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Then

THE SOUND WOKE HER, JARRING HER FROM AN EDGY dream.

Had it come from outdoors, Emma wondered, staring into the darkness—or from inside the house? Maybe the noise had only happened in her dream.

But a few seconds later, as she lay alert in the twisted sheets, it sounded again, shooting up the stairs and carrying down the corridor outside her bedroom. It was the doorbell, she realized. The vibrations clung to the air like those from a tuning fork.

She rolled onto her side and squinted at the digital clock on the bedside table.

1:47 a.m.

Her heart pitched forward. It was the middle of the night, and someone was at her front door.

Could it be a prank? She pictured the teenagers who

sometimes congregated on the front lawn of a house down the street: sullen, private-school types, oozing with an urge to cause trouble.

After kicking off the duvet, she jabbed her arms into the sleeves of a terry cloth robe and grabbed her phone before hurrying barefoot to one of the small spare bedrooms at the front of the house.

At first glance through the window, the street below appeared deserted. And then she spotted the tail end of a dark car out front. The rest of it was blocked from view by the pitch of their roof.

No, not sullen teenagers then. Returning to the hall, she flicked on a light and descended the stairs with her heart in her throat, grasping the rail the whole way down.

In the front hall, she saw through one of the narrow windows on either side of the door that there were actually two cars parked in front of the house: the dark one—and a local police cruiser. Her stomach dropped. The police didn't show at your house at this hour because you'd been recorded running a red light earlier in the day.

She inched closer to the window and discovered three people standing on the wide stoop in the glow of the overhead light: a tall, burly man in a tan overcoat, a younger one in a police uniform, and a woman in a black puffer jacket.

The older man noticed her through the window. "Mrs. Rand?" he called out, cold air escaping from his mouth in ghostlike puffs.

Emma went to unlock the door and then, flustered, reminded herself of the intercom. She swiped the hair out of her eyes and pressed the button. "Yes?"

“I’m Detective Chuck Lennox, from the New York City Police Department. Can we please come in and speak with you?”

“What’s this about?” she asked, barely able to hear herself over the whooshing in her ears.

“Ma’am, we’d prefer to explain inside.”

“I—I need to see some ID.”

“Of course. I’m going to put it up against the glass, all right?”

She returned to the window and read the identification card he’d pressed against the pane. The ID looked legit enough, with its bright blue and yellow lettering, not that she was any expert.

Emma deactivated the security alarm and tightened the belt on her robe, then ushered in the three strangers along with a blast of frigid March air.

As they stood in her hall, Lennox solemnly introduced Emma to the woman, Detective Martinez, a small brunette who couldn’t be much older than thirty-five and was wearing the kind of comfort pumps the ads show women shooting basketballs in. Then he gave her the name of the patrol cop, which she didn’t catch, though his uniform indicated he was from their town, Madison, New Jersey. Emma let herself fixate on the details because this way she didn’t have to focus on the enormity of what must be coming next. Why else would they be here in the middle of the night?

“Please, what’s going on?” she asked.

“You’re Emma Rand?”

“My name’s Emma Hawke, but Derrick Rand is my husband. What’s the matter?”

Lennox's eyes flicked toward the living room, which was bright with light. She'd left two lamps burning when she went up to bed, the way she always did when she was going to be home alone overnight.

"It would be best if we could sit down," Lennox said. "Do you mind?"

"Uh, yeah, okay."

As they moved to the living room, Emma fished through the pocket of her robe, found an elastic, and unsteadily tied her hair into a ponytail. She and the two detectives took seats, while the patrolman remained standing by the entrance to the hall, like a bouncer at the front door of a nightclub.

"*Please,*" Emma asked, nearly pleading this time. "What's happened?"

"I'm very sorry to tell you this, Ms. Hawke," Lennox said, "but it appears your husband was killed tonight in New York City."

His words seemed to hover in the air like a drone at eye level, vibrating slightly.

"Killed?" she finally said. "*How?*"

"He was shot twice in the torso. The location was a small alley on Greene Street in SoHo. Probably between nine thirty and ten thirty. It looks like it might have been an attempted robbery, but we don't know for certain yet."

She stared at Lennox, at the long, thin mouth that cut across the lower half of his face like a slit in a piece of cloth.

"It . . . it can't be him. Derrick's in the city tonight but at a conference. He's staying in Midtown."

“Unfortunately, we’re fairly certain it was Mr. Rand. Can you please describe him for us?”

“Uh, about six feet tall, well built. Short brown hair . . . brown eyes.”

Lennox nodded grimly. “Though the victim’s wallet and phone were missing, we found a ticket in his pants pocket for a BMW parked in a nearby garage on Friday morning and registered in your husband’s name. There was also a small leather case with business cards in the other pocket.”

Reaching into his own pocket, Lennox withdrew a business card and leaned forward for Emma to take a look. It was Derrick’s.

“Oh my god.”

It was true then. Her thirty-seven-year-old husband was dead, was gone forever, was never going to come home from work, step into this room, and stretch his legs across the pale gray ottoman across from her. Ever again. She began to tremble, her arms and legs doing a crazy kind of twitch.

“Let’s get you some water,” Detective Martinez said gently. “Your kitchen is—?”

Emma flung an arm in the general direction. The detective was gone and back in less than a minute, and after offering Emma the glass, Martinez picked up a wool throw from the back of one of the armchairs and draped it around her shoulders.

It took both hands for Emma to grasp the glass, and she managed only a tiny sip from it before setting it down on the side table.

“Where is he now?” Emma asked, the shaking subsiding. “In—in the hospital? The ER?”

“He was declared dead at the scene, so he was taken directly to the city morgue,” Lennox said. “On First Avenue and Twenty-Sixth Street.”

Against her will, Emma saw it in her mind’s eye—Derrick lying in one of those steel drawers they show on crime shows, his body zipped into a long black bag. His flesh already starting to decay.

She gulped. “Do I need to go there? To identify him?”

“Not tonight.” Lennox unbuttoned his coat but didn’t remove it. “That can be done in the morning when you might be feeling a bit stronger. But I do have a few questions for now. You mentioned your husband was at a conference. Can you tell us the nature of the conference and where it was being held?”

“It was an off-site management conference at the, um, Cole Hotel, for Alta, his employer. Like the card says, he’s their head of financial planning.”

“And where did you spend the evening?”

“Where? Uh, here at the house. Spouses and partners weren’t invited.”

“And you weren’t alarmed when your husband didn’t return home this evening?” There was nothing exactly challenging in his tone, but it seemed more deliberate than a moment before. She suddenly noticed that Martinez was jotting notes on a small pad.

“No—it’s a weekend event, and it’s not over until noon on Sunday. Well, today.”

“And he decided to spend the nights in the city instead of coming back here? It’s not that long of a drive.”

“The sessions start early and there are dinners at night. . . . And he’s part of management. He’s—he was supposed to be present almost twenty-four seven. . . . Did anyone see anything? Anything at all?”

“We’re still canvassing the area and hope to find out,” Lennox said. “Can you tell us the last time you spoke to your husband?”

A sob caught in Emma’s throat, and she pressed the back of her hand hard against her mouth.

“Tonight,” she said after grabbing a breath. “Uh, last night, I mean. He called me around eight.”

“Long conversation, short conversation?”

“Short. Just hello, how are you. He was grabbing a moment between courses at the dinner.”

“And that was held where?”

“In a banquet room at the hotel. It was too big a group for a restaurant.”

“Did Mr. Rand mention anything about heading downtown or needing his car for any reason?”

Emma shook her head. “No. Nothing like that. You said *SoHo*?”

“That’s right. Do you have any idea why he would have parked there to begin with? It’s such a long way from the hotel.”

“I don’t have a clue.” She bit her lip, trying to focus. “Maybe he didn’t want to drive through Midtown on Friday morning, so he took the Holland Tunnel into the city instead of the Lincoln and parked downtown. Then took the subway to the hotel. But that’s just a guess.”

Lennox tapped his lips a couple of times with his index

finger before speaking again. “Is it possible your husband went back downtown to purchase drugs?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, definitely not. He didn’t do drugs.”

“Can you think of any reason someone might want to harm him? Someone in his personal life or even someone he knew professionally?”

“God, no reason at all. Wait, I thought you said this was a robbery. Do you think someone he knew—?”

“We’re not certain at this point,” Lennox said. “Shooting someone during a mugging is very extreme.”

The detective seemed to be holding something back. Emma’s trembling resumed, and beneath it she felt a mounting wave of nausea. She bent at the waist, sucking in air.

“Is there anyone who can be with you at this time, Ms. Hawke?” Martinez asked her softly. “A friend or family member?”

Her parents were in the UK, where they’d moved a decade ago, and at the moment her brother was there, too, researching a book. Her best friend, Bekah, was an hour away in Manhattan, and though normally she wouldn’t hesitate to call her, Bekah had suffered a miscarriage the week before and Emma couldn’t imagine imposing.

“Yes,” she lied. She didn’t know how she’d get through the night, but she knew she wanted them out of her house as soon as possible.

“Why don’t we leave you now, then?” Lennox said. “We’re so sorry to have to ask you to do this, but we’d like for you to come to the morgue at nine tomorrow to make an identification. Is that possible?”

“All right . . . ,” she said, then something else occurred to her. “Could you please contact my husband’s brother and let him know? I don’t have the strength to break the news to him.”

There was no way she was talking to Kyle, not tonight anyway.

“Of course. Is he local? Would you prefer to have him make the identification?”

“He lives north of the city in Westchester County, but I’ll handle the ID. If you could just let him know what’s happened.”

She’d set her cell phone on the coffee table, and after pulling Kyle’s contact info from it, she scribbled the details messily on a piece of paper and offered that to Lennox. He thanked her, rose, and drew a card from his wallet.

“Here’s the address for the medical examiner’s office,” he said as he handed it to her. “We’ll meet you there. And it’s fine to have someone accompany you.”

Barely present, Emma led Lennox, Martinez, and the patrolman to the door and lingered briefly by the window as the two cars drove away. In the house across the street, a light blinked on upstairs. Was her neighbor, a snoopy middle-aged woman, peering out the window now, attempting to figure out what was happening?

Emma reset the security alarm, her fingers jerking across the pad. The nausea seemed to have spread through her entire torso, and the back of her mouth now burned with the taste of bile. She wondered if eating something plain would help, but she couldn’t summon the energy to even drop a piece of bread in the toaster. She should lie down, she decided.

She didn't return to their bedroom, though. The thought of being in that space tonight seemed unbearable. In fact, she couldn't envision ever doing it again. Instead, she drifted upstairs to the guest room she'd scurried into earlier, which hadn't been used even once in the year or so they'd lived in the house. She flicked off the light and lowered herself onto the bed, lying flat on her back and trying to breathe.

There was no way she was going to fall back to sleep, she was sure of that. As frayed and ragged as she felt, she was also too wound up. So she simply lay there quietly, staring into the darkness above her and trying to picture what the next few days would entail—beyond the trip to the morgue.

In a few hours, she'd have to break the news to her parents and brother. Touch base with Derrick's boss. Begin to make funeral arrangements. Field phone calls from friends, neighbors, Derrick's coworkers, her own coworkers, and Kyle, of course. Emma realized suddenly that there also might be inquiries from reporters on various crime beats. Wasn't this the kind of story the *New York Post* ate up? "Exec Slain in Downtown Alley."

And what about the following days, and the weeks beyond those?

Did she dare imagine what it would be like to come home night after night to an empty house, never to see her husband's face or hear his low, husky voice again?

And more than that. Did she dare imagine how good it would be to finally feel happy again?