. Wait for me.”

Charlotte wanted to jump out of her skin. She looked at the screenshot she’d taken and went to the profile of the person who’d tagged the bookstore. Shit. It was a private Instagram account. She clicked the follow button and hoped the woman would click accept. It took all the restraint she could muster not to book a flight to Florida. She went to Facebook and typed in the woman’s name. She had a Facebook profile. She went to the Messenger app and began to type:

You don’t know me, but my son went missing a year ago. I have reason to believe that he was at a birthday party at Sunshine Bookstore. Can you please contact me? Whoever has him has kidnapped him. I am desperate. I’m attaching a picture here of



my son, Sebastion.

Charlotte sent a picture of herself with Sebastion taken a few weeks before the accident and included her cell phone number. Hopefully, the woman would get back to her. Another thought occurred to her. And she froze. What if the woman she'd just sent a message to was the one who had taken Sebastion, and she'd just tipped her off? She needed to slow down and think this through before making any more rash moves. She'd wait to go to the police until she had more information. The last thing she needed was for them to dismiss her as a grieving mother with no hold on reality. She would go back over every detail of that day with clear eyes. Somehow, her son had escaped that terrible fate. She was going to find out how. She got up and walked down the hall. She unlocked the door to Sebastion's room and looked around with eyes of hope. Now she understood why she'd never been able to put his things away. She was going to bring him home.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

She was already waiting in the kitchen when she heard Eli's car pull into the garage. He ran inside and held out his hand. "Let me see the picture."

She gave him her phone with the picture enlarged on the screen. "See. He's right there in the green T-shirt."

He stared at the screen for a long moment then looked at her with pity. "I'll admit he looks like Sebastion, but the picture's a bit blurry. I'm sorry, Char. I think it's just a child who resembles him."

She shook her head. "No, you're wrong. How can you not see that this is him? Look at his leg." She pointed. "The birthmark! It's him. I know it's him."

"It's not a clear picture, Char." He sighed. "Let's sit," he said, guiding her to the

chairs at the kitchen table. “Honey, you know what they said. The bus sank into the Chesapeake Bay. By the time they reached the bus it was too late, they had all drowned. There’s no way that Sebastion can be alive.”

She gave him a cold look. “I’m perfectly aware of the details of the accident. But I know my son. And that’s him in that picture. Nothing you say will change my mind. I’m going to the police tomorrow and showing them this picture. Then the bookstore will have to release the name of the woman who booked the party. I’m going to find him.”

“Be reasonable. All you’re going to do is make the insurance company dispute the claim. And for what? To chase down some child that looks like ours? I wish he were alive too. Don’t you think I wish there were some way this was all one big mistake? But it’s not. This is only going to set you back.”

“The insurance? Are you for real? I still don’t understand why you took out a hundred-thousand-dollar policy on our child!”

“It’s whole life, and I have policies for both Harper and Sebastion. It’s good financial planning. Don’t you remember, we talked about this.” He shook his head. “It would have been a nice nest egg for Sebastion when he grew up.” His voice caught. “I never thought ...”

“Well, I don’t care if the insurance company tries to take it back. How can you even bring that up?”

He sighed. “Charlotte, you know our financial situation is still precarious. I used that money to pay the mortgage payments that were in arrears and the credit card debt we accrued before I went back to work. All I’m saying is, why raise a red flag? As hard as it is to accept, Sebastion is gone. If you try to reopen the case, they could make us pay that back. We’re not in a position to do that.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “The hell with the money. I’m going to find our son. I can’t even believe—”

“Charlotte, I’ve been a patient man. I’ve been both mother and father to Harper while you’ve slept the better part of a year away.” He put his hand up. “Not that I’m blaming you. But now that you are finally functioning again, you’re chasing ghosts. That picture proves nothing. It’s not Sebastian. You have to face the cold reality that he’s gone. The first responders found the bus. It was underwater. There’s no way he survived that.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know that for sure since they didn’t find his body.”

“Remember what the report said. The bus driver wasn’t found, nor were some of the other children. He must have tried to help them get out, and they drifted off. Bodies are lost in the water every day. What do you think? Magically, a helicopter that no one saw came and pulled him out? It’s crazy.”

But she knew in her bones that her son was alive. This wasn’t like the other times. “I don’t know how, but somehow, he escaped. We’re missing something. I’m requesting a copy of the accident report. I need to see who they identified and who they didn’t. Our son is out there somewhere, and I’m going to find him.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Eli hadn’t even said goodbye when he left for work the next day. After dropping Harper at school, Charlotte had headed straight to the Maryland Transportation Authority to request an official copy of the police report from the accident. She took a deep breath now, her hand resting on the sealed envelope, trying to muster the strength to read it. What if Eli was right? If her son really was dead, did she want to add to her grief by reading a vivid description of everything that had happened that day? She shook her head as if to empty it of her doubts and ripped the envelope open.

Her heart sped up as she pulled the thick document from the envelope and read the title: School Bus Run-Off Bridge Accident, Annapolis, Maryland. She moved to the table of contents and was stunned to see that the report was eighty-five pages long. With a sinking heart, she read the first page, containing the narrative describing the accident. Seeing it all in black and white made it all the more real, and she couldn't stop herself from imagining what it must have been like inside that bus. She flashed back to that morning, wishing with all her heart that she'd let her son stay home that day.

Her eyes moved to the narrative of the pre-accident events, which detailed the field trip that was supposed to have taken place. The last stop the bus made before the accident was at McDonald's. Witnesses reported seeing it pull in at 10:00 a.m. and not leaving for almost half an hour. That was strange. Why would they stop at a restaurant so soon after leaving school, and why for so long?

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She studied the page with the medical and pathological information. It had a diagram of the bus, and a legend at the bottom explained the designation next to each seat with the injury level. They were all F for fatal, with the exception of five seats—the ones of the bodies that were never found. The bus driver's seat was also empty. She knew that the bus was filled because a friend of Sebastion's turned his permission slip in too late, and there was no room left on the bus. She skimmed through the information on the bus driver's background as well as the description of the bus. It was all becoming too much for her. She flipped the pages until she reached the conclusion page. She already knew some of it because the driver was determined not to be at fault. Parents had wanted to sue the school, but the blame lay squarely on the driver of the truck that had hit them, and that driver had also perished. She leaned back in her chair and sighed. She needed to look over the list of names of the bodies that had been recovered. At the time, the only thing she'd cared about was that Sebastion's body hadn't been found.

She retrieved her file on the accident and pulled out the police report. Looking over the names, she realized that Sebastion's teacher, Penelope, wasn't listed as one of the bodies on the bus either. That seemed strange. She couldn't imagine that Penelope would have left any of the children. Aside from the bus driver, she was the only adult not accounted for. Charlotte could understand the bus driver, he was probably at the door trying to get the children out, but a teacher would be one of the last off the bus. And Penelope always struck Charlotte as a good teacher. There were times that she almost resented how close she was to Sebastion. Times the teacher would try to give Charlotte advice on ways to coax him out of a sullen mood or suggestions about what kinds of shows he might enjoy, as if she knew Charlotte's son better than Charlotte did.

Something was niggling at her. What was it? Something about Penelope. She went into her office and logged in to her mobile carrier. Navigating to last November's bill, she pulled up the phone log for that day. There it was. At the time, it hadn't registered with the shock of the accident. Before the missed calls from the school, which had come at 12:30 p.m., there was a missed call from Penelope's cell phone at 10:25 a.m. Why had Penelope called her? She navigated to the details for Eli's phone and saw that he also had a call from Penelope, but that call had lasted eleven seconds. Had he spoken to her? And if so, why hadn't he mentioned it? Penelope called them before the bus crashed, and around the same time they were at McDonald's. It had to have had something to do with Sebastion. Had he gotten lost in the crowd? That could be why they were there for so long. But surely, they wouldn't have left without finding him. His stomachache—maybe it had gotten worse. What if he'd gotten really sick, and the bus had dropped him and Penelope off at a hospital or medical center? Now she wondered if the reason their bodies were never found was because they weren't on the bus when it crashed! A surge of adrenaline rushed through her. That had to be the answer. But where were they now?

## CHAPTER NINE

Charlotte had been on the phone all afternoon. First to check each of the area's urgent care facilities and local hospitals to see if anyone matching Sebastion's description had come in that day. His name wasn't on any of their computers, and no one remembered seeing him. She also had them check under Penelope's name, but nothing. Next, she'd called the school to find out who Penelope's next of kin was, but they said that would violate their privacy policy. She opened her laptop to the memorial page the school had set up after the tragedy. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Sebastion's picture, and a sob escaped her. Taking a deep breath, she scrolled down to the comments made by family members and friends. There were hundreds of messages, and it was tough going, but she had to see if anyone had left a message about Penelope Watson. An hour later, she finally found something.

To my wonderful sister, I'll carry you in my heart forever. Nora

She did a browser search for Nora Watson, but there were too many. She narrowed it down to Maryland and began meticulously looking at each one. Penelope had been in her twenties, so her sister would likely be close to her age. After another hour, no further ahead, she got up and made herself a cup of tea. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Social media might yield something. She returned to her office and went to Facebook to see if Penelope had a page. No luck. Then she searched Nora Watson and began to sort through the profiles. None of them seemed right. Frustrated, she glanced at her watch—almost seven. Harper would be home from her soccer game soon. She was surprised that Eli wasn't home yet. She picked up her cell phone and realized it was in silent mode. He had texted a while ago.

Last minute change of plans with a client. Taking them to dinner. Don't wait up.

Working late? She wondered again if something was going on with him and Madison. She would bring it up to her therapist. She was tempted to keep going with her internet sleuthing, but she knew Harper would be starving when she came in, and Charlotte suddenly felt guilty that she hadn't prepared anything for dinner. She went into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and pulled out a pizza. That would have to do.

Moments later, the front door opened, and Harper's footsteps echoed from the hallway.

"Mom, we won!"

She burst into the kitchen, all smiles, and Charlotte walked over to give her a hug. "Congrats, honey! That's great."

"I scored the winning goal. Everyone was cheering. I wish it had been a home game so you could have been there."

“Me too.” The truth was that Charlotte could have chosen to drive the ninety minutes to the game; some of the other parents did, but she couldn’t focus on anything other than whether her son was alive. At Eli’s insistence, she hadn’t told Harper anything, although she was bursting to. She could use an ally, but Eli was right; Harper needed to be kept in the dark until she had some answers. It wasn’t fair to get her hopes up.

“I put a pepperoni pizza in for you,” Charlotte told her.

“Cool. I’m gonna shower. Wanna watch an episode of Grey’s with me?”

What she really wanted was to keep going with her search for Penelope’s sister, but she nodded. “Love to.”

“Kay. I’ll be back in a flash.”

Charlotte pulled the pizza from the oven and cut it, then grabbed plates and sodas. Harper was back, a towel around her neck, her hair still wet from the shower, wearing her pajamas. Charlotte felt a tug in her heart. Harper was still so young, yet she’d grown so much over the past year. A deep feeling of regret washed over her, thinking about how much of her daughter’s life she’d missed while she was buried in grief. No more. No matter what, she had to keep a balance. She would leave no stone unturned in investigating what she now believed was her son’s disappearance rather than his death. But she had to make sure that she didn’t neglect Harper in doing so. She would spend her days searching for answers, but her evenings would be reserved for her daughter. What about your husband, a little voice asked. She didn’t have an answer.

## CHAPTER TEN

The following day, Charlotte was back at it, methodically going through the profile of every Nora Watson on Facebook. Some profiles had more public information available than others, and she narrowed it down to three women who might be related



to Penelope. If only she had access to all their photos, she could see if there were any older ones of Penelope. Maybe Nora was married and her profile was under her married name, which Charlotte didn't have. She debated sending them all friend requests then thought better of it. Even if she found Penelope's sister, who knew if she could be trusted?

Next, she went to search the death records in Maryland to see if Penelope was listed. Eli and she had had to request a death certificate for the insurance company, and one was provided pretty quickly after the investigation when it became clear that there were no survivors. Navigating to the vital records website, she initiated a search for Penelope Watson's death certificate. It took her to an online order link. She typed in the information, but when she reached the end, she found that only the decedent's mother, father, spouse, or child could order a copy.

She picked up her phone and called the school. "Hi, Misty. It's Charlotte Fleming. How are you?"

"Oh, hi, Charlotte. It's nice to hear your voice. What can I do for you?"

Charlotte had always liked Misty. She often brought Misty coffee in the morning and spent extra time chatting with her. She was the first line of defense at the office, and Charlotte knew many of the parents could be difficult and downright rude at times. Misty handled the encounters gracefully, but Charlotte could see it took a toll at times. "I need some information."

"What is it?"

"I have a friend who wants to apply to teach at the school. I told her what a wonderful place it is. But she's getting out of a difficult marriage and needs a job with good benefits. Do you mind giving me an overview of the benefits package?"

“Well, we have a 401K plan, good health insurance, and life insurance.”

“That’s great. Do you know who the life insurance is through? Her husband works for one of the insurance companies, and let’s just say she wants to make sure he can’t find her.”

“Oh, my. I see. Hold on, let me take a look. Um, here it is. Provident Casualty.”

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“Great. Thanks so much, Misty. You take care.”

“You too, Charlotte.”

She looked up the number for Provident and asked for one of the claims adjusters.

“James Whittaker. May I help you?”

“Yes, Mr. Whittaker. My name is Charlotte Fleming, and I’m calling because I suspect a claim you settled might be fraudulent.”

“Which claim is that?”

“It concerns that terrible bus accident on the Bay Bridge last November. There were three or four employees of the Windsor School whose policies would have been paid out. One of them was Penelope Watson. But I believe Ms. Watson is still alive. I wanted to make sure that a death benefit wasn’t paid out to her sister.”

She could hear keys clicking. “Watson with one t?”

“Yes.”

More clicking. “I see that there were two claims from that accident but nothing for Ms. Watson.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, quite sure.”

“Okay, thank you.”

Another indication that Penelope hadn't been on that bus. Her sister would have claimed the death benefit if Penelope had died. She needed to find Nora Watson. Charlotte still hadn't heard back from the woman she'd sent a Facebook message to about the birthday party. She'd decided to take matters into her own hands. She'd gone earlier that day to the police department to tell them her theory. A kind detective listened patiently, his face impassive, not betraying what he was thinking.

“I'm so sorry for everything you've been through, Mrs. Fleming. It's unimaginable. You say the picture you saw took place in a bookstore in Florida?”

She nodded.

“If there's any credence to your theory, you would need to get the FBI involved. I can give you the number of the local field office.”

She'd gone home and made the phone call, and the agent answering the phone took down the information.

“I'll forward this report to the appropriate squad. An agent will reach out to you shortly.”

Now all she had to do was tell Eli.

Harper was doing homework at a friend's and wouldn't be home until around nine. As soon as Eli walked in, Charlotte handed him a glass of wine and told him they needed to talk. She'd put out an assortment of cheeses and nuts and opened his favorite cabernet, hoping to put him in a more receptive frame of mind. She'd even lit

some candles and put on some soft background music.

“What’s this all about?”

“I want to end the cold war,” she said, arching an eyebrow.

He took a sip of the wine and sat down at the island.

“There’s no war, honey. We’re on the same side,” he said.

“I know. Listen, I found out some things today that support my suspicions that Sebastion is alive.”

“What things?”

“For one thing, Sebastion’s teacher called both of us from her cell phone about an hour and a half before the accident occurred. I didn’t even notice the missed call because I had all those calls from school, and then the news ...”

“Hmm, I’ll admit that’s weird.”

“Did you talk to her that day?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

“What? Of course not. I would have told you.”

“Well, did she leave you a voicemail? The phone records show an eleven-second call.”

His face paled. “Charlotte, what is this? Why are you rehashing all this now?”

She continued. “I thought maybe Sebastian got sicker that day, and Penelope was calling to let us know he couldn’t go on the field trip. She could have told the bus driver to go without them and taken him to an urgent care or something.” She didn’t mention that she’d already called all the ones in the immediate area to no avail.

“But if she didn’t reach us, she would have had to go ahead and get back on the bus. I mean, she wouldn’t have the authority to take him anywhere on her own. Plus, she wouldn’t have had a car,” he said.

“I thought of that too, but she could have called an Uber. But that’s not all. I found out that the life insurance on her was never paid out.”

“How did you—”

“I called Misty at the school, and she gave me the name of their insurance carrier. So, I called them to check. Anyway, don’t you think it’s suspicious that the benefit wasn’t paid?”

“I don’t know. Did Penelope have a family? If no one called to make a claim—”

“She has a sister. I’m trying to locate her. I looked over the accident report. There were three teachers on that trip and three adult chaperones. The diagram showed fatalities in all the occupied seats. There were four empty children’s seats, and the bus driver’s seat was empty, as was one other adult seat. I don’t think any of the other adults would have tried to get out before helping the children. What if Penelope was never on the bus?”

He blew out a breath. “That’s a lot of conjecture. Honey, this could all be nothing. I would love to believe that our boy is still alive. You’re pinning your hopes on a picture that is most likely just a boy who looks like ours. I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t you see all these red flags? The stop at McDonald’s for all that time. The phone calls to us. Something’s not right.”

He took her hand in his. “Sweetheart, this is all very far-fetched. And the phone calls were probably because she wanted to give him something for his stomachache. She and Sebastian must have been on the bus, otherwise, why wouldn’t Penelope have brought him home?”

“That’s exactly what I intend to find out. First of all, if Penelope and Sebastian didn’t get on the bus but somehow got hurt or lost, then Penelope’s sister would have assumed she died in the crash and would have claimed the money. I told you, there was no insurance payout on Penelope.”

“Who knows why the insurance wasn’t paid. Maybe Penelope’s sister didn’t know about the policy. You have to stop this. All you’re going to do is dredge up more pain, and like I said, jeopardize the insurance payout. Then where will we be left?”

She gave him a steely look. “I’m not giving up on our son, and I don’t understand how you can.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlotte sat across the table from Agent Jamie Preston in the Violent Crimes Against Children squad at the Baltimore FBI field office. When the agent first walked in, Charlotte was surprised at how young she was. Even with her hair pulled back in a tight bun and minimal makeup on, she was attractive. Charlotte estimated her to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She wondered how long she'd been on the job.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," Charlotte said. "I got the feeling from the first agent I spoke with that my concerns might not be taken seriously."

Agent Preston's eyebrows went up slightly. "I'm sorry the agent made you feel that way. We get a fair number of reports from people thinking they see their missing child that turn out to be false leads. But, please, tell me why you believe that your son is alive."

Charlotte told her about the phone calls, the unscheduled stop at McDonald's, and what she'd discovered about Penelope Watson's life insurance not being paid out.

Preston arched an eyebrow. "And you found out about the insurance, how?"

Charlotte shrugged. "I may have lied to the insurance agent, but I'm telling you, something doesn't add up. I know my son is alive, and for some reason, Penelope Watson took him." She leaned forward, making eye contact. "Do you have children, agent?"

Preston pursed her lips as if deciding whether or not to share personal information, then nodded. "Yeah, I have a son. A little younger than yours."

"Well, try to put yourself in my place. What would you do? At the very least, can't you look into Penelope? See if there's any evidence that she's alive? I think she's in



Florida, so that's a start."

"Okay, let me see what I can find out. You said Ms. Watson called you from her cell phone. Do you have that number?"

Charlotte pulled out her phone. "Yes, I took screenshots to show my husband. Here." She handed her the phone, and the agent copied down the number. Preston returned the phone to her.

"Okay, Mrs. Fleming. I'll get back to you as soon as I have something."

"Thank you. And please, call me Charlotte."

The agent smiled for the first time and nodded. "Okay, Charlotte. And again, I'm deeply sorry for what you're going through. I'll get back to you soon."

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“Oh, one more thing I forgot to mention. I did track down the woman who tagged the bookstore in the picture. I found her on Facebook. Unfortunately, her Facebook privacy settings didn’t let me see much. I sent her a Facebook message telling her what happened and asking her to contact me, but I haven’t heard from her.”

“I wish you hadn’t done that.”

Charlotte bit her lip. “I know. I realized too late that all I may have done is alert Penelope to the fact that I had seen that picture.”

“If you’re right and this woman is alive and has your son, she’s fabricated some story to explain how she came to have him. He’s not a baby, so she would worry that he might tell someone she’s not his mother. Please don’t do anything else. Let us handle things from here on in.”

As Charlotte drove home, she felt hopeful for the first time in almost a year. Regardless of how young Agent Preston was, Charlotte was grateful that her case had been assigned to her. If anyone could empathize, it was another mother—especially one with a son close to Sebastian’s age.

When she walked into the house, Harper was doing her homework at the kitchen table, and Eli was chopping vegetables. She’d lied to him and told him she was meeting with Patricia about her new client. She didn’t want to listen to him lecture her again. Why was he so opposed to turning over every leaf? She couldn’t understand it.

“Hey, guys,” she said, walking over to Harper and kissing her on the head. “Smells

good,” she told Eli, forcing herself to sound amicable.

“I’m making your favorite. Teriyaki chicken stir fry.”

“Great. I’m gonna go change.” She still barely had an appetite, but now it was more from anticipation and nerves than grief. She played scenarios over in her mind. If Penelope had Sebastian, that hopefully meant no harm would come to him. Charlotte knew that Penelope wasn’t married, but maybe she had been at some point. Who knew, she could have lost a child and was in some sort of delusion about Sebastian. You heard stories all the time about women kidnapping pregnant women and stealing their babies. Had she planned it or had it been a crime of opportunity? Charlotte felt like she would go crazy until she could do something. She had prepared to fly down to Florida and confront the bookstore lady, insisting that she give her the name of the woman throwing the party. But if Agent Preston believed her, waiting and following her lead would be much better.

It took all the acting skills Charlotte could muster to get through dinner and small talk with Eli and Harper. She volunteered to clean up, and instead of joining Eli in the living room after dinner, she pled a headache and went upstairs.

She climbed into bed and prayed that tomorrow would bring good news.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Charlotte had just dropped Harper off at school when she got the call. “Hello?”

“Agent Preston here. I have some information.”

Her heart began to beat faster. “Yes.”

“I was able to get a warrant for Ms. Watson’s cell phone. The day the bus accident

occurred, she called an Uber after she called you and your husband.”

“I knew it! Where did she go?”

“We don’t have that information yet. We’re working on obtaining that information from the company and getting the driver’s name. Her phone was active for two days after the accident.”

“So, she’s alive!”

“Well, we can’t know for certain yet. She might have lost her phone, and someone else picked it up and used it, although it’s unlikely since it would have been password-protected. But if we find the Uber went to her address, or if the Uber driver can confirm that she was with your son, we’re in business.”

“Even without either of those, you have enough to dig further, right?”

“Definitely. I’m working on getting a warrant to look into Ms. Watson’s financials. We can see if there’s activity in her bank accounts. And I’ll go to Florida to speak with the bookstore owner and the woman who hosted that party.”

“Great. I’ll book my ticket and meet you there.”

“Hold on. I need you to stay home. I’ll keep you updated every step of the way, but I can’t have you there.”

“But—”

“Charlotte. I get that this must be killing you. But the last thing we need is for you to jeopardize the investigation. I will do everything in my power to return your son to you. You have to trust me. Please.”

“Okay, when are you leaving?”

“I’m flying out this afternoon.”

She ended the call and drove home. She called Eli on the way and breathed a sigh of relief that it didn’t go to voicemail.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

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She was momentarily remorseful, realizing she never took the time to call and check in with him during the day anymore. “Yeah. I have to go meet with the clients in person. I’m flying to North Carolina today,” she lied. “Can you pick up Harper? I’m sorry to drop this on you last minute, but they liked my proposal so much that they decided to increase the budget. They want to meet in person first.” The truth was, she had called Patricia and told her she couldn’t take on the work right now, but Eli didn’t know that.

“Shoot. I’ve got a client meeting too. I can ask Madison if that’s okay with you.”

She couldn’t worry about Madison right now. “Yes, that’s fine. Tell her I said thank you.”

“When will you be back?” he asked.

“Not sure. In a day or two. I’ll call you from there.”

“All right. Safe travels. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She pulled into the driveway, ran into the house, and went straight to her laptop.

Then she booked a flight to Orlando.

**PART TWO**

PENELOPE

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tell me the story again about how a bad mommy took care of me until you saved me and became my new mommy.” Sebastian looks at me with those big blue eyes, and my heart melts.

“I knew I should be your mommy from the first time I met you. Your birth mommy wasn’t a nice mommy. She didn’t have time to play with you and made you go to school when you didn’t feel good. She got tired of you and left you. I was so happy when I was able to rescue you. You were so happy too. Now we play together all the time, and nothing is more important to me than you.”

“And you’ll never leave me, right?”

I push a golden curl from his forehead. “Never.”

“How come I don’t get on the school bus like the other kids on the street?”

I smile at him. “Because you’re lucky. You get to stay home and be homeschooled. You know I used to be a teacher at a school. But I’d much rather stay home and teach you.”

He yawns, and his eyes close. “I love you, Mommy,” he mumbles as he drifts off to sleep, and I lean over to kiss his cheek. I wait a few minutes to make sure he’s asleep before I slip from the room.

When I go downstairs, I see a message on my phone. It’s from Rebecca.

Call me. I’m sorry but Sofi posted a picture from the party. I think the woman you’re

hiding from saw it.

My stomach drops, and I call her right away. “What’s going on?”

“I’m so sorry, Cathy. Sofi didn’t know and tagged the bookstore with a photo of the kids at Daniel’s birthday party. Sebastion’s birth mother called the store to try and get my information, but fortunately, Edith didn’t give it to her. But then I got a Facebook message from a Charlotte Fleming. It’s from a few days ago. I’m not on Facebook every day, so I just saw it. Her message said that her son was kidnapped. Is Charlotte her name? Sebastion’s mom who lost custody?”

I could kill Sofi. I’ve been so careful. I’ve limited our social circle to a few other homeschool families. I never let anyone take Sebastion’s picture. And in an instant, that moron, Sofi, has undone it all. “Yes, that’s her. I need to think. Don’t answer her message yet. I’ll call you back.”

“Okay. And again, I’m so sorry. I should have briefed Sofi on the situation. I wasn’t thinking with all the hustle and bustle that day.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say, even though I’m equally as pissed at her. Why did she have to invite an outsider to the party? “Okay, I’ll call you back shortly.” I run to my bedroom and start packing. There’s no option. We have to leave.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Before

10 Months Earlier

I pay close attention to the children entrusted to my care. I’ve always known I wanted to be a teacher. From the time I was a little girl and my sister, Nora, and I played



school, I had to be the teacher, she the student. Pre-K is the best. They're so sweet and eager, wide-eyed, innocent, just wanting to love and be loved. The Windsor School is the top preschool in Annapolis and a feeder school to the sought-after Charter Academy. It took me a little while to get used to the mothers. I didn't grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth, far from it, and these women may as well be from Mars.

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I read an article once that said emotional poverty is just as damaging as financial poverty. After five years of working here, I can attest to the truth of that statement. More often than not, I don't even meet the mothers until parents' night since the nannies typically drop their children off. Every week there is a slot for a parent to come in and read, do a craft, or be a general day volunteer. I pay special attention to those mothers who can't find the time. I don't let the dads off the hook either, but I'm a realist. Most of these women don't work outside the home, whereas the husbands mostly do.

I've always been on high alert when it comes to my students. I closely observe the interactions between the parents and look beyond the superficial. I've had to call DCF several times when it turned out to be unsubstantiated, but better to be safe than sorry. The headmaster got angry and warned me that if I continued to report parents so quickly, he would fire me. I warned him that if he tried to prevent me from carrying out my obligation to report, I'd report him, and he would be the one out of a job. After that, he backed off. I wish someone had called DCF when I was growing up.

I can't remember a time from my childhood when my mother wasn't drunk. She'd start hitting the bottle the second my father left for his job at the bank. He was what you'd call a functioning alcoholic and didn't start drinking until he got home from work. Nora, seven years older than me, was the one who made sure I was up and dressed for school so that I could catch the bus on time.

I was eighteen when my parents died in a crash with my drunk father behind the wheel. I won't pretend I was sad. The insurance money paid for my college, and after Nora and I inherited and sold the house—we couldn't wait to leave it and the terrible memories behind—we each ended up with a lot more money than we expected. Over

two hundred thousand each. I consider it restitution, although the damage those two did to us could never truly be repaid.

Today is the day all three pre-K classes are going to the Audubon Center. We've all been looking forward to it for weeks. My one misgiving is having to cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. There's a reason it's rated the second scariest bridge in the world. It's always reminded me of those tinker toys—the steel you can see through makes it a terrifying journey. It's just over 4 miles long and over 350 feet tall.

Everyone is ready to go, but Sebastian isn't here yet. I'm about to call Charlotte when she rushes in, pulling him behind her. Why can't the woman ever be on time? I frown when I notice that he's bent over, his little hand across his tummy as though in pain. I walk over to her.

“What's wrong, Sebastian? I thought you were excited to go to the Audubon Center today.”

“Tummy hurts,” he says, looking up at me with those beautiful blue eyes.

“I need to talk to Ms. Watson for a moment. Go play, and I'll see you later.” Charlotte pushes him in the direction of his friends and in a low voice asks to speak to me off to the side. She brushes his pain off as psychosomatic, claiming he's been extra needy and that his doctor says it's a coping mechanism. But I know Sebastian, and he's not a faker. If he says his tummy hurts, then it does. I do my best to modulate my voice to keep my annoyance from it, but she's barely looking at me as she checks a text that's come in on her phone. She's too self-absorbed and self-important for my facial reactions to register.

“It's going to be a long day. Are you sure he's up to it?”

She shakes her head. “Yes, I know he'd regret missing it. Once I'm gone, he'll be

fine.” She looks over to see Sebastian laughing with another boy and seems relieved.

I’m still fuming when she leaves. I call him over to me and put my hand on his head. He’s not warm. I pull out the forehead thermometer just to be safe, and his temperature is normal. Maybe she’s right and it is stress-related, but that makes little sense to me. He’d been looking forward to the field trip as much as the rest of the class, so I don’t think he’d fake an illness to get out of it.

Angela, another teacher, comes into the room and claps her hands. “Time to line up,” she says, and turns to me. “All set?”

I nod and lead the children outside and onto the bus. Usually, Sebastian would sit next to his best friend, Josh, but I decide to sit next to him to keep a closer eye on him.

“I’ll sit by the window, and you can sit on the aisle with Josh on the other side. That way you can still talk. Okay?”

He nods and slides in. I’ll turn away from the window as we go over the bridge, or Sebastian won’t be the only one who feels sick. Everything seems fine at first, but then, a few miles before the bridge, he starts crying and doubles over.

“I have to go potty. My stomach hurts really bad.”

“Okay, sweetie. We’ll stop.”

I motion to Angela to tell the driver. Fortunately, a McDonald’s is coming up in a mile.

She walks back down the aisle. “The driver’s not happy about the unscheduled stop, but he says he’ll pull over if you’re quick.”

When we stop, I usher Sebastian out and notice several more students follow us off the bus. The power of suggestion.

I take Sebastian into the women's bathroom and wait outside. I don't want to rush him, but he's been in there a long time, and I'm getting concerned about the bus driver.

"Honey, are you okay?"

The toilet flushes, and he comes out. He's as white as a sheet, sweat on his brow. There's no way he can make it through the field trip. Why hadn't his foolish mother listened to me? We walk back outside, and the driver stands by the door, his face red, tapping his foot.

"We are way behind schedule here."

"He's sick. We need to go back."

"What? Lady, are you kidding me?"

Angela comes down from the bus. "What's going on?"

"Sebastian's sick. Let me call his parents and see if they can come here and pick us up."

The driver shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "Hurry up."

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I shoot him a dirty look. I'm reporting him to the bus company when we get back. I pull out my parent contact list and call Charlotte's phone first, which goes right to voicemail. Seriously? You send your sick kid on a field trip then ignore the teacher's call? Talk about shitty priorities. Next, I try her husband's office. It goes to voicemail too. I call his cell, and after four rings it's answered. By a woman.

"May I speak with Mr. Fleming?"

"Sorry, he's not available at the moment. Can he call you back?"

I can hear a shower running in the background. What a great husband and father. Instead of working, he's out screwing around. Both Angela and the driver are looking at me expectantly. I hate for the other children to miss the trip, but poor Sebastian needs to get home. That's when I make a split-second decision. I turn away and end the call then pretend to speak with Sebastian's father. "Hello, Mr. Fleming, this is Penelope Watson from Sebastian's school. Everything's okay, but he's not feeling well. Would it be okay for me to wait here with him until you can come pick us up and let the bus go on ahead?" I turn back around, nod at Angela and the driver, and point to the bus.

"Go on without us. Sebastian's father is going to come and pick us up," I tell them.

They get on the bus and drive off. What I've done is against protocol, but under the circumstances, I'm sure everyone will understand. If Charlotte Fleming tries to give me a hard time about it, I'll report her to DCF for neglect. I order an Uber on my phone, and ten minutes later, a car pulls up.

We're halfway back to school when the news alert comes through on the driver's radio. There's two-way traffic on the bridge because they've closed one side. A truck collided with a school bus, and they both careened off the bridge. It feels like all the air leaves my lungs. The children. Oh my God, the children! Then it hits me, what we've just escaped. It's a miracle! It takes me only a moment to decide. I lean forward and speak to the driver.

"Change of plans." I give him my home address.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When the driver approaches my apartment building, Sebastion looks at me with confusion.

"You said we were going back to school."

I sneak a look at the driver, worried he'll get suspicious. I turn to Sebastion. "We are honey. I just need to get something from my apartment." We get out of the car, and I take his hand in mine. "How's your tummy?"

He shrugs. "Okay."

"Are you hungry? I have cookies."

He nods.

Once we get inside, I have to think fast. I sit him down in the kitchen with some Oreo cookies and milk. "I'll be back in a minute, sweetie." I go to the bedroom and turn on the news. I watch in horror as the anchor relays the details of the crash. Everyone is believed dead. There is no one left alive who can tell anyone that Sebastion and I never got back on the bus. Everyone will think we're both dead. It's a miracle! If

Charlotte hadn't sent him to school sick, I would have been on that bus. My life would be over. And if I hadn't taken the initiative to call that Uber instead of putting him on the bus, we'd both be dead. This is the universe giving us both a second chance and sending me a message—Sebastion and I were meant to be together.

Charlotte and her husband will feel devastated when they get the news, of course. But it's only because of my concern for Sebastion that he's been spared. It was Charlotte's selfishness and ambition that put him on that bus to begin with. What kind of mother sends her sick child to school just so that she can go to work? If she needed the money, that would be one thing. But no one at the Windsor School needs the money. If you can afford to pay nearly fifty thousand dollars for a pre-K program, you are certainly not living paycheck to paycheck. Charlotte Fleming swept in late more often than not, wearing designer clothes, her hair and makeup perfect, driving her Range Rover, and living in the lap of luxury in one of the most sought-after neighborhoods in Annapolis.

Poor Sebastion was simply an accessory to her. No more important than her designer purse. And I could swear there were times I smelled alcohol on her breath. What other jeopardy might she put him in if I send him back to her? No, he's safer with me. I'll devote myself to him. And besides, I'm betting that her marriage isn't long for this world with that cheating shit she's married to. I think back to all the nights I cried myself to sleep listening to my parents fight. How scared I was that my father's explosive temper would vent itself on me. Sebastion deserves better.

I pull a suitcase from the closet and throw in some essentials, including the five hundred dollars in emergency cash I keep on hand. I look around the room, debating what to leave and what to take. There can be no indication that I've been here, of course. It has to look like I perished in the crash. I open my jewelry box and grab the gold necklace Nora gave me when I graduated from high school. There's a photo of us on the wall, but I have to leave it, otherwise its absence will be noticed. I have to hurry. If any of my neighbors see me, it's all over. Think, think, I tell myself. We need



to get out of the state, far from Maryland, where no one will remember that our names are listed as casualties from the accident. It's not as though I can manufacture a new identity right away, so we need to go somewhere no one knows us until I figure out what to do. That's when I decide on Florida. I need time to come up with a believable explanation as to why I suddenly have a four-year-old boy living with me. And I need time to make Sebastian forget where he came from. Orlando is perfect. A few hours from Nora's house in Stuart. Plus, Disney. Sebastian will love that. His favorite character is Buzz Lightyear. We'll have so much fun exploring the park together.

When I come out of the bedroom, he's standing by the door. "I want my mommy. Can you take me home?"

"Oh, sweetie. Your mommy just called and asked me to look out for you a little longer. She has to work."

His face falls. "She always has to work."

I walk over to him and crouch down so we're eye to eye. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I know it's hard. But in the meantime, we can go on a little adventure until you can go home. Have you heard of Disneyworld?"

"Yeah. My mommy and daddy said they would take me there for my next birthday."

"How would you like to go now?"

His face lights up. "Really?"

"Really. Your parents will meet us there. But it's a long ride, so we'd better get going."

“Okay.”

I load him in the car, and we take off. When I first bought my used car, I was annoyed that it had built-in booster seats. Now I see it as another sign that this was meant to be. We'll be in Orlando by early afternoon tomorrow if I drive straight through. I'll rent a room for a few days, buy him some clothes and toiletries, and then figure out our next move. It's not long before he falls asleep, and as I drive us farther from Maryland, a picture begins to form in my mind. I'll find us a cute little house to rent, one with a pool. We'll join a local homeschool group so that Sebastion will have friends, but no documentation will be needed. I'll miss teaching at the Windsor School, but fate has a higher calling for me.

Thanks to my background in early childhood education, I know that in a few years, his memories formed up to now will be forgotten. As long as I'm patient and reinforce the new narrative, he will come to believe it. In the short term it's going to be challenging, but I just have to keep reminding myself that he'll be better off in the long run. If only someone had rescued me, I would have been spared a lifetime of pain. While I may not have hard proof that Sebastion's parents are actually abusive, I have enough evidence that they are neglectful. And that's just as bad. I'll give him all the love and support I never got growing up. And when the time is right, he and I will move closer to my sister, where he'll have three cousins. Everything is going to turn out just fine.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sebastion won't stop crying.

I want my mommy is the only sentence he's uttered for the past two hours. Fortunately, he was asleep when I checked us into the motel. The last thing I need is for someone to call the authorities thinking I've kidnapped him.

"It's time for me to tell you the truth," I say. We can't go anywhere in public until he accepts me as his new mommy.

He rubs his eyes and looks at me. He seems so small sitting in that big chair, and all I want to do is hug him and tell him everything will be all right.

"Your mommy doesn't want you anymore," I say, watching to see how he'll react.

"You're lying. I want my mommy."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Your mommy only has time to take care of your sister. She said she never wanted to have you. That you were a mistake and she tried to love you but she couldn't. But I do love you. I want to be your mommy."

Confusion fills his face and he starts to cry again. "My mommy loves me!"

I walk over to him and kneel down, taking his little hands in mine. "I'm sorry, but she doesn't. But I do."

“No, I don’t want you.”

He turns away from me and begins to sob. I sigh, stand up, and let him be. He needs time to grieve, but he’ll come around. I go into the bathroom and put some makeup on, trying to figure out how to comfort him. An idea comes to me. I walk over to him again, handing him a box of tissues.

“Here, sweetie. Dry your eyes. Listen to me. If you’d rather be with the mommy who doesn’t want you, I’ll take you back to her. All I ask is that you stay with me until Christmas. What do you think?”

He shakes his head. “No. I want her now.”

“Okay, let me call her.”

I pick up my cell phone and dial my own number. After a moment, I speak. “Hello, Charlotte. It’s Penelope. Sebastian doesn’t believe that you don’t want to be his mommy anymore. Can you talk to him?” He runs over, his hand extended. I make a face. “What? Please. No, Charlotte, wait—” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, honey. She hung up. She said she doesn’t want to talk to you. That she’s tired of taking care of you, and she has to get back to work.” I feel horrible telling him this lie, but it’s the only way. He’ll be much happier once he accepts that I’m his true mother, ready to unselfishly devote myself to him.

He crumples in front of me, and I open my arms. He falls into them, crying softly. I rub his back. “It’s okay, it’s all going to be okay.”

I open my laptop and navigate to the Disney website. “Look, sweetie, we can go here soon. Look at all the fun rides. And I bet we can even have breakfast with Buzz Lightyear!”

“Okay,” he says, but there’s no enthusiasm in his voice. He looks shell-shocked. My poor child.

“Are you hungry? Why don’t I order something?”

He shakes his head and climbs up on the bed, curling into a ball. I turn on the television and find a show I think he’ll like. He just needs time, I tell myself. Soon, he’ll be back to the happy little boy I love. I pick up my book on childhood trauma and read.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After three trying months, Sebastian has finally turned a corner and accepted me as his mother. We rent a cute house in Campbell, Florida, only twenty-seven miles from Disney. It’s fully furnished and in a quiet neighborhood. To help Sebastian adapt to his new life, we went to the pet store and picked out a guinea pig. Sebastian named him Buzz after Buzz Lightyear, of course. He’s black and white and just the cutest little thing. Growing up, I was never allowed to have a pet, so this is a treat for me too. Maybe when we have our own house, we’ll get a dog. I feel like I’m living in a Norman Rockwell painting. Every few days, he still asks about Charlotte, but it’s getting easier and easier to distract him from his memories. The most important thing is that he calls me Mommy when we’re out in public. I made it clear to him that if he gave anyone any reason to suspect that I wasn’t his mommy, they would take him away and put him in an orphanage, where he would be until he grew up. I hate to use a scare tactic, but it’s for his own good.

Tomorrow is Christmas and Sebastian is as excited as, well, a kid on Christmas Day.

“Shall we decorate the tree?” I ask while he’s working on his spelling words in the kitchen. He looks up, holding his pencil midair, and nods. Sliding off the chair, he pushes his work away and follows me into the living room, where boxes of newly

purchased ornaments sit open. Next to them is a box filled with the handmade ornaments we've been working on all month. Sebastian goes to that box first and grabs the reindeer made from Popsicle sticks and googly eyes.

"Where should I put Rudolph?" he asks.

"Wherever you like," I say, smiling at him.

He puts it on a low branch. Christmas music is streaming on a speaker from my phone, and a sense of happiness fills me. This is the first Christmas since Nora got married and moved away that I have a sense of belonging, of having my own family. "Jingle Bells" starts playing, and Sebastian drops the ornament in his hand and stares blankly.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"My mommy and daddy sang this to me when we went sledding." His lip starts to tremble. "I wanna go home."

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I put my arms around him. “You are home, remember?”

He struggles from my embrace and runs from the room. I hear his bedroom door slam, and I sigh. It’s his first Christmas in his new family, so he’s still adjusting. I need to make this one extra special and create new memories with him that he’ll cherish. He’s so young; those old memories will be gone in a few years and all that will remain are the ones we make together.

I think back to the earliest Christmas I can remember. I think I was seven. I still believed in Santa Claus and asked my parents to leave him cookies and milk. My mother said she would and hurried me off to bed, warning me that if I didn’t go to sleep, Santa wouldn’t come. I was too young to know whether or not my parents were drunk back then. I only have scattered visions of that night. I remember sneaking downstairs after everyone was asleep to see if she’d left the cookies and milk by the fireplace. She had forgotten. Worried that Santa might not leave us anything, I went into the kitchen to do it myself. I had to climb on the counter to reach the cookies, and I slipped. The cookie jar came crashing down, and there was broken glass everywhere. I froze at first, and then went to the garage to find a broom. When I opened the garage door, it set off the burglar alarm. The next thing I knew, my father ran into the kitchen with a gun in his hands, and when he saw me, he began to yell.

“What the hell are you doing?” The phone rang, and he answered and told the alarm company it was a false alarm. My mother came down to see what the ruckus was.

“You forgot to leave cookies and milk for Santa. I was just trying to reach the cookies,” I explained.

My father turned to me, his face full of fury. “There is no damn Santa Claus. It’s time you stopped believing these childhood fantasies.”

“Marvin!” My mother looked at him in horror.

“There is too a Santa,” I said.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me from the kitchen into the living room. “Look,” he said, pointing to the tree. “See all those presents? Your mother and I did that. Not Santa. Now go to bed!”

That Christmas I lost my faith in more than Santa.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sebastion hardly ever asks about his parents anymore. We’ve settled into a nice routine. Up at eight, breakfast, some playtime outside, then lessons from nine to eleven. Another play break, lunch, and free reading for an hour in the afternoon. I ordered a homeschool kindergarten curriculum online, and I love giving all my attention to just one student. As much as I loved teaching pre-K, I can see now that having my attention divided among twelve students didn’t allow me to maximize learning for each of them. I can’t imagine how children fare once they’re in classrooms twice that size. I do miss the camaraderie with my fellow teachers, and I’m realizing that Sebastion needs the company of other children.

Our homeschool group thinks my name is Cathy Miller. Watching some YouTube videos on Photoshop and making a new birth certificate and a fake social security card was easy. That, plus the phone and utility bills in my new name, was all I needed to get a Florida driver’s license. If Sebastion ever corrects me about my name, I’ll remind my new friends that I had to change it to avoid his abusive birth mother finding us. I’ve told them that she lost her parental rights and that we need to stay off



the radar in case she tries to kidnap Sebastian. To avoid a digital trail, I cut up all my credit cards and withdrew my entire inheritance from a North Carolina bank branch on the way down here. Installing a safe in the rental house was next on my list so that the two hundred thousand dollars would be secure. Swapping out my Maryland tags for Florida tags registered to Cathy Miller was the final step in starting my new life.

We joined the group in January, and we take field trips together, have park playdates twice a week, and get together for a few classes where we take turns teaching. It's really the best of both worlds. The one fly in the ointment is my fear that Sebastian's former parents will find us, but I'm confident I've done an excellent job impressing upon the mothers how important it is that his birth mother doesn't know where we are. Many women in the group are already leery of authority figures, some having been persecuted by the school board for homeschooling. I trust that I can count on their discretion. Today, we're meeting the group for lunch and a beach day at Cocoa Beach. Sebastian's been in his bathing suit since breakfast.

"Can we go now, Mommy?" he asks again as I clean up the breakfast dishes. It still thrills me to hear him call me that.

"We're not meeting everyone until eleven, but what if we take the morning off from our studies and head there now? We can bring our books and read under the umbrella."

He jumps up and down. "Yay!"

When we arrive, we set our things up on the beach, and after everything is ready, he grabs my hand and pulls me toward the water. "Come on, let's go swimming."

I grab the wet bag with my keys and wallet and strap it around my arm. You can never be too safe, and I'm not about to leave them on the beach where anybody could steal them.

We run into the water and have a splashing fight until I tire of all the water in my eyes. I start to get bored but can tell he's not ready to get out yet. To be honest, I really don't like swimming in the ocean. There are too many strange creatures. I much prefer a swimming pool. I watch him try to do a handstand, and we hold hands and jump when the small waves come. Finally, I can't take it anymore. "Time to get out."

"No," he says as he sticks his chin out defiantly.

I feel my temper surge. He's been a bit of a handful lately, and this rebellious streak is getting worse.

"Sebastion, it's enough already, Mommy's tired."

He turns and swims away from me, his legs kicking as fast as they can. In two strides, I'm behind him and I grab him around the waist to stop him.

"Let go of me," he shouts.

"Sebastion! If you don't stop this instant, we'll go home and forget the playdate."

"I hate you," he yells, and the heat rises to my face when I notice swimmers near us all looking at me.

Under my breath, I say, "Please be a good boy, and I'll buy you an ice cream." I know it's the absolute wrong thing to do, but I can't risk him causing a scene. The promise does the trick. He turns back to me, and we walk back to the beach.

"We have to go to the car and get my money," I tell him, wanting to talk to him where no one can hear us.

I open the door to the Volvo, and he climbs in the front seat, which I allow only because we're not driving. I get in on my side and shut the door.

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“I’m extremely disappointed in your attitude, young man. It’s not acceptable for you to speak to me that way. Especially in public.”

He gives me a long look. “You promised ice cream.”

“I know. But first you have to promise that you’ll listen the first time, otherwise, the police might come and take you away. Little boys who sass their mommies can get in big trouble.”

His eyes narrow, and his face turns red. “You’re mean! My real mommy is nice.”

It feels like all the breath whooshes out of me. “I’m your real mommy. How many times do I have to tell you that? I would never give you away like she did. But if you’re not happy, I can take you to the orphanage. In fact, maybe we should go there now.”

“No, no.” He starts crying, his breath coming in uneven hitches.

I don’t reach out to comfort him—not yet. He needs to learn that his words have consequences. “Well then, I don’t want to ever hear another word about your old mommy. She doesn’t love you. She doesn’t want you. She’s forgotten all about you. She even sent me a letter saying how happy her life is without you.” In a few years, if he’s still asking, I’ll say they died, but I’m confident he’ll forget.

His shoulders are shaking now, and I’m starting to worry he’s getting hysterical.

“But I love you, Sebastion. I’ll never leave you. I promise. It’s not your fault. Your

mommy is a bad person. She couldn't see what a wonderful little boy you are. I'm sorry I had to say all those things, but it hurts my feelings when you talk about her. Especially since I'm the one who loves you and takes care of you. Can you understand that?"

He nods, his tears still falling, but his chest no longer heaving.

"So do you promise to never, ever, talk about her again?"

"I promise."

"Okay, let's go get you that ice cream."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Now

My things are all packed and in the car. I'll take care of Sebastian's room tomorrow. I pick up my phone and call my sister.

"Hey there, how's it going?" she answers.

"Not so great. You remember I told you about Sebastian's birth mom getting out of rehab?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, she's tracked us down. I've already called my landlord and Venomed her one month's rent to terminate and said she could keep the security deposit. You know I always fulfill my obligations. I let her know that I deducted the cost of the carbon monoxide detectors I'd had to buy when we moved. She's lucky that I didn't report

her for the violation.”

Nora laughs. “Still making sure everyone follows the rules.”

“You know my motto, rules are there to keep society in order. Can you book us a place to stay until we get settled? One of those places with a kitchenette, washer, and dryer? An Airbnb in your name so we don’t have to show ID when we check in?”

“I guess so. I don’t understand why you have to keep running like this. Sebastian’s mom lost her parental rights. Couldn’t you have her arrested if she tries to come near Sebastian?”

“It’s not that. I don’t want him getting all upset. It’s taken me months to help him forget about her and embrace his new life with me. His therapist said it’s imperative that she have no contact with him. It could really set him back. We’ve had to do so much work. It’s why I haven’t even brought him to meet you and the kids yet.” There is no therapist, of course, but I’ve read enough books about this kind of thing to know that what I’m saying is true.

“Don’t get mad, but are you sure it’s good for him never to see her again? I don’t mean for you to ever give her custody back, but he may want to know her one day.”

Annoyance bubbles up, but I keep my voice even. “I’m not the one who terminated her rights. The court had good reason. You have to remember, he’s a traumatized child. The first few years of his life were spent neglected and malnourished. Who knows who his mother had in and out of that horrible rattrap she lived in. I’ve had him for almost a year, and he’s finally a happy little boy. Remember how Mom and Dad were and multiply that by a hundred. I’m never going to subject him to her influence again.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be insensitive. When do you think you’ll get here?”

“We’ll leave in the morning. I haven’t told Sebastian that we’re moving yet. But I know when I tell him he’ll meet more family, he’ll be really excited.”

“I can’t wait to meet him, Pen. I still can’t believe you’re a mother!”

“You’re going to love him. Listen, please remind Frank and the boys not to say anything about his being adopted.”

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“Okay, but don’t you think you’ll have to tell him one day? Is that really fair to him?”

I grind my teeth and sigh. “Of course he knows he’s adopted. He wasn’t a baby when I got him. But we don’t talk about it anymore. We’re leaving the past in the past. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Okay, okay.”

I love my sister, but sometimes she can be so obtuse. We hang up, and I go to Sebastian’s room. I gently nudge his shoulder. “Wake up, sleepyhead. I have a surprise.”

He rubs his eyes and looks at me. “What?”

“We’re going to meet your Aunt Nora, Uncle Frank, and ... three cousins!”

“I have cousins?”

“Yes, all boys: Mario, Phillip, and Anthony. Anthony is only a couple of years older than you are.”

“I don’t remember them.”

“You’re going to have so much fun. They have a built-in pool and a trampoline. Come on, go brush your teeth and wash up.”

He gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom. I rush to his closet and throw things



into some suitcases.

When he comes out of the bathroom, I've already laid out a pair of shorts and a shirt for him.

He looks around the room and notices that his stuffed animals and the posters on the wall are gone.

"Where's my stuff?"

"I packed it. We're moving closer to my sister so we can be near family. About two hours away, in Stuart. You're going to love it."

"I don't wanna move. What about my friends and my classes?"

Damn that Sofi. I hate to uproot him again, but there's no way we can stay here. For all I know, Charlotte is already on her way here, and if she gets the authorities involved, it won't be hard to track us down.

"I know, honey. It's not easy to move. But you'll make lots of new friends, and we'll find a new homeschool group."

He stomps his foot on the ground and crosses his arms. "No. I like it here."

I think fast. The only thing I come up with is a way to appeal to the fear of the police I've instilled in him. "I do too, but the police are shutting down the homeschool classes because the school system is mad that we're homeschooling. The police lied and said the mommies were stealing things. If we don't leave, they'll think we're a part of it and arrest us too. They'll put me in jail, and you'll go to jail for little boys. We have to leave before they find us."

“Oh no!” he says as he grabs my hand. “I’m scared.”

“It’s okay. I’ll always protect you, but we have to hurry and go now.”

He helps me as we grab the last of our things and put them in the car. I lock the door and leave the key under the mat. I hope we’ll have better luck in Stuart. If Charlotte discovers that he’s still alive, she’ll never stop until she finds him. She’ll paint me as a criminal. But I’m just a woman doing her best to protect the child that fate determined should belong to her. I can’t let Charlotte find us and take him back. He doesn’t belong to her anymore.

We get in the car and drive off. We’re almost to the end of the street when I notice a car pulling up to our house and parking. I press the gas and forge ahead.

## PART THREE

### CHAPTER TWENTY

It took everything Charlotte had to wait in her rental car while Agent Preston went inside the Sunshine Bookstore. After twenty minutes, the agent emerged, and Charlotte got out of the car and walked over to her.

“Charlotte! What did I say about coming here?”

“I couldn’t just sit at home. I was going crazy!”

“You have to stay out of my way. It’s for your own good. Why can’t you understand that—”

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“Could you sit at home if it was your son?”

Preston’s expression softened. “No. But it doesn’t make it right. Fine, you’re here. But you have to do what I say. Can you at least promise me that?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’ll go back to my hotel after you tell me what she said.”

“The woman who threw the party is Rebecca Halstead. She has a son named Daniel. I’m on my way to her house now. And no, you can’t come. Go back to your hotel and wait for me.”

“Please, let me just follow behind you. I’ll stay in the car. I can’t just sit in a room.”

“I’m probably going to regret this. But if you get out of that car—”

Charlotte put her hands up. “I won’t.”

She followed behind the agent, and ten minutes later, they arrived at Rebecca’s house, a pink bungalow in a well-maintained neighborhood. Charlotte watched as Preston knocked on the door, which was opened by a young woman who looked to be in her early thirties. She had a baby on her hip and a little boy beside her. Charlotte put her car window down so she could hear their conversation.

“Hello, ma’am. I’m Special Agent Preston, and I’d like to ask you some questions.” She flashed her badge.

Rebecca opened the door, and they both went inside.

Charlotte drummed her fingers on the dashboard while she waited. The woman in there had seen her son. Was friends with Penelope. She'd know how Sebastian was doing—whether he seemed scared or hurt. Charlotte had a million questions, and what if Agent Preston didn't ask them? Almost on autopilot, she jumped out of the car, ran up the walkway to the house, and knocked on the door. A few moments later, Rebecca was back, looking puzzled.

“Can I help you?”

“I'm Agent Preston's partner. May I please come in?”

“Oh, sure.”

Preston scowled. Her face turned red, but she quickly recovered.

“Sorry, had to take a call,” Charlotte improvised.

“Take a seat, Agent,” Preston said. “Mrs. Halstead was just identifying the children in this picture.”

“This is Simon Logan, Matty Brennan, and this one is Sebastian Miller.” She pointed to Charlotte's son.

“His name is Sebastian Fleming,” Charlotte said. “He's my son.”

There was a flicker of recognition on Rebecca's face. “Fleming, Fleming. Wait. You're the woman who messaged me?”

Agent Preston sighed loudly, shaking her head.

“Yes, you never answered me.”

“What is this all about?” she said, suddenly defensive.

“I apologize for Mrs. Fleming’s deception. But as a mother, I hope you’ll understand. We have reason to believe that the woman claiming to be Sebastian’s mother is a suspect in a kidnapping.”

Rebecca’s mouth dropped open. “So, what you wrote to me is true?” she asked Charlotte.

“How long have you known Ms. Miller?” Agent Preston asked.

“Little less than a year. Cathy joined our homeschool group in January. She said she’d adopted Sebastian from an abusive situation and that his mother had lost all her parental rights. She told us that his mother was dangerous and was looking for him. That’s why I didn’t answer your message.”

“Did you inform Ms. Miller about the Facebook message you received?”

“Yes, because I believed her story and wanted to warn her. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“When did you tell her?”

“Two days ago.”

Charlotte pulled out her phone and tapped it. She showed the picture to the woman. “Is this the woman you call Cathy Miller?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

Charlotte turned to Preston. “That’s Penelope Watson. Sebastian’s preschool teacher.”

Rebecca’s hand flew to her mouth. “This is unbelievable! She kidnapped your son? Oh my God! She seemed like such a good mother. And he called her Mommy. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“How did he look? Did he seem happy? Is he healthy?” Charlotte’s emotions were ricocheting between elation that her son was really alive and despair at what he must be going through. She was terrified she would never get him back.

“He seemed healthy.” Rebecca tilted her head. “Happy? I don’t know. He was always quiet, subdued. I thought he was just shy. He always stayed close to her and looked to her for approval before doing anything.”

“What do you mean?” Charlotte asked.

“Like if someone brought cookies or other treats to the park playdates. Most of the kids would just run over to the table and grab them, but he always looked to her for a nod or okay. She definitely kept him on a tight leash, but I thought it was because she

was worried about his mother finding him.” She shook her head. “Now I know that’s true but for the wrong reasons. You must be going crazy.”

“You have no idea.”

“Here’s her address and phone number.” She scribbled on a paper. “Her house isn’t far from here. About four miles.”

“Thank you,” Agent Preston said, taking the paper. “And please keep this conversation to yourself for now. Don’t tell any of the mothers. We can’t risk her finding out that we’re close. She’ll spook and run.”

Rebecca nodded. “Of course. Please let me know if there’s anything at all that I can do.”

After they’d left and Rebecca had shut the door, Preston whirled around and glared at Charlotte. “I hope you realize you may have cost us any chance of finding your son.”

Her stomach dropped. “I’m sorry. I just needed to know—”

“I’ve been more than patient with you, but I’ve had it. How long do you think it will be before she calls one of her homeschool friends to share this choice gossip?” She shook her head. “We need to move fast. She’s had a two-day lead on us. Hopefully, she’s still in town. You stay out of my way, do you understand? Go back to the hotel. Now.”

Tears filled Charlotte’s eyes, and she nodded, got in the car, and drove off.

As Charlotte sat waiting in her hotel room, her excitement mounted at the thought of seeing her beloved son. What had Penelope told him? It was evident from what Rebecca had said that Sebastian had been brainwashed into calling her Mommy and

was interacting with a whole group of children and mothers without ever mentioning who he really was. What the hell had Penelope done to her son? Charlotte had thought Penelope was such a great teacher. She'd respected the way Penelope prioritized her students over their parents, who were often entitled and spoiled, believing that the expensive tuition gave them the right to express every opinion. Now Charlotte searched her memory for signs of mental instability in the woman.

Charlotte had often felt Penelope's scrutiny when she'd drop Sebastion off in a hurry, but it hadn't struck her as pathological. The year before, when she'd had the luxury of staying at home, she would often linger for fifteen or twenty minutes, allowing Sebastion to set the pace for the separation. That raised the ire of his teacher, whose philosophy was that a clean break was best for everyone. The mother Penelope witnessed was, by necessity, a different one.

One day in particular, about a week before the accident, stood out.

At the beginning of the school year, Penelope had sent out an email with sign-ups for class reading. She'd prefaced it with the admonition that it was only for parents—no nannies. Charlotte had chosen a day and marked off the time on her work schedule. Unfortunately, her boss, an older man who probably never had to worry about anything child-related, rescheduled an important meeting. Charlotte had only been with the company a couple months and couldn't afford to make waves. It was too late to change the schedule, so her nanny would have to pinch-hit for her.

"I don't want Mandy to come and read today. Why can't you?" Sebastion had been in a melancholy mood.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and put her hand on his shoulder. "Honey, I told you. My boss rescheduled a meeting for this afternoon, and I can't get out of it."

She'd dropped Sebastion off in the line but then parked in visitor parking. Dread



filled her as she made her way to the classroom to let Penelope know the situation. Penelope was still greeting the children when she approached the classroom, so she stood outside, where Sebastion couldn't see her, and waited. A few minutes later, she poked her head in the classroom. Penelope waved her in.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

She tried to make it fast before her son caught sight of her. “I’m so sorry, but my boss moved a meeting around, and I can’t do the reading time today.”

Penelope stared at her for a moment, saying nothing, and then finally raised her eyebrows. “This is very last minute.”

“I know. My nanny, Mandy, is happy to—”

“You know my policy. If you’re too busy, I’ll read to the children myself. But I have to say—”

“Mommy!” Sebastion ran over and threw his arms around her legs.

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“Hi, sweetie. I was just talking to Ms. Watson for a minute. Give me a hug, and then go play.”

“Did you change your mind? Are you going to read?”

That’s when she saw the look on Penelope’s face. A mix of disapproval and disgust.

“Your mommy has to work, but don’t worry, we’ll have her read another time. I’m sure she feels just terrible for disappointing you. I’ll read today, so you still get to sit in the special reader’s helper seat.”

She felt that Penelope judged her, but she certainly would have never in a million years imagined she would go to these lengths.

Her phone rang. It was Agent Preston.

“Doesn’t look as though anyone was inside the house. We’re working on getting a warrant.”

Anguish overcame her. “Do you think she’s on the run? Rebecca told her about my message, so she knows I’m on to her.”

“Now that we have her alias, we can track her down. The office is accessing her license and tag information. We’ll put out a BOLO on her car. And we’ll try to find her sister. I’ve got someone calling the school to get her emergency contact information. Hopefully, we’ll get lucky there. We’re also accessing the records on her new cell phone.”

She was despondent. “What if we never find her?”

“We’re going to. I promise.”

But Charlotte knew all too well that some promises were impossible to keep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I left my cell phone in the car and bought a burner. Now Sebastian and I are waiting outside Walmart for the Uber I called using the new phone. I was only able to take two suitcases from the car. Unless I’m lucky and they don’t figure out my identity, we’ll have to part with the rest of our things. A man comes outside and throws his food wrapper on the ground. Ugh.

“Excuse me. That’s littering!” I say, pointing to the trash.

He gives me an apathetic look and keeps walking. If I weren’t in such a hurry, I’d call the cops and report him! Why can’t people follow the rules? Still fuming, I call Nora while we wait.

“Hey, you almost here?” she answers.

“She found the house. We got away right before she spotted us. A minute later, and she would have seen us.”

“Oh my gosh! Where are you now?”

“Waiting for an Uber to get to the Airbnb. Listen to me, if by some crazy chance she finds you, you can’t tell her where I am. She might even have the police with her. She’s a consummate liar.”

“What? Why would the police believe her?”

“I’m just saying. I don’t know. Call me paranoid but better to be safe. Just don’t tell anyone where I am. And we’re going to have to postpone getting together. I’m not sure where we’re going, but it has to be out of state.”

“Oh, Penelope. You’ve got to stop running. This woman is ruining your life. Just calm down. I’ll come over later, and we’ll figure something out together. Don’t do anything rash.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise. Uber’s here. Gotta go.”

“Who saw us?” Sebastian asks as we’re getting into the car.

“Nobody. Don’t worry.” I can’t get into it in front of the Uber driver. Why couldn’t Charlotte just leave well enough alone? Why couldn’t she just enjoy the fact that she has the freedom to work as much as she wants now? No more struggling to get to school on time or making her child go to school sick so she doesn’t miss one of her important meetings. It’s not fair. Now I have to uproot my child from all he knows and loves because Charlotte is so selfish. A feeling of rage overcomes me, and I dig my nails into the palms of my hands. I want to scream with all my might.

“Do you have a booster seat?” I ask the driver.

“What? No.”

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I make a face. Can no one do anything right? “When I ordered the car, I put in the comments that I was riding with a young child. This is really unacceptable.”

The driver shrugs. “Are you getting in or not?”

I shake my head. “Yes, but please be careful.”

The seat belt is way too big for him, but I buckle the lap belt. I’d report the driver if I weren’t trying to keep such a low profile. I count to one hundred in my head, hoping it will be enough to calm me down.

We arrive at the house without incident. The code to the lockbox works, and we get the key and go inside. It’s a small bungalow, bright and airy, but close to the houses on each side. I feel exposed. The first thing I do is shut the living room curtains.

“Where are we? Is this our new house?” Sebastian asks.

“No, sweetie. We’re just here for a couple days until we figure out where to go next. We need to get far away from here so police don’t think we’re part of those bad ladies stealing and arrest us.”

He starts to cry. “I don’t want to go to jail.”

I pick him up and kiss the top of his head. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise. We may need to change your name.”

“No!”

“Okay, okay.” He’s clearly not ready for that. If it comes to it, I’ll have to figure out a way to make it a fun game for him. “Never mind. It’s all fine. How ’bout I order us a pizza and then we can go online and try to find a fun place to move.”

“Okay.”

I place an order through DoorDash. “Let’s go sit on the sofa and look together,” I tell him. He follows me over, and I put the computer on my lap. I pull up a map of the United States. “We’re here,” I tell him as I point to Florida. “I think we should go to the other corner of the map. Washington or Montana.”

He begins to fidget. “I don’t know.”

“Okay, what’s your favorite weather?”

“Sunshine and warm. Like here.”

“What are your favorite things about Florida?”

“I like the beach. And the palm trees. And Disney.”

“I’ve got it! Do you know what state has all of those things and is even prettier than Florida?”

He shakes his head.

“California!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlotte spent a sleepless night lying next to her phone, willing it to ring with good

news, but it remained silent. She got dressed and went down to the restaurant for coffee. She thought she'd lose her mind if she stayed in the hotel room for another minute. She texted Eli that she was already in a meeting and would call him later that afternoon. She was in no mood to talk to him and make up more lies about her trip. Penelope was now going by the name Cathy Miller. She'd deliberately chosen a very generic name. The fact that she'd taken on a new identity meant she was well aware of what she was doing. She wasn't laboring under the delusion that Sebastion belonged to her. Instead, she had executed a plan to kidnap and keep him. Charlotte couldn't fathom how someone could be so cruel. To allow her to believe that her son was dead. If Penelope was that cold and calculating, who knew what she might do to Sebastion if she found out that they were close to finding her.

She drank two cups of coffee, her mind imagining all sorts of scenarios, when finally, her phone rang. She got up to find a spot to talk more privately.

"Did you find her?" Charlotte asked in lieu of a hello.

"Not yet. We tracked her cell phone, which was active until noon yesterday. Nothing since then. I'm assuming she bought a burner. We found her car in a parking lot by a Walmart. We're checking the security cameras in the area to see if someone picked her up or if she called for a car. I've got some agents reviewing the footage now."

"So now what? She dumped her phone and her car?"

"I'm going to speak with her sister. The school gave me her information. She was listed as Penelope's next of kin."

"I want to go with you."

"Absolutely not!"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

“Hear me out. Penelope already knows we’re on to her, so there’s no risk of my revealing that. The sister might respond better if I’m there. Who knows what Penelope has told her. Remember what Rebecca said about the story of Sebastion’s real mom being a drug addict and dangerous? If she sees for herself that I’m not that, she might tell us the truth.”

“I don’t know—”

“Honestly, what could it hurt at this point? Are you confident that you’ll be able to convince her that Penelope was lying? I really think I need to be there.”

Charlotte heard Agent Preston sigh. “All right. I’ll swing by and get you. Be there in fifteen.”

Charlotte went to her photo album on her phone and scrolled through, finding as many pictures of her and Sebastion as she could. She’d show them all to Penelope’s sister as proof that she’d been a good mother to him. She stopped and ran her finger over a photo of the two of them—Sebastion sitting on her lap. She missed him so much it hurt. She ached to hold him again, to kiss his cheek, and to inhale the sweetness of his skin. Her baby. Dare she believe that she might bring him home?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I call my sister. “Change of plans. We’re leaving town today.”

“What? I’m not even going to get to meet my nephew? Where are you going?”



“It’s better if you don’t know for now. I’ll call you once we get settled. Sebastion’s mom is in town, and I can’t risk her finding us.”

“I understand, but I’m so disappointed. The boys were really looking forward to meeting Sebastion too. How are you getting ... Wait, someone’s at the door. Be right back.”

I hear voices in the background. Sounds like two women.

“Pen, I gotta go. It’s the FBI! I’ll call you back.”

Panic seizes me. The FBI! How did they find Nora? That means they know I’m Cathy Miller. Shit, shit, shit! We need to get to the bus station fast. I’m about to order an Uber but then freeze. Can they track my phone? No, no, there’s no way they could know my burner number. I go to a browser and look up the Greyhound schedule. The next bus leaving from the Florida Mall is at 2:10 pm. It’s a sixty-eight-hour trip so it will take us two and a half days. This is going to be agony, but there’s no other option. I’ll turn it into an adventure. And really, it’ll be educational. Think of all the states Sebastion will get to see. I’ll pack lots of good snacks and some cozy blankets and we’ll be fine. My anxiety subsides. This is a good plan. The trip will give me time to plan our next steps before we arrive in Los Angeles. I’ll find a motel that accepts cash and won’t insist on identification. Now that Charlotte knows that Sebastion is alive, I’m going to have to come up with new identities for both of us, but it shouldn’t be that hard now that I’ve done it once. And Mexico is close to California, so if worse comes to worst, we can disappear over the border and never be found. I’m quite sure two hundred K will be enough to keep us living in comfort there.

Sebastion is finishing up the French toast I ordered from DoorDash with the prepaid credit card I bought. I pick up a fork and take a bite. “Yum. So, listen, buddy. We’ll get going in a little bit and head to California. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Uh-huh,” he says, not taking his eyes off the show.

“I’ll just pack up our stuff. When your show’s over, I need you to get dressed. I’ll put your clothes out on the bed.”

As I gather our things together, I wonder if Charlotte is here too and how much she knows. I pick up my phone and call Rebecca.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Rebecca, it’s Cathy.”

“Don’t you mean Penelope?” Her voice is cold.

“What?” I play innocent.

“Don’t even. The FBI was here. I can’t believe you kidnapped that child. His poor mother. Do you have any idea what you put her through? She’s devastated.”

So, Charlotte was here. “What did you tell them?”

“I’m not giving you any information. But you should turn yourself in. Sebastian doesn’t belong to you. You’re a horrible person and I hope—”

I end the call. Screw her. What does she know about horrible people? Charlotte probably charmed her with her beautiful face, expensive clothes, and perfect hair. You already gave me all the information I need, Rebecca, I mutter under my breath, making a face. This means that they have my old address and have already gone there. Luckily, I cleared out. But now they’re at my sister’s house. Will Nora believe Charlotte and give them this address? I can’t chance it. I go to my Uber app and order a car.

I walk over to Sebastian and turn off the television.

“Hey!”

“Sorry, bud. But we have to go now. Throw on these clothes, no time to even brush your teeth. We need to leave.”

Ten minutes later, we’re in the car on our way to the bus station.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

Charlotte and Agent Preston sat in Nora Rossi's kitchen. Nora had ushered them right in when Agent Preston identified herself.

"I know why you're here. It's Sebastian's mother, right? She's violating the restraining order?"

Charlotte was about to speak, but a stern look from Agent Preston stopped her. She took a deep breath and waited for Preston to speak.

"Actually, Mrs. Rossi, your sister's story about Sebastian is not accurate."

Her brow creased. "What do you mean?"

"Were you aware of the bus accident that claimed the lives of the students and teachers on a field trip last November? The accident your sister was believed to be in?"

"Of course! I didn't hear from her for two days afterward. I thought she was dead. She didn't end up going on the trip because she'd been in a car accident that morning and was unconscious for two days."

Agent Preston's brows went up. "You didn't think it was strange that she was listed as one of the casualties? Wouldn't the school have known she didn't come to school that day and wasn't on the trip?"

Confusion played over her face. "Well, now that you say that—um—at the time I was just relieved that she was okay; I didn't really question it. I think she explained it

away by saying the news got the names off the roster or something. Anyway, what does it have to do with anything?"

"Sebastion was a student of your sister's. He was supposed to be on that field trip. In fact, your sister was not in an accident prior to the field trip and was on the bus. But we believe Sebastion got sick and they stopped at a fast-food restaurant. The bus continued without them. But no one knew that. They were both believed to be dead."

Charlotte watched Nora's face and saw the truth beginning to dawn on her. "Wait, are you saying she didn't adopt him from foster care? That he went to that fancy school where she taught?"

Agent Preston nodded. "Yes. We were able to access her phone records from that day. She took an Uber from McDonald's to her home. We interviewed the Uber driver and he identified her and Sebastion. She took him that day."

"Oh my God! Are you sure? Why? Why would she do that? This makes no sense."

Finally, Charlotte spoke. "Can I show you something?"

Nora nodded.

She pulled up the "favorites" album on her phone and handed it to Nora. "You can scroll through. I'm Sebastion's mother. Those are pictures of the two of us over the years. As you can see, I love him very much. I would never hurt him."

"Do you know where your sister is now?" Agent Preston asked.

Her hand flew to her mouth. "I booked her an Airbnb, but she called me just as you arrived. She knows you're here. She said they're leaving but wouldn't tell me where."

“Do you have the phone number she called from?”

Nora got up, grabbed her phone, and tapped it. “Here.”

Agent Preston took a screenshot and then sent a text. “We’ll track this and get a location. Give me the address of the Airbnb. She may have left something there that will help us.”

Nora wrote it down and gave it to her. She turned to Charlotte. “I’m so sorry. I truly don’t understand why she would do this. It must be some sort of a misunderstanding. My sister’s a good person. Yes, she’s had some issues in the past, but nothing like this. What’s going to happen to her?”

“Let’s just find them both first. If you think of anything else or if you hear from her again, please call me,” Agent Preston said, handing Nora her card.

They left and got back into Preston’s car.

“We’ll check the airports and bus and train stations. My guess is she’ll take a bus since that doesn’t require any identification. But she could be getting sloppy.”

“She could even hitchhike or have called someone to drive her. Then what? She could stay hidden forever,” Charlotte said.

Agent Preston turned and looked at her, steely determination in her eyes. “She’s not going to stay hidden. If I have to walk through hell and back, I’m going to find her.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We arrive at the bus terminal with time to spare. Sebastian is fidgety and cranky.

“I’m tired. And it’s hot. I wanna go home.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

“Why don’t you read a book?”

He makes a face.

“Fine. You’ve already had too much screen time today, but I’ll make an exception.” I pull out my iPad and load one of his games. The Wi-Fi is turned off, so it can’t be tracked. I hand it to him with earbuds, and he’s blessedly content for now. No one tells you how hard parenting is, but most parents aren’t under this type of stress. Once we’re settled in Los Angeles, things will be great again.

My phone buzzes, and I look down. Nora. “Hey,” I answer.

“Penelope! What have you gotten yourself into! The FBI is looking for you. They say you kidnapped that boy.”

I look around the crowded station. “It’s complicated. I can’t really talk here. But it’s not what you think. I rescued him.”

“Honey, please come back. We can figure this out together. His mother is beside herself. She thought he was dead all this time. How could you do this?”

It occurs to me that they could be tapping this line now. What if Nora is cooperating with them? I end the call. I need to get rid of the phone. Think, think. We’re sitting close to the counter, and I strain to hear where the woman at the window is going. She’s going to New Jersey, and her bus leaves at the same time as ours. I watch as she struggles with her bags and wrangles two small children. Luck is with me as the group sitting beside us gets up and leaves. She takes their place. When her back is to



me, I slip the phone into the front pocket of her purse. I'm getting really good at this. I should write my own book about disappearing one day. Five minutes later, they leave. Problem solved. That should divert them until we're on the bus headed to California.

I tap my foot, waiting for the minutes to pass, my eyes trained on the entrance as each new person walks in. Just another hour before we can board our bus. I'll make Nora understand. She'll be on my side when I explain what an absentee mother Charlotte was to Sebastian. How she sent him to school sick, how she was so cold when he wanted her attention. Also, my suspicions that she has a problem with alcohol. Nora won't be able to deny that he's much better off with me. She'll bring the boys out to see us after the trail has gone cold and the FBI has given up. I'll have to pick up another phone along the way. But for now, I'm relieved nothing in our possession can be tracked. We're almost home free.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Agent Preston and Charlotte arrived at the bus station and parked.

"Stay behind me," Preston admonished as they approached the door. She'd gotten word that the cell phone was pinged here over an hour ago. They could only hope that Penelope's bus hadn't left yet. Charlotte watched as Preston looked at something on her phone, then turned to her.

"The phone is on the move, headed north. Agents are triangulating the signal and will intercept the bus."

"We just wait then?" Charlotte asked, still scanning the room, hoping to see her son.

"I'm going to check the bathroom, just in case," Preston said. She came out and went to the counter, spoke to the agents for several minutes, then walked back to Charlotte.

“The bus to New Jersey left an hour ago. We’ve issued an Amber Alert, and the bus driver is being notified via AlertMedia, their communication system, about what’s going on. We don’t want to do anything that could make Penelope do something drastic, so agents will be waiting when the bus stops in Atlanta. That’s where they’ll have to transfer to the next bus.”

“Can they stop right now and get him?”

Agent Preston shakes her head. “Penelope will have the bus’s itinerary. She knows we’re looking for her. If the bus makes an unscheduled stop, who knows what she might do. We have no idea if she has a weapon. If she believes that you are a danger to your son, she could hurt him to keep you from taking him. I know this is torture, but the best plan is to have undercover agents waiting in Atlanta, which will be in another five or so hours.”

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“Charlotte, listen to me. We’re so close. You’ve done the opposite of what I’ve asked at every turn. The last thing we need is for you to be there and for Penelope to see you. You’ve got to trust me on this.”

“Can we drive to Atlanta and park a few miles away? That way when they get him, they can call you and we can get there quickly. He’ll be scared. He’s already going to be so traumatized.”

She nodded. “We can do that. Have you called your husband yet?”

“No.”

Agent Preston gave her a strange look. “Why not?”

“He doesn’t know I’m here. He told me I was chasing ghosts, so I pretended to be on a business trip. I’ll call him when we have Sebastion back.”

Agent Preston cast a sidelong look at her while driving. “Charlotte. Is there a reason you don’t want your husband to know that we’ve found him? Do you think he had something to do with this?”

She exhaled a pent-up breath. “Of course not! But he was dead set against my looking into this. I was tired of arguing with him.”

“Why is that? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

Charlotte sighed. “He kept talking about having to pay back the insurance money if the insurance company thought there was a chance Sebastion was still alive.” She hesitated, thinking of something else. “When I looked up the phone records, Penelope’s call to his phone lasted eleven seconds. He brushed me off when I asked him about that.”

The agent was quiet. “You should have told me. We could have discreetly looked into him, and we will now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

Charlotte started to blame herself again. Had she put Sebastian in further jeopardy by keeping her suspicions to herself?

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I pull the blanket up to Sebastian's chin. He fell asleep after only half an hour. I watch him as he sleeps, thinking again what a beautiful child he is. An image of Charlotte flashes through my mind, unbidden. He looks like her; they have the same beautiful cerulean eyes, ivory skin, and delicate features. It irks me that he resembles Charlotte and not me. I know—I'll dye my dark hair blond. I could even get blue contact lenses. Then people will look at him and tell me how much he looks like me.

There's a woman in the aisle across from us with her shoes off, and I wrinkle my nose. I lean over and give her a dirty look.

"It's unsanitary to remove your shoes. Please put them back on."

She returns my dirty look and then scoffs. "Mind your own business, lady."

"Do you want me to tell the driver?" I ask, although I'm not sure I should call attention to us, but hopefully, the threat will be enough.

"Go ahead. Freak."

I tighten my hands into fists, frustrated. "I will at the next stop," I say, needing to have the last word.

“Whatever,” she says.

“Jerk,” I mutter, but not loud enough for her to hear me. Why can’t people just follow the rules? It would make life so much better. Selfish, stupid people ruin everything. I take a deep breath and turn toward the window, watching the miles roll by, feeling lighter with every mile we put between us and Florida. My eyes feel heavy, and I close them, allowing myself to drift off. The next thing I know, I’m being poked in the ribs.

“What?” I snap, my eyes flying open.

“My tummy hurts,” Sebastion says.

I reach in my bag and pull out a bag of chips. “Here,” I say, handing it to him. “You’re probably just hungry.”

He shakes his head and puts his hands on his stomach. “No, it hurts.”

I really don’t need this right now. I sigh and force a neutral tone. Why must he be so difficult? “Sebastion, this is no time for your shenanigans. I know this has been stressful, but everything’s going to be fine. I just need you to settle down and try to rest.”

“I’m not tired. I wanna go home!” His voice rises, and other passengers look our way.

I reach into my bag and pull out a bottle of chewable Benadryl. “Keep your voice down,” I say. “Here, this will make your tummy feel better.” I hand him a dose and a half. Hopefully it will knock him out, and I can get some peace.

He takes them from my hand and puts them in his mouth.

“Good, now try to close your eyes and get some sleep, and when you wake up, we’ll be that much closer to California.”

He quiets down and I look out the window, pondering this latest turn of events. I should probably dye his hair black, like mine. Or maybe I should make us both redheads—then we’ll definitely look more alike. I’ve been researching the nomadic lifestyle. At first, I thought it was only weirdos living that way, but I’m learning that many people find it a liberating way to live. It would certainly help us to stay hidden, and it would be educational for Sebastion to travel the country. It could give us a sense of community without the worry of someone getting too nosy. Those folks know how to mind their own business. And my money would definitely last longer that way. The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. I sigh contentedly, glancing over at Sebastion, who’s now knocked out, although moaning a bit in his sleep. I close my eyes and drift off again, dreaming of our new life on the road.

It’s dark when I open my eyes again. Sebastion is crying. What now?

“What’s wrong, Sebastion?” I say, unable to keep the irritation from my voice.

“My tummy hurts!” He doubles over and I notice that his face is white. Before I can say another word, he vomits all over me. I jump up, disgusted.

The lady across the aisle makes a face. “Eww, your kid’s sick.”

I give her a dirty look and pick him up, hurrying to the back of the bus and the bathroom. As soon as we’re in the cramped area, he starts to get sick again. I turn him in front of the commode. “Do it there,” I yell as I wet some paper towels and try to clean my shirt.

When he finishes, I take him back to our seat. “I’ll be right back, honey.” I approach the driver.

“My son is sick. How long until the next stop?”

“We’re twenty minutes from Atlanta. Do you need to call 911 or can he hold off until then?”

“That’s fine, thank you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

I figure we'll have to get a room for the night and catch another bus tomorrow. When I get back to my seat, Sebastion is crying and I get withering looks from everyone around us.

"Haven't you ever seen a sick child, before? Mind your damn business!" I scream.

I put a hand on his head. He's warm. He must be getting the flu. We'll have to lie low for a few days, but he'll be okay. "Sweetie, we're stopping soon, and we'll go to a motel where you can lie down."

I do my best to soothe him for the remainder of the ride, and finally the bus comes to a stop. I grab our bags and hurry him off the bus, looking around for a taxi. I notice the woman whose bag I put my phone in. She's being questioned by a police officer. My blood runs cold when I see three more officers standing at the doors to the bus, checking the ID of everyone who gets off. I didn't realize the bus to New Jersey would be making the same stop as our bus. Shit! I pick Sebastion up and, as discreetly as possible, turn around and walk the other way. Once we're no longer in their line of sight, I run as fast as I can, jostling Sebastion in my arms. I stop when I see a cab and hail it. Only when we're safely inside and driving away do I exhale.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Agent Preston's phone rang and Charlotte held her breath.

"Yes, okay. You're sure? All right."

She turned to Charlotte with a bleak look.



“They weren’t on the bus.”

“What? How is that possible? I thought they were tracking her phone.”

“They were. She put it in someone’s bag. She must have known we were on to her. We can only assume she took another bus, or maybe she left the station. Unfortunately, we have no way of tracking her.”

Charlotte’s heart sank. “You were right. It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t interfered—”

Agent Preston put a hand on her. “No, stop. If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t even know Sebastian was alive. I know I was tough on you, but this isn’t your fault. Everyone found out the truth when I went to talk to them anyhow. It was most likely her sister.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“As I said, there’s an Amber Alert. We’ll also send agents back to her sister’s to see if we can monitor her phone. We’re going to do everything we can to find him.”

Charlotte didn’t miss the look of defeat in Agent Preston’s eyes. “But there’s no guarantee, is there? In fact, it’s very likely I’m never going to see my son again, isn’t it? I need to call Eli and tell him what’s happened.”

“Yes, and you should go home. But I don’t want you to give up. Penelope’s going to mess up, and when she does, we’re going to find Sebastian.”

But Charlotte knew in her heart that those were just empty words. They had lost the element of surprise. Penelope was smart and determined. It was going to take a lot more than luck to find her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I've been up all night with Sebastian, and he's not getting any better. His fever hasn't broken, and now his stomach is distended. I looked up the symptoms for appendicitis, and he has some of them. I don't know what to do. If it is appendicitis, he'll need treatment, but then we'll be exposed. If I don't take him to the hospital, and it is appendicitis, he could die. On the other hand, if it's just the flu, then I could risk our getting caught for nothing. I never knew motherhood could be so hard. All these decisions and no way to know what the right one is!

I decide to give it a little longer. When I looked it up, it said that complications don't usually occur until after forty-eight hours. So, we still have a little time. And besides, it's probably not even that. I always have had a tendency to jump to the worst conclusion. This is either a twenty-four-hour flu, or just a stomachache from being on the road and him not going to the bathroom. He's probably just constipated.

We're in a fleabag motel off the highway, but they didn't ask for any ID when I slapped some cash on the counter. Sebastian is curled up on the bed, crying, and I'm pacing the floor, wishing he would just be quiet so I can think.

"Any better?" I ask, leaning down to put a hand on his head.

He shakes his head. "It hurts, Mommy!"

"Maybe it's gas. Let's see if you can go to the bathroom." Now that I think of it, I can't remember the last time he had a bowel movement. I pick him up and carry him to the bathroom and seat him on the toilet. He doubles over again, his little arms wrapped around himself.

"I can't," he says, tears running down his face.

“Just try for a few minutes, you might feel better.”

He shakes his head pathetically. Why can't he just try harder? This could totally be just gas.

“Just sit there until you go. Then you'll feel better. I promise.” Maybe I should give him a laxative. I saw a drugstore around the corner. If he doesn't go in the next hour, I'll run out and get him one.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

Charlotte sat at the airport, waiting for her flight to board. She'd called Eli and told him everything. Eli had been stunned to learn the truth. "My God! I'm sorry for not believing you. He's really alive! That's wonderful!"

"Yes, it is, but I don't know if we'll ever find him." She choked back a sob.

"We will move heaven and earth, Char. We're going to get him back! I can't believe Penelope's had him all this time."

"I know, it's beyond words. I have no idea where she's taken him. What if we never get him back?" Her voice caught and she took a deep breath to keep herself from crying again.

"We will never stop looking. I promise." She could hear the steely determination in his voice.

The announcement for her flight came over the loudspeaker. "I'm boarding. We'll talk more when I get home."

"Love you," he said.

"Love you too."

She stood up and gathered her things but froze when she saw Agent Preston's number flash across her phone screen.

"Has something happened?" she said without preamble.

“We found him! He’s at Grady Memorial Hospital.”

Her heart beat faster. “Is he okay? What happened?”

“He was brought in by ambulance. Appendicitis. Apparently, it was pretty advanced and it ruptured. He’s in surgery now. A nurse recognized his face from the Amber Alert and called the FBI.”

“Oh my God! Okay, I’ll meet you there.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I had to do what any good mother would and put my own safety at risk for the good of my child. I rode with him in the ambulance, declining to give any identification, claiming it had been lost on our bus trip. The paramedics didn’t have time to argue with me, because poor Sebastian was in agony by then. I waited as long as I possibly could, but when his screams were so loud that they drew the attention of the manager at the motel, I knew it was time to take him. They said if I’d waited any longer, he might not have made it. So I did a good thing by finally calling. I had him admitted under a fake name, and told them I could pay cash, that we don’t have insurance and that my ID was lost. They seemed to believe me. Now I just have to wait this out, and then we’ll be on our way again.

As I pace in the waiting room, scenes from the past year flood my mind. Now that he’s finally accepted me as his true mother, I can’t lose him. I’ve put in so much work, suffered through all his tantrums and demands, his defiance and his complaining. It can’t all be for nothing. He has to make it through the surgery. If he dies, it will be her fault for finding us and making us go on the run. Selfish. That’s what Charlotte is. Only caring about her own needs and not allowing Sebastian to thrive in his new life.

I look up as the doors swing open and the doctor walks toward me. I try to read the expression on his face. He looks angry.

“He’s out of surgery.” He shakes his head. “I don’t understand why you waited so long to bring him in. He developed peritonitis, which is life-threatening. Fortunately, we were able to clean the abdominal cavity. Now we have to monitor him for infection.”

How dare he lecture me? “I thought he had the flu. We don’t have insurance and you doctors and hospitals charge exorbitant fees. Maybe if you didn’t, I would have brought him sooner. But I didn’t want a ten-thousand-dollar bill for the flu.”

His jaw tightens. “He’s headed to recovery now.”

“When can I see him?”

“A nurse will be out to take you back as soon as he’s awake.”

“Fine.” I won’t thank him for doing his job, especially after the way he’s just spoken to me. He shakes his head and walks off without another word.

I turn as I hear the elevator ding and see a woman and a man step out. Something about the way they look at me makes my hair stand on end. I’m about to get up and go to the cafeteria when the woman walks up to me.

“Hello, Penelope.”

I spring up, my heart beating faster. How does she know my name? “You must have me confused with someone else.” I start to walk away but she clamps a firm hand around my arm.

“Get off of me! What do you think you’re doing?”

I hear the click of metal and realize I’m being handcuffed. The woman speaks.

“Penelope Watson, you’re under arrest for kidnapping. You have the right to remain silent—”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

Blood rushes in my ears as she continues reading my rights. “Stop. I have to see my son. He needs me! You can’t take me, he’s in surgery and—”

They drag me away before I can finish the sentence, and my heart breaks as the image of my son waking up and looking for me flashes in my mind.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Agent Preston was waiting for her in the lobby when she got to the hospital. Charlotte ran toward her.

“How is he?”

“Out of surgery and just moved to a room. We arrested Penelope. Another agent has taken her for processing. I wanted to be here for you.”

Charlotte was filled with a sense of euphoria and relief. He was safe. Her child was alive and safe! Tears of joy fell from her eyes, and she started to weep, all the pent-up fear and anxiety spilling from her in hitching sobs.

As they rode up in the elevator, she felt as though she would burst. She couldn’t believe they had found him. She was finally going to see her son! To hold him in her arms again. To bring him home. They stopped at the nurses’ station and were directed to his room. Agent Preston hung back as Charlotte walked toward it. She felt like she was moving in slow motion, everything surreal. Then she saw him. He looked so small and frail lying there.



She ran to him, and he looked up at her. Confusion in his eyes, he started to blink. Charlotte couldn't contain herself. She leaned down and hugged him to her.

"My darling. My darling. I've missed you so much."

He stiffened in her arms. "You didn't want me."

She pulled back. "Is that what she told you?"

"You gave me away."

She shook her head. "No, no. Honey, she lied. She took you away. I've been looking for you. I've been so sad without you." She had no idea if he even knew about the school bus accident, and she didn't want to scare him by telling him she thought he was dead.

He looked at her with skepticism.

"Sebastion, Mommy would never, ever give you away. I'm so sorry that she took you. I love you with all my heart."

This was killing her. The reunion she'd imagined, him happy to see her, the two of them clinging to each other, was a fantasy. Of course he'd be confused. God only knew what other lies Penelope had told him. It didn't matter now. Her son was alive! And she'd get him help. She'd bring him back to her little by little. "Mommy loves you more than—"

"Than all the stars in the sky," he finished.

Tears ran down her face. "Yes, yes." He remembered.

“Mommy, can we go home now?”

“Yes, my love. We can go home.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sebastion was quiet as they pulled into the driveway. He had been in the hospital for four days, and during that time, Charlotte had stayed with him, telling him stories of his life before Penelope and showing him pictures of their family life. He was exhausted and weak from the surgery, so their conversations were sporadic, and she spent most of that time just watching him, reveling in his presence and being grateful for his return to her. Her therapist, Dr. Morrison, was brought up to speed on everything, and despite Eli’s desire to fly to Atlanta to be with Sebastion, advised them to wait and let Charlotte and Sebastion have time to bond again so he wouldn’t feel overwhelmed. Now they were home, and Charlotte looked at her son nervously, unable to tell what he was feeling.

“Are you ready to go in, honey?”

He nodded, biting his lip.

“Daddy and Harper can’t wait to see you.”

He didn’t answer as they got out of the car. She held out her hand and he took it, grasping it tightly.

“It’s okay to be scared. But it’s all going to be okay.”

When they opened the door, she saw that the living room was filled with balloons and signs that said “Welcome home.”

Sebastion looked around in wonder. Eli and Harper walked over to him tentatively. Charlotte could see the tears in both of their eyes and could feel their eagerness, but they held themselves back as the therapist had advised.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:11 am*

Sebastion looked back and forth between the two of them, a slow smile spreading across his face. Eli crouched down and opened his arms. “Hi, buddy. I am so happy to see you.”

Sebastion took a small step toward him and then Eli closed the distance and hugged his son, tears falling down his cheeks and his shoulders shaking in sobs. Harper ran over and hugged Sebastion from behind, crying as well.

Sebastion patted Eli’s shoulder and spoke softly. “It’s okay, Daddy. Don’t cry.”

Charlotte joined the trio, wrapping her arms around them, and knew in that moment, that they would survive.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### Afterward

Charlotte would never stop wondering, if Eli had only answered his cell phone that day, if everything would have been different. Agent Preston’s investigation into him confirmed her instincts about him and Madison had been right. It had come out during the investigation in preparation for Penelope’s trial. Those eleven seconds on his cell phone when Madison had answered instead of him. Eli had had to come clean. It was one of the most painful conversations of her marriage.

“I didn’t know that Penelope had called me. Madison answered the phone.”

“And why the hell was she answering your cell phone?”

He'd hung his head, looking at the floor for a few moments. "Her car wouldn't start. She called me to pick her up. One thing led to another ..." Eli explained. "It was stupid. She was telling me how lonely she was and how much she looked up to me. Then she kissed me. I don't know why I let it happen. I felt horrible afterward. I was in the shower when my phone rang. She answered but the caller didn't identify herself. She thought it was a spam call because the number wasn't in my phone. It was only that one time. I swear."

She'd looked at him in disgust. "You let it happen? You need to take responsibility, otherwise ... I can't even. This is not the time, but I don't even know who you are anymore."

Over the past few months, she had been working on forgiving Eli as well as forgiving herself for sending Sebastian to school that day. It was going to take a lot of marriage counseling, and she didn't know if she would ever really trust him again, but she had to try. Throwing her marriage away over one mistake was not something she wanted to do. Sebastian's world had already been turned upside down. Charlotte agreed to focus on their son first, and deal with her marriage later.

It had been six months since they got Sebastian back. He was almost his sunny self again, although remnants of the trauma remained. Harper was quieter these days, hovering more than usual, always trying to make sure that he was safe. They were all doing their best to move forward without fear and anxiety. Their family had survived, and Charlotte chose to be grateful and live each day with hope.

Penelope was sentenced to twenty years in prison without the possibility of parole. She'd be forty-eight when she got out. Still young enough to live her life. But at least Sebastian would be twenty-five and no longer in jeopardy from her.

Charlotte had debated visiting Penelope to try to understand how she could have done what she'd done, but, in the end, she realized that nothing Penelope could say could make her understand. Nora had told her all about their abusive background and how it

had made Penelope hypervigilant regarding the children in her care. She recalled their conversation.

“I’m not making excuses for what my sister did,” Nora had said. “I just didn’t realize the extent to which our childhood had left her damaged. Both our parents loved their drink more than us, and our father had a violent temper. Our mother did nothing to protect us. Penelope had this idealized view of the perfect mother. No one could live up to it, really.”

“I suppose we’re all guilty of that to some extent. Does anyone judge a mother more than another woman? I blamed myself for what I thought happened that day. But what I did wasn’t out of neglect. I believed he wasn’t really sick. And I was doing everything in my power to keep the house and bills paid while Eli was out of work,” Charlotte said.

Nora had nodded. “Penelope’s favorite show was *The Brady Bunch*. As old as that show is, she felt like it was the standard for what a family should be. I think the idea that you can make a new family you weren’t born into appealed to her.”

Charlotte had shaken her head. “I’m sorry, but I still can’t understand how she could do what she did. There were times I contemplated ending things. She put me through the darkest days of my life. I hope she gets the help she needs, but I also want her in prison for as long as possible.”

Charlotte’s text tone pinged, bringing her back to the present. She looked down to read a message from Eli.

Family movie night?

She smiled and typed back.

Perfect.

They had been through hell and back, but they were lucky. They'd been given a second chance. There was work to be done, and a long road ahead. But for now, her family was once again complete, and for that, Charlotte would never stop being grateful.