A Mother's Premonition

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What She Sees Is What They Get

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To Travis - the man who has loved and supported me always.
Without you, this book isn't possible.

To Max - for growing my heart and making me a better person.
For giving me confidence to go for my goals so you know you can,
too.

ONE

The sound of shattering glass catapulted Addi out of a dream and into a nightmare. Her head whipped around, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings of cardboard towers in a living room that didn't resemble her own. Colors and textures and smells blended together — none familiar, none hers. *Where am I?* Her eyes fought to open. Night swirled with the boxes, turning everything a murky brown, a paltry sliver of streetlight barely slipping in through the cracks only to be lost in the muddiness. No flames illuminated the room, the fireplace instead oozing a subtle smell of soot that reminded Addi of the subway. Fatigue from the move swallowed her, preventing her brain from fully waking. *SMASH*! A loud crash jarred her again. Alertness clawed its way to the surface. It was coming from the nursery.

Addi practically teleported from the couch to her daughter's room, a pile of silvery chards glimmering against moonlight in the corner. The cool evening air streamed in, a dampness covering every square inch that only added to the sweat pouring from Addi's skin. Adrenaline pulsed through her veins while her stomach churned side to side, up and down. An ominous black spread its fingers until it covered the nursery. She knew no one was there. No shuffling in the shadows. No labored breathing.

No newborn baby grunts. Only silence. She was too late.

She smashed her face against the window, trying to make out anything in the early morning darkness. The slightest film of dew hugged the window, droplets one by one racing down, giving way until Addi could see through the glass. For an instant she thought she heard heavy breaths after all, before realizing they were her own, escaping as her muscles tightened and heart raced. Finally, her vision cleared, and a figure darted into the distance. The movement was only visible against the stillness of the fog, the figure themselves an amorphous, yet chilling, blob. They weaved their way around the shrubs that sprinkled the property line, the end of a pink blanket flapping behind them, and disappeared into the oblivion like a ghost. She sprinted to her cell phone and frantically dialed *9-1-1*, leaving the empty crib behind.

TWO

Twelve hours earlier

Blue jays serenaded the quiet street, flittering from oak to oak, trees that towered long before the homes in the Glendale community began popping up one by one in the late 1940s. They steadily filled with young couples, some already with small children, as men flooded back from the war. Proud new wives with victory roll hairstyles and colorful aprons who were interchangeable among the households always had dinner on the table at precisely 5:30pm. Despite the inevitable passage of time, over seventy years later it felt as if nothing had changed. The neighborhood symbolized the picture perfect, suburban dream that so many still longed for. And Addison Elrod hated it. She pulled a breath deep into her lungs, the fresh air replacing the smog that had tickled her nostrils since she moved to the city at twenty-two years young.

Thirty yards in front of her, just at the end of a river stone pathway, a nauseatingly traditional two-story colonial mocked her. Windows dotted the flat front of the home, covered with half raised blinds that imitated droopy eyelids, fitting for the sleepy street where she imagined absolutely nothing of interest ever happened. Even the plants seemed bored. Purple butterfly

bushes grew towards the sun, nothing to do but hope the occasional monarch or painted lady would flutter by to pollinate them. Colossal green leaves from the elephant ears rooted on either side of the porch drooped, lacking enthusiasm for the yard and neighborhood in which they found themselves — just like Addi.

She floated towards the front door, scoffing at the continued attempts to liven up the lot. A well-established hydrangea boasted a mix of blue and pink flowers, each bloom still sparkling from the early morning dew. Nothing like the shades of gray that dominated her former life — cracked sidewalks and monstrous concrete buildings. The only swirls of color that penetrated her previous daily routine emerged from graffiti, billboards, and bus wrappings — or the occasional walk by Central Park. And most other New Yorkers didn't take it in at all, instead staring at their feet and sprint-walking to their next destination. Here, the natural colors smacked her in the face, singing *"we're happy, we swear*," while crossing their fingers behind their backs.

But the facade of a few flowers didn't fool her at all. The city was alive — not this place. This place was a colorful cemetery where mundane women faded away into the humdrum of a traditional life, packing lunches and cooking dinners with no professional aspirations of their own. They went to water aerobics on Tuesdays, book clubs on Thursdays, and volunteered at their children's schools on Fridays. They all visited Sally at the *Hair Haven* to get the latest mom bob and chunky highlights once a month. Sometimes they sprang for a blowout or two.

And Addi imagined these women she pitied repeating this routine, over and over, until all that remained was their family sharing stories and arguing over who had to keep the gaudy china collection. Her mother suffered that fate, after all. But there were no dishes for Addi to keep, no family heirlooms to inherit, just an estate sale to clear their debt and set their only daughter free.

The breeze dawdled by, a mere whisper against her skin, barely registering as she stepped outside her musings and continued up the pebble-lined path. Sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead, casting dotted shadows on the ground. The arms of the weeping willow swayed gently, extending a warm, welcoming embrace, the moving in of the Elrod's the most exciting event it'd seen since being planted with the home in 1973.

"1973? As in fifty years ago?" she had asked when Joe pulled up the Zillow listing.

But she hadn't even been able to listen to his answer, words like '*good bones'* and '*fixer upper'* bouncing off the walls of their tiny, one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Her eyes fixated on the screen, everything she ran away from tied up in a nice little package and placed right in front of her. Chip the paint, let the grass grow tall enough to annoy the neighbors, and throw a couple of beat-up cars in the driveway and she was looking at her childhood home — the one she swore she would never return to. But her husband was clueless, and all he saw was a home tinted in red through his rose-colored glasses.

"It's got charm, sweetheart. And it's twenty years newer than a lot of the other houses. It's an established neighborhood. I think I read the first one was like 1948? It's the best of both worlds!" he'd gushed.

Joe, always the romantic, she thought. It's one trait that attracted Addi to her now husband. As a literature professor, he quoted romantic poetry from Wordsworth and Keats. He explained beautiful symbolism in classic works by Austen and Bronte. The tightrope he walked between his life of words and reality meant he saw the world through so many perspectives, giving him an uncanny ability to uncover the positive in everything around them. But Addi's past had taught her sometimes circumstances just suck; there is no lesson to be learned or silver lining to see.

And, after three years of marriage, what was once endearing teetered on annoying.

Now, the topic was their future home. Where he saw potential, family gatherings in the yard, or quiet evenings reading in the nook, Addi saw renovation costs, contractor headaches, and decision fatigue. Not to mention Joe mistakenly believed he was handy. Hanging a picture frame and moving plumbing were skill sets on opposite ends of the construction spectrum — and he possessed neither. Addi shuddered at the added responsibilities of homeownership, the never-ending '*what-ifs*.' Sure, Lenny, their building's super, was a giant pain in the ass and it took him twice as long as it should to address any single maintenance request, but ultimately, he did. She didn't want to be the Lenny.

"It's more affordable. And it's *safe*," Joe reiterated.

She glanced at the counter, stacks of ripped envelopes holding past due notices and collection warnings. Just yesterday, she dashed to the bank to deposit money to make sure their electricity bill check didn't bounce, longing for the days they lived more financially free and praying they would get back there. She thought of the Jewish family on the first floor who experienced a break in last week; the husband suffered a fractured leg, and the wife came away with a black eye. Thankfully, the children had spent the night away at their grandmother's and avoided life-changing trauma.

"Okay," she had nodded, while her inner child screamed, "*RUN*."

The weight of her childhood fears creeped in, whispering that danger lurked just beyond the surface of this otherwise innocuous moment. Scenes of past confrontations flooded back — times when trust led to hurt — all inside a house almost identical to the one she just agreed to let her husband buy.

In the days following, she and Joe exhaustively discussed the

looming move. Her mind struggled to untangle his valid points from the assault of childhood memories and even still from the independence she had been clinging to since her mother drew her last breath. Snippets of their conversations played back like a radio station with poor reception, running together in a disjointed, mostly Joe monologue that aired on repeat until suddenly, she was here.

The path dead ended at the front door. With nowhere left to go but in, she forced herself to move forward just like she'd always done. Behind her, loud grunts beckoned for her attention. Two surly, bearded men struggled to balance four cardboard boxes between them, each one carelessly labeled with a thick black Sharpie. They exchanged terse glances as they maneuvered through the door, their heavy boots thudding against the floor.

"You can stick those in that room over there," she directed the movers, pointing to the room two doors down from the primary suite.

She looked back down at her phone, double checking the address. It didn't look like the same house. Had the floor in the foyer been that faded when they toured? Did the walls always give off a dingy glow instead of an eggshell clean? Why did everything look so… old? Even her body reacted differently. Both hands curled into fists. Her glances darted left and right and left again, looking for someone who would never step foot in this house. The reflection of the woman in the entryway mirror vanished, and she saw herself as a third grader coming home from school, wishing she had anywhere else to go.

Slam, slam. Bang, bang. Commotion echoed down the hallway before the two men emerged again, sweatier than when they'd entered. She followed them outside, eyeing the truck for any missed boxes. After signing the paperwork, she sloughed back up from the curb, forcing her legs to walk towards a replica of her pain and slammed the door behind the movers. She coveted

alone time like a rare gem, but the absence of her husband on their first night in their new home felt lonely, even if she blamed him for the change of address. Addi's independence, always at war with the other elements in her life, clashed with the uncomfortable truth; she agreed to this — both the move and his absence.

Just two weeks before it was time to leave the city, Joe's new boss, Dr. Marvin Coffer, called in a panic. His colleague had taken a new position and was no longer available to guest lecture at Princeton. With limited options, Marvin offered Joe a hefty bonus to step in at the last minute, proposing a number that would make anyone's eyes grow wide.

"I know it's short notice, but you'd be representing us at a prestigious institution. It might open doors for you down the line," he urged, his words tinged with desperation.

Joe hung up the phone. As he shared the news with Addi, the grin on his face and the biting of his lip told two different stories. Internal conflict was etched on his face. The desire to seize this unexpected financial opportunity and the guilt of missing a milestone each grabbed an arm and yanked hard, Joe flopping back and forth like the flag on a tug-of-war rope.

"You can't turn this down," Addi said firmly, her eyes steady on his.

Now, no husband in sight, she flipped the lights off and drug herself to the sofa, combing through the box labelled *BOOKS*. But all her tired mind craved was distraction. She slid the books away, succumbing to her lazy desires before remembering the cable still wasn't set up; Joe was already behind on his honey-do list. So, she popped open the laptop to let *Gilmore Girls* drone into the night, a favorite comfort show she'd seen all the way through at least seven times. On evenings Joe didn't have papers to grade or lectures to prepare, he snuggled in to watch, cluing her in on all the classic movie references she didn't understand, twirling her

hair around his fingers. But tonight, she only had Lorelai and Rory's quick-witted banter in the background to keep her company until she slipped off to sleep.

THREE

Present

Six police cars sat positioned just in front of 1127 Stonecrest Lane. Flashing red and blue lit up the cul-de-sac, sneaking into the neighbors' homes through cracked blinds with nosy faces pressed against glass. The biggest news that spread around this street in years was last August when Billy Hammond put in an unpermitted shed. The HOA brought in the building inspector and the entire street watched with hushed whispers as a city employee demolished it with a bright yellow excavator. So, this was certainly a sight for all to see; and they were determined to gather all the details they could from a distance.

Officers milled about the property like ants foraging for food to bring back to their colony. But none seemed to be in a particular hurry. A trio leaned against the porch rail to drink their black coffee, chatting about the day's forecast, before even attempting to help process the scene. One, for whatever reason, decided he'd be most helpful pulling up the SOLD sign still staked in the grass, despite having nothing to do with the investigation. Regardless of their assigned tasks, all of them talked with lowered voices, baffled at the circumstances before them, anxiously awaiting the lead detective's instructions.

Inside, Addi stared into the empty crib, still shaking from the image of the person retreating from the window, their arms crossed in front cradling a small baby. *Her* small baby.

"Mrs. Elrod?"

"Yeah?" She turned to see a rookie officer fresh out training, standing with forced posture and fiddling with his hat.

"Detective Reynolds is here. He'd like to talk with you, if that's okay."

"Definitely." She ran her finger along the rail before shifting her focus to the living room.

"Mrs. Elrod?" the gentleman asked.

No shit, she thought, but extended her hand and instead replied, "Yes, that's me. Thanks so much for coming."

The man before her wore a giant cowboy hat in place of a traditional campaign hat, topping off slick, grey trousers and a button-down shirt. The mustache on his face held remnants of a quick granola bar, crumbs playing hide and seek through the coarse hair, and masking the fact that his mouth was a bit too small for his round face. But despite his burly stature and commanding presence, his eyes were delicate and kind.

"Of course, ma'am, that's my job. But I have to — well, I guess — so, someone tried to break in?" he started, unsure of how to handle this particular call.

She struggled to place his accent, but by the way he added a lengthy '*y*' to the middle of 'ma'am', she guessed he likely transplanted from the south.

"That's right. I think someone was trying to kidnap my baby," she said.

She practiced the statement in her head over fifty times in the drawn-out minutes waiting for the police to arrive. Calmness and clarity were musts. Their first impression in such a tense scenario must be a woman who was in control, a master of her mind, not its victim. Her belly flinched with a kick. Even six months in,

Addi would still briefly, for a flash of a second, forget she was pregnant. But after what she saw, she knew that would ever happen again. She could tell he was tumbling words around in his head, praying for the right ones to reveal themselves.

"So, the intruder came after you?" he asked.

"No, like I was telling officer, uh, what's his face," she said gesturing vaguely toward the kitchen, "I fell asleep on the couch watching TV and I got woken up when I heard the window breaking. I ran in there as fast as I could and that's when I saw someone running away from the window. Then I called."

"Ma'am, I really don't mean to offend you, but I'm just a little confused," he said, his accent now noticeably thick with his southern roots. "You're still pregnant, we can all see that. What makes you think the intruder was trying to kidnap a baby that, well, that hasn't been born yet."

"Look I know they couldn't get her now. I don't know how to explain it…" *I don't know how to explain it.* Her throat nearly closed. She'd heard those words before one too many times.

Addi grabbed the chair in front of her. The house swayed back and forth, seemingly unnoticed by the detective. The stoicism she practiced vanished, replaced by sloshing knees that wobbled from side to side as she inched closer to toppling over. *In. Out. In. In. Out. Out. Out. In. Out. Out. In. In.* Rapid breaths with no discernible pattern tried desperately to run oxygen to her brain. The edges of every thought, every face, disappeared into an inky void. All the force of a scream built up inside of her, but nothing came. Her chest cavity couldn't contain her pounding heart much longer. Reality transcended shock, the gravity of her beliefs setting in. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, finally pushed over the edge by anxiety, streaming her unwashed mascara from the night before down her cheeks.

"I saw them reach in and take Belle, I saw it! She was wearing her coming home from the hospital outfit!" she screamed. "They

couldn't get her today, but they're going to, I know it."

Even though the absurdity flicked her upper lip as the words escaped her mouth, she ached to her marrow that what she was saying was real. *Why aren't they listening*? Her fingers started shaking stronger, the decaf cup of coffee she didn't even remember accepting clinking in her hand.

"It's okay, it's okay." Detective Reynolds reached out and grabbed her clenched fists. "I don't think you should be scared, Mrs. Elrod. I think maybe you had a bad dream? Home alone, new place, and we have some big critters around here — racoons and opossums that will get into anything. They might've smelled something they like and tried to get in. Explains the big branch knockin' into the window. Half asleep, you thought the dream was real and called us," he proposed.

Addi could sense he was genuine in choosing his words skillfully, but they still ignited the pilot light inside of her. She could feel herself becoming enraged at the audacity of this man to explain away her own experiences like it was some simple explanation. It reminded her of her father always questioning her mother, only to call her a liar with every trembling word she uttered.

"I think I know what I saw," she said cooly. The collected woman everyone knew her to be returned. Addi claimed few weaknesses, but the perpetual presence of anger simmering under her skin was one of them. It was an inherited trait, but unlike her father, she chose not to use hers to slay the innocent.

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry," he retreated. "My guys tell me they haven't found anything other than the broken branch I mentioned."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Well, nothing was stolen," he started, glancing at her stomach, "and we don't have any fingerprints or any type of lead to go off of, so we're kind of at a dead end."

"Meaning you're not going to do anything," she finished.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Elrod, there's only so much I can do. I'm happy to have a patrolman do some frequent drive-bys for a few weeks, make sure no one comes back and bothers you?"

"I think that would be nice," she conceded. Her cell phone vibrated, Joe flashing across the screen over a picture of the two of them on their honeymoon in Jamaica. In the chaos, she'd forgotten she'd have to explain this to him.

Just a year ago, she would gladly have emptied her heart at Joe's feet, sharing her genuine feelings about the entire situation. Even though she could sense Joe slightly dreaded what they may one day have to face, she always trusted they would face it together. But life hurled obstacles in their path on global and personal levels over the last three years. Hardship and responsibility chipped at the carefree nature that defined their relationship. And every day that invisible wedge drove deeper, Addi added a brick back to her wall.

Less confident in what their relationship could actually survive, she shared less and less with him. These days, she feared it would only be a matter of time before she didn't want to share anything with him at all, especially if it started encroaching on parts of her identity she preferred to lock away — the parts of her past that might make someone leave. Her friends knew just enough details she could skirt questions, but Joe knew so much more. She granted him access to the full catalog of her childhood, which she sometimes still regretted. He never wielded the sword of information against her, but she knew the blade was sharp; it would only take one swing.

"Hey," she started.

"Addison, thank God. I'm sorry it took so long to see your text. What is going on? Are you okay?"

Detective Reynolds could hear Joe from the other side, his voice at a high pitch and talking at a pace that melted his words

together.

"Take all the time you need." Able to step away from their conversation, the detective's jaw loosened and his posture shed its stiffness.

"I'm okay, but, but they were going to take Belle!" Lengthy silence filled the void between the two of them.

"Joe? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I'm here. What do you mean, take Belle?"

The same tone shared by the detective pierced her patience. "Exactly what I fucking said, Joe."

"Whoa, whoa, I'm on your side here. Sorry. Tell me what happened, I'm listening." The Joe she knew came rushing back. The guy who walked fifteen blocks in the rain for an order of Miso soup from *Wasabi's* when she came down with the flu. The guy who cleaned the apartment, folded laundry, and cooked dinner all in the same day after she taught a tough slate of classes. This was the guy she wanted to talk to.

"Well, I fell asleep on the couch. Then early this morning someone broke the window. They tried to come in! I don't know how to explain it…" *Damn it, there it was again.* "…but I saw them take her. She had the long onesie on, you know, the one with all the eucalyptus print that ties at the bottom? The one she was, is, going to wear home from the hospital."

"Mm hmm," he assured.

"And they just grabbed her, went right out the window!" She waited for words that he didn't speak. "JOE!"

"Look, I'll deal with the window when I get home. But do you think maybe you were just dreaming?"

"That's what the detective said." She rolled her eyes despite his inability to suffer the gesture.

"Probably because it's the most likely thing. You were all by yourself last night, and I know his move hasn't been the easiest thing on you, pregnancy hormones, you know…"

"Well, who's fault is it I was left here all alone?" she fired.

"That's not fair. You know we need that money. You agreed." He wasn't wrong, but now wasn't the time for logic.

"Whatever, Joe. I guess according to you and this useless detective I'm fine, so I'll just see you when you get home." She looked in his direction, half hoping he'd heard, but Reynolds remained in conversation with an over-eager subordinate.

"Addi, please, I love—"

Click.

Fuming, she stormed outside hoping the fresh, albeit not city, air would calm her nerves. She needed to place her bare feet in the grass and stop the static growing exponentially louder in her ears. But as soon as she stepped onto the porch, a slew of turning heads greeted her. With each officer that left, another fellow neighbor felt comfortable enough to emerge from their home, ready to assess the situation from outside. Addi looked the stares away from one side, only to feel the eyes from the other return to her, boring, curious, and most of all, wary of this new transplant. *What has the city girl brought with her*, they thought. The gossip train was already chugging along full steam ahead.

"Ugh, fuck faces," she mumbled as the last patrol car rounded the corner, then turned to walk around the side of the house and retreat to the solitude of the backyard. She approached Belle's broken nursery window, now secured with thick tape and a sacrificed moving box. Her mind flashed to the lanky figure jogging away only hours ago. That wasn't a dream. Dreams were your teeth falling out, or standing naked on stage at your high school graduation. At their worst, dreams startled you awake, the terror dissipating the moment your eyes refocus on the physical world. Whatever she experienced was none of those things, even if she couldn't quite explain it to anyone else.

Addi possessed an uncanny ability to see things that weren't there — the imperceptible glaze of an eye, the slight alcohol-

induced lisp caught only by those looking for it. Before she walked through the door after school, she could feel the air hot and thick with tension billowing through the seams, a warning for her to tread carefully like she had to often. It wasn't a skill she was born with, but one her upbringing forced her to hone. Necessity is the mother of invention — and survival. The backhands of her blacked-out father were too much to bear, so Addi learned quickly to adapt. She taught herself to be invisible, silent, moving through the house like an unwelcome rodent who just needed crumbs to survive until they could figure out how to move on to safer pastures. Her mom tried to do the same, but unfortunately for her she lived under Robert Mitchell's microscope, constantly watched, tangled in his jealousy and the challenge of presenting a 'happy family' front. Adult Addi, pulled by the gut of her younger self, took another step closer to the broken window.

"Ow, damn it!" She lifted her right foot, expecting to see a chard of glass missed by the crew. Instead, she discovered a single earring.

"No way," she thought. Her heart stopped. Sizeable, radiant cut emeralds were bezel-set in classic gold that, if real, would be worth thousands. But the way it sat mushed in the ground, mud caking into the crevices, she imagined it was a synthetic knockoff that had been there for a while. But something about the jewel exuded an air of true luxury. Either way, there was a woman outside this window.

"Didn't find anything," she muttered, heading back inside to call the detective, her morning yoga aspirations now a distant memory. Maybe she wasn't going crazy after all — not yet.