

LOVE, MOM

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PROLOGUE

I've never hurt a single person. But right now, I want to punch the face staring at me from the national newspaper's front page. A picture of *her*, with that signature red lipstick and long raven hair. The pretty face of a monster.

BESTSELLING AUTHOR FOUND DEAD

Elizabeth Casper, 43, better known around the world as E. V. Renge, the author of gritty thrillers, was found dead in what appears to be a "freak accident."

She is survived by her beloved husband, Ben Casper, and their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Mackenzie Casper.

The world is in shock at the tragic loss of the talented soul gone too early. Fans all around the world gather for a massive tribute to the literary genius.

Oh, the lies...

The cold smile taunts me from the newspaper in my trembling hands, and I have the urge to carve it out and wipe it from my memory.

She had it coming.

She deserved to die.

I just wish it had happened sooner.



PART 1



1

MACKENZIE

You'll probably never see another memorial service like this one—without a single tear shed.

My mom's memorial service is the grandest performance of the year or, perhaps, her entire life.

The mob of fans outside Saint John's Memorial Center doesn't know that. They think that their mass gathering is organic. They don't know about the money being poured into publicity, influencers, gossip columns, and book bloggers.

Since Mom's passing, her novels have topped the book charts again.

Look, Mom! You are dead, and everyone is still cashing in.

The newspaper headlines have been going crazy in the last week, proposing all sorts of wild theories.

**E. V. RENGE, 43, DIES TRAGICALLY AT THE
PEAK OF HER CAREER. ACCIDENT OR...**

That's why that guy standing at the back of the room is here. Middle-aged, with a funny mustache, dressed in a suit and tie.

"This is a private event. Please leave," Grandma says to him curtly in a hushed whisper.

As soon as she walks off, her smile disappears.

You don't need to be super observant to spot a gun holster under his suit jacket—he is a detective. He came to our house two days ago. I opened the door, and he started asking me about Mom until Grandma flew up toward us like a furious hen.

"Mackenzie, leave us, please," she ordered, blocking me from him. Then, when I walked around the corner, she told the detective in a clipped tone, "You should be ashamed of yourself—talking to a child who just lost her mother."

Now, the man is forced to leave again.

The newspapers and bloggers have been suggesting all sorts of crazy theories about my mom's death for days. The truth, as per investigators, was more banal—Mom slipped, fell, and cracked her head on a rock while taking her usual morning walk in the woods adjacent to our house.

"Misadventure" is what they called it. Coincidentally, Mom's bestsellers are full of misadventures.

Don't get me wrong, some people might be sad.

That bitch, Laima Roth, who is talking to the publisher right now like this is a regular business meeting? For sure. She has been my mother's agent for over twenty years. She can now forget about the future book releases they were planning. Though, I'm sure she'll capitalize on special editions, sprayed edges, book boxes, and whatnot. This enterprise will never dry out.

We cremated Mom several days ago in a private arrangement

attended only by a dozen or so people. Still, there were no tears.

This memorial service is for publicity. For “friends,” they say. To pay their respects. Respect was pretty high on Mom’s list, but friends? Not sure she had any true ones, though the eloquent speeches they’ve been giving in her honor for the last two hours made it sound like she was Shakespeare, no less.

The streets outside the building are mobbed, but the crowded memorial hall is eerily quiet, whispers ricocheting between the walls.

On one side of the room is a giant author portrait of Mom in a lacy high-collar blouse and red roses in the background. It says *E. V. Renge* under it. The middle-aged quirky photographer hired by the publishing house is snapping pictures of it from every angle. With the publisher, the agents, and Dad. He asked me to pose too, but I refused.

Screw them.

On the other side of the hall is a picture of Mom in her office. She has full makeup and her hair done, but she looks somewhat dreamy sitting in front of a bookshelf. Her real name, Elizabeth Casper, is under her informal picture. This version is for other sources, like the local newspaper, the church Grandma goes to, and the charities Mom used to donate to.

I prefer to stand at the back of the room, away from this spectacle, next to my grandpa who doesn’t give a crap—and never did—about my mom. Or my looks, for that matter.

Grandma does. Earlier at the house, she asked me not to put on my usual black lipstick and heavy eyeliner.

“And wear something appropriate.”

I almost always wear black. Coincidentally, that’s very

appropriate for a memorial service. Just like my black eyeliner and the lipstick I put on anyway.

Grandma, of course, is dressed in Dior and expensive jewelry. She makes sure she talks to every attendee.

Dad is dressed in a slick black suit, and he looks dashing. He is somewhat sulking, but that might be because of the withdrawal. His parents live only four hours away, but they have been staying at our house since Mom's passing. Grandma controls Dad's too-early-in-the-day intake of booze. With Mom gone, she proudly took over the household.

Me? I want to cry, I really do, but the reality hasn't hit me yet. I want to be sad, but I always felt like Mom never cared enough about me. That made me very bitter in recent years, and we grew apart.

My best friend, EJ, says I have delayed grief. Maybe I'm just heartless. I asked EJ not to come, because I didn't want my best friend to see how screwed up my life has been, well, pretty much as far back as I remember.

I'll see him at the house where we are having a catered party tonight for the "close circle." I'm sure it will be a party, though they call it a celebration of life.

I look around the room and cringe when I see the familiar figure approach Dad and shake his hand. That's the dean of the university I go to. I look away and roll my eyes. Mom used to rub shoulders with him. "For your future's sake," she said once. She even did a lecture at my university and donated money, in fact. I wouldn't be surprised if they set up a monument in her honor.

Mom's therapist is here too. Two of her editors. Her three assistants. Our family lawyer. Most of her "friends" are simply people she worked closely with.

For the last week, since the accident and while I was

staying home instead of at my studio apartment in town, I constantly thought about her, what we had, our little screwed-up family. I felt sad, just not overwhelmingly sad like I am supposed to be, I guess.

Dad checks his phone and hurriedly walks away from everyone and toward the door. There, I notice another man in a baseball hat who turns around and walks away. Dad follows.

This would be a good time to tell Dad that I have a headache and am about to have a mental breakdown—lies, of course—and I need to leave. Emotions bubble up inside me, but I can't figure them out. Mostly, I want to be away from these people.

I walk out into the empty hall connecting to another small hallway and see Dad talking to the stranger at the very end.

I start walking toward them and slow down when I hear a hushed whisper. "You scumbag."

The hell?

I step to the side, behind the doorway, where I can't see them but can clearly hear them.

"Not here," he hisses. "How *dare* you?"

"How dare I? I have the right to be here."

"Get out. Now."

The man chuckles quietly. "Does she suspect anything?"

"Who?"

"Mackenzie."

My heart gives an uneasy beat at the sound of my name.

"Don't you dare mention my daughter."

"Oh, she doesn't? Well played, Benny-boy."

Benny-boy? My father? Who the hell calls him that?

"I said, leave," Dad adds more desperately. "Just...go. We'll talk later."

I step closer to the doorway to peek around, and the hardwood flooring under the carpet squeaks, it freaking squeaks.

Dammit.

I stand still like a deer caught in the headlights. I hear muffled footsteps, and Dad appears in the doorway. As soon as he sees me, a panicky look crosses his face.

“What was that about?” I ask and peek around the doorway, but the mysterious man is gone.

Dad wipes his face with both hands. “Nothing.”

“Were you arguing with someone?”

“No, kiddo, just talking.” He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a flask.

“Do you know that man?”

Dad takes a nervous gulp and exhales slowly. “I’ve never seen him before.”

That’s a clear lie.

He hides the flask back in his jacket, then winks at me. “You okay?”

“I can’t be here. These people—” I don’t finish and, rolling my eyes, motion toward the main hall.

“I know. I know.” Dad closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“*You* okay?”

Dad and Mom weren’t exactly a perfect couple. Especially lately. They fought more than ever before, and that’s only what I saw during the weekends with them, because for the last two years, I’ve been renting a small studio in town, close to the university.

Dad inhales loudly and exhales through puffed lips, then manages a fake smile. “Yeah, kiddo.” He gently pats my shoulder. “It’ll all be fine. You can get out of here if you want.”

“See you at the house,” I say and turn into the hallway that leads to the back entrance.

The biggest performance will be outside as soon as

everyone exits the building. The fans from all corners of the country are the ones actually grieving. The publishing house already brought an in-house PR team to navigate the event. Yes, they call it an event. A hired group of actors will cause havoc and scream obscenities and desecrate one of Mom's portraits, proclaiming E. V. Renge a devil. Because, you know, there is no bad publicity. I know that because I was informed beforehand. Right after I signed an NDA, a non-disclosure agreement. This stunt secretly conjured by the PR firm is supposed to rake up insane sales for the books.

I definitely don't want to exit through the main entrance and right into a pack of paparazzi and crazy fans.

I exhale in relief when I step outside the back door of the building and, making sure there's no one in the parking lot, walk to my car.

My phone rings.

"Thank god," I blurt when I answer. "I'm out of there."

"Hey, Snarky, it's almost over." EJ's reassuring voice is like a balm for my soul.

"You are coming over, right?"

"Already on my way. Might be there before you."

"Watch out for the paparazzi in front of the main gate, okay?" I unlock my car door to get in. "I'm sure there will... Hold up."

There's an envelope on the driver's seat, and I frown in confusion, picking it up.

"EJ, hold on." I put him on speaker, get in the car, then study the envelope. "What the hell..."

"You okay?" he asks.

"Not sure," I say, my heartbeat spiking as I read the words on the envelope.

From #1 fan. XOXO

2

Fame, even in the literary world, comes with praise, fan mail, stalkers, and occasionally, a random vial of urine or bloodied underwear. Yes, there are crazies out there. I won't talk about the more morbid stuff. There's plenty of that too.

Nervously, I peer out through my car's windows. The parking lot is packed with cars but not a single person in sight.

"Kenz, what's up?" EJ asks worriedly on speaker.

"Fan mail," I reply, turning my attention back to the envelope.

"Something crazy?"

"What's crazy is that it was inside my car."

"Did you forget to lock it?"

"Tsk, dude, I know better. I hope it's not ricin or something. I should just toss it."

"Open it! It might be entertaining."

EJ is always excited about Mom's fan stories.

"Okay, okay!" I rip the envelope open.

Carefully, I spread it open with the tips of my black-polished nails and peek inside. You can never be too careful with fans. Stranger things have happened. People send all sorts of stuff to my mom. Love letters, threats, their own manuscripts, toys, cookies, locks of their hair. A bottle of urine—that was nasty. Some guy sent her a photoshopped picture of him and her, covered in his semen.

“Come on, spill. What is it?” EJ asks impatiently.

“There are papers inside. Someone’s teary letters, probably.”

“Read them.”

EJ loves that kind of creepy stuff. He graduated from my university a year ago and does various freelance IT jobs. He might be a brilliant programmer now, making more money from coding jobs online at twenty-three than an average adult, but when I met him several years ago, he was a nerd. He told me he had stayed for a second year in junior high because he had skipped classes and spent all his time on the computer at home. He is still a nerd, but he just found a gang of like-minded people. Sometimes, that makes all the difference in life.

I pull out the papers from the envelope and unfold them.

The letter is handwritten and consists of three pages, one side of them fringed, like they’ve been ripped out of a notebook.

“Come on!” EJ urges me impatiently.

“Hold on! Jeez. Patience is a virtue, you know.”

The first page only has a couple of lines that I slowly read out loud:

Want to know a secret?

Love, Mom

3

“What the hell,” I say, then angrily look at the second page and feel my hair stand on end.

I can see the familiar names on the paper, a date from twenty-two years ago in the top left corner. Location: *Old Bow, Nebraska*.

If that’s someone’s sick joke, it’s an elaborate one, because I know that place. My parents went to college there, more than twenty years ago.

“Snarky, you there?” EJ asks.

“Listen, I’ll call you back.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you.”

“You’d better.”

For the next five minutes, I don’t move. I read the three pages from the envelope and feel my insides twist. I reread them and turn the pages to make sure there is nothing else I missed.

I don’t know much about my parents’ past, but I know

where they come from. The story on the pages seems personal, intimate. Mom never cared to tell me much about her past. Why would she now?

“Complicated,” she used to say.

Knowing her novels, I would say it was screwed up. The critics called her imagination “brilliant.” I personally think it’s batshit crazy with its roots obviously in the past. And what parent tells their kid about their screwed-up past?

My first reflex is to shove the pages into a giant chest full of the similar stuff written to my mom over the twenty years of her publishing career. She keeps the chest in her office at home. It’s an old Gothic thing, the size of a tomb, dedicated to her fan mail.

But I’m curious. What if these letters are really from Mom?

There is one thing I can do to check the authenticity.

I start my car and drive to my parents’ home.

Our house is an hour outside town. I insisted I didn’t want to stay home while getting my BA, considering Mom didn’t let me move anywhere out of state for college. So, at least I got some freedom by moving into town.

I visit my parents often, every other weekend. After Mom’s passing, I’ve stayed at home. Of course, it was Grandma’s idea so that “we could bond through grief.” That’s her wording. Though I’m pretty sure none of us are grieving.

An hour later, I pull into the private road that leads to my parents’ estate. It’s a seven-thousand-square-foot house on five acres, with an additional guest house, a pool, and a natural pond next to a lake surrounded by forests.

A security guy, hired by the PR firm, nods to me. But I should’ve expected that one wasn’t enough, because two hundred feet up the road, here they are—several men darting

out of the thick woods with cameras, flashing pictures of me as I approach the main gate.

“Mackenzie, do you think your mother’s death was an accident?”

“Mackenzie, will you be finishing her current novel?”

“Miss Casper!”

“This is private property!” I yell at them through the glass. But they know that. They don’t care. At least, when the metal gates slowly open and I drive in, they don’t dare follow.

A minute later, I’m walking into the house.

An overwhelming sweet scent wafts into my face—hundreds of flowers sent from friends, colleagues, and fans. The house is crowded with catering staff preparing for the evening reception.

I make a beeline straight to Mom’s office, the envelope in my hand.

The office is locked. Mom was the only one with the key, or so she thought. We could only go in when she was there. But I know where Dad keeps the spare. I caught him sneaking in months ago. Mom never knew about it, and the fact that this was even happening shows how screwed-up my parents’ relationship was.

Right now, I really need to get inside that office.

I walk to the small tribal mask by the guest bathroom and sink my hand into the mane of its thick fake hair. In the soft rubbery base of the skull is the office key.

“Bingo,” I murmur. Dad still keeps it there, which is a relief.

I hurry to the end of the hall and unlock Mom’s office, then lock the door behind me.

I’ve never been here on my own, only with her. The only reason I was ever curious is because she always locked this room. That was her writing haven, she said. Not anymore.

I'm waiting for the grief to strike me suddenly, sneak up on me here, of all places, but it's not happening. Not a tear. Not even sadness really, just bitterness.

Mom and I were never close. I was told that a small trust fund she set up for me would cover my entire education, but that's about it. Nothing extra. No inheritance. Everything goes to my dad. I would like to be a hypocrite and say that we don't love our parents for their money, but Mom made millions and didn't leave me a penny besides the college fund. I'd be lying if I said that this fact doesn't piss me off or at least rub me the wrong way. So, yeah, I wasn't Mom's fan. Her trying to teach me a lesson? Whatever. I'll be fine on my own.

Right now, I'd like to learn what the purpose of this anonymous letter is. Maybe, the lesson is still coming. If this little prank turns out not to be a prank but a farewell letter from Mom, I could do better research later.

The only thing I need to check its authenticity is the small frame on the giant mahogany desk. That frame was—wait, drum roll, please—Mom's reminder of how much she'd achieved. Right. Typical pat on her shoulder. Inside the glass frame is the first page of the original manuscript of *Lies, Lies, and Revenge*, Mom's first novel and the internationally acclaimed bestseller that sold millions of copies and put E. V. Renge on the map.

This first page could probably sell for thousands of dollars right now. It's handwritten on some old page from a journal Mom wrote as a teenager. Yes, that page is that old, almost thirty years or so. My mom started writing her bestseller at the age of sixteen. Talk about genius, right?

But I need this little piece of memorabilia to compare with the pages I got from an anonymous fan.

I sit down right on top of the desk—Mom would've

killed me—set the framed page down flat on its surface, then flatten the pages from the envelope and study them.

Obviously, I'm not a graphologist or a forensic examiner, but I lean close to both samples and inspect every letter. The way the *I*'s are wavy on top. The way the *B* in Ben, my father's name, curls at the bottom. The commas, the quotation marks, the way one word is underlined twice in the letter and identical in the framed first page, right under the *Prologue*.

Five minutes later, my neck hurts from leaning down, my eyes sting from squinting, and an uneasy feeling is gathering in the pit of my stomach. The handwriting on both the framed page and the letters is identical.

"Huh," I muse to myself.

Still, that doesn't prove that the letter came from Mom.

But that's not what makes me curious.

It's what she has written at the end of it:

This secret will now be yours.

