

A Thin Film of Lies

Part One

Opening Shots

I wasn't there that night. But, believe me, I can fill in the details. Being a photographer, I was taught to have an eye for detail: the angle of light, the way a shoe hits the pavement, the juxtaposition of foreground against background—all these things I know.

If I could re-create that scene, last Wednesday night, it would be with a series of stills—black-and-white, of course. No point in shooting color in such dim light, although the tepid, yellow-tinged street lamps would make for interesting ambiance. And forget digital—that's for amateurs.

First shot: This would encompass Libby in her Pontiac Firebird. A beat-up old car, a periwinkle blue. I'd shoot the angle from the front, straight through the windshield with a telephoto lens, capturing her flashy eyes and the way her thick, red hair tumbled down her shoulders. The street lamps' glare bouncing off the windshield would add a nice touch. She'd be wearing her oversized tortoiseshell glasses and the purple angora sweater. Her makeup, as always, applied subtly; she had a knack for making modest features appear attractive.

However, the look on her face would imply more than exasperation. Not just from the daily routine of having to circle the block three times to find a parking space large enough to squeeze her clunker into. And not from the aggravation of work, or having just spent forty minutes in rush-hour traffic on the Ventura Freeway. No, there would be something else rippling the surface.

Here's the beauty of the expression: you couldn't tell if Libby was excited or fearful. A person would wonder—what was the source of her seemingly abnormal agitation? Why were her hands gripping the steering wheel so tenaciously?

It'd be nice if I could also get into the shot the kind of junk Libby has strewn around her car: newspapers, tissues, mascara, Styrofoam take-out food boxes, shopping bags—what she had to rummage through to clear a place for the occasional passenger. However, I'm digressing. None of this is important to our theme, although it would be appropriate in a portrait piece.

Second shot: 15mm wide-angle lens, maybe even a fish-eye. I'd get in the long rows of apartment buildings with their minuscule lawns parallel to the long rows of parked cars, all merging at the horizon line in the darkening distance. Libby's Pontiac would be on the left, across the street from her apartment complex. She'd be halfway out of her car, keys dangling from her hand, canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

With a 1/15th shutter speed, I could blur the movement ever so slightly—and I'd wait until a car was going by to capture that onrush of headlights. I don't think I'd get her face in this one. Just the angle of her bent head as she looked back to lock her door. Typical for Los Angeles, at least in San Fernando Valley suburbia, there are no people on the streets. Just concrete and metal, trees and lawn. Boring trees in neat little rows, scrawny and neglected. The stingy landlords don't want to shell out for real gardeners. They just spend enough to imply "upscale yuppie neighborhood," although no one's fooled. The shot would make that clear.

Shots three through five: For the next few frames I'd use the motor drive. I'd cover each step as she crossed the street, first one foot leading, then the other. The trick would be to capture her just as her weight shifted off one shoe and onto the next; like she was walking on air, her body fluid motion. And I'd emphasize her hurrying. You know, with her hair flying wildly, like in those commercials with the wind machines? Also, note that her mind was preoccupied, causing her to be looking down instead of searching the street. A mistake that contributes to her untimely demise.

Now, the coming together of the two moving elements reveals the purpose of the still sequence. And what a masterpiece this would be! First, as she steps away from her car, the headlights

are distant. Observing the shot, you wouldn't really notice them; they would be specks lost in a background of urban lights. But with each step, the lights would loom larger, closer, more imposing. Until the point where all things converge.

This would be the killer shot: the instant Libby is aware of the car nearly upon her. I'd have to get this by running ahead of her, across the street as I shoot her, and then stationing myself on the opposite curb. Now I would finally need to zero in on her expression. The wild-eyed fear as the moment of recognition comes upon her.

And here's the question we would never get to ask her—what is in that moment of recognition? Just the awareness that she was meeting her fate head on, so to speak? Or, in that brief second, does she lock eyes with someone who is by no means a stranger?

We'll never know, will we?

Here her body shape would be in sharp contrast to the moments before. Her arms would be bent at the elbows, as if bracing herself for impact. Both her feet would be glued to concrete, grounded, unlike the previous shots where she nearly floated. Her pose: strongly statuesque, the last one she'd ever make. And now we'd get to see the front of the oncoming car—a dark window, a human shape, the driver a mystery in the recesses of the vehicle. Only Libby would be illuminated on the asphalt stage for a few seconds before the car screeches away to leave her mangled in the street—her final curtain.

Shot number six: With a fast shutter speed, I could get the second after impact, when Libby's body is hurling in midair, limbs and hair a whirling dance of abstraction. I'd go after that quality of a rag doll being carelessly tossed. Her purse would float in suspended animation off to her right, her hair covering her face.

This is when you don't want an expression. You have to portray this scene with an almost detached inhumanness; that's the only effective approach. To make you say it's not real, it's not really happening.

And the final shot, number seven: I'd do from way down at the end of the block, with a zoom. She would be quite the lonely figure, lying there, half in the street, left arm draped over the neat little lawn growing up to the curb. A balled-up candy bar wrapper would lie in the gutter next to her right hand. Overhead, a street lamp would shine down on her like a weak spotlight. You could almost think she was asleep, almost. Except no one sleeps in the street, dressed like that. And the angle of her neck would tell you she had to be dead.

There, setting the backdrop, would be all those neat little buildings and trees and cars in a long row. Nice geometric lines. Like something out of "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." The only odd shape disrupting the landscape would be Libby's distorted positioning.

The absence of any other people in the shot would enhance the impression of loneliness and isolation. Who knows how much time will pass before someone sees her there, and fearful of getting involved, calls 9-1-1 from their cell phone?

See, that's the ignominy of it—Libby lying there with her stockings torn, her skirt hiked up indecently, her hair disheveled. All these elements add immeasurably to the composition of the picture, but it would be hard for me not to go over and neaten her up before her ride arrives. As much as my artistic sense would applaud it, I would have a hard time leaving her like that. I'd have to do something to justify her death, to give her back some dignity.

Yes, I most certainly will.

Chapter 1

Busywork had just been generated for the Van Nuys police force. In fact, the wheels of that runaway car had now set a multitude of bureaucratic wheels in motion, about to disrupt and preoccupy the lives of many for weeks to come. Who would have thought? If you want to wax philosophic, you could consider the change in the course of history. Maybe Libby would have found a cure for cancer, or maybe her progeny would have become president of the United States. We'll never know, now, will we, how Libby's death changed things? But, of more immediate concern, it put the taxpayers' money to use, by providing gainful employment for the local police.

Sometime after eight on Wednesday evening, the officer arriving on the scene phoned in a 2001 C.V.C.—felony hit-and-run. After uniform division assessed the situation, a call was routed to Fran Anders, homicide. Fran and her partner arrived just as the body was loaded into an ambulance and whisked away to the coroner's office like some obstruction in the street. An officer handed Fran a wallet, found in Libby's purse. Fran checked out the address on the driver's license and noticed they didn't have far to travel to get to Libby's apartment. They were standing on her front lawn, so to speak.

Detective Anders turned and observed the crowd of voyeuristic vultures slowly dispersing. She chewed her lip thoughtfully, with a slight look of disgust. The carrion always came out when they

spotted the flashing police lights—a beacon for the morbidly curious. Their behavior reminded Fran of moths attracted to flame, flirting dangerously with death. Some people were just like that—too curious for their own good. *Stupid* was another word that came to Fran’s mind. How many too-curious bystanders had been caught in gunfire after being warned away? Too many. Two other cops questioned the bystanders. No one saw anything; what else was new?

The sky had waxed dark, as dark as it could be under a huge canopy of artificial lights. Fran scowled and adjusted her starched black uniform shirt. For some reason the fabric made her itch on that balmy evening. And she chided herself for going off her diet—the belt pinching her waist was on the last notch, but she suffered the discomfort as punishment for devouring the remaining half of that lemon cheesecake her daughter had baked and left on the counter. Megan knew Mom had zilch willpower, but did she care? People with fast metabolisms like her daughter didn’t understand how all the “other” people could gain five pounds just by close proximity in the same room with a plate full of calories.

Daryl Patterson, her partner in the investigation, stood under the streetlight writing in his report book. He looked up as Fran approached, and she noticed his hair gel shone with illumination. For a brief moment she caught hint of familiarity in his expression, the way her son, Trevor, sometimes looked at her when she grilled him over a late night out. Patterson, twenty-eight, was nearly young enough to be her son, but he hated it when she mothered him, fixed his collar or mussed his hair, even in play. But irritating her uptight, play-by-the-rules rookie amused her. One of these days he would loosen up and learn to take this intense police work in stride. You just couldn’t maintain that much rigidity without eventually cracking. And that neurotic note-taking. You’d think he was writing the next installment of *War and Peace* with a last-week deadline.

“After you,” Daryl said, gesturing at the door that displayed a manager’s sign positioned over the peephole.

Fran rang the bell and the outside porch light switched on. A squat old man cracked his door partway until he scanned the identification cards the officers showed him. Then he disengaged a metal chain that wouldn't even keep out a toy poodle. The door opened.

"What's all the commotion?" He looked and sounded European; Fran guessed German or Dutch. A pungent odor of broccoli and cigar smoke seeped through the open doorway.

"We'd like to get into Ms. Denham's apartment," Daryl said.

The manager stood there, clearly trying to figure out what trouble his tenant had gotten into. Fran spoke. "She was killed by a hit-and-run. In front of the apartment building." Fran took in the man's visible dismay. Some game show blared from a TV behind him. People cheered and bells rang, the exuberant celebration an incongruous backdrop to the night's incident.

"Just now?" he asked. After a moment he added, "Oh, I'm sorry." As if he needed to apologize to someone.

"Did you see anything, hear anything?"

The man shook his head. "I keep my blinds closed. The TV is always on." He shrugged. "My wife doesn't hear so well, so the sound was up. I wouldn't have heard a car crash on my doorstep." He added: "My God, my God," shaking his head in obvious distress. How could such a thing happen on his doorstep?

After signing the consent-to-search form, he picked up a ring of color-coded keys and closed the door behind him, then led Fran and Daryl around the side of the building to a flight of pink cement stairs adorned with a peeling white-painted metal banister. Fran looked at the pimply stucco texture of the building, typical for Los Angeles. She absentmindedly ran her hand along the wall as they waited.

"Anyone else live with her?" Daryl took copious notes.

The manager frowned in thought. "I didn't see her much. Worked at some clothing store. She was a quiet tenant, not like some. Paid the rent on time." He scrunched up his face. "Such a shame."

“Would you know how to reach her family?” Daryl asked.

The man shook his head. “What do I know about my tenants? It’s none of my business; I just collect the rent. My wife and silky terrier are enough to keep track of.”

Fran noticed tiredness etched deep in the man’s face. Was he thinking that now he’d have to clean the place up and advertise for a new tenant? And who would come to take all that dreck out of the apartment? He sighed and trudged up the narrow stairs.

As he unlocked the deceased’s door, Fran appraised the apartment. How many hundreds of times had she stepped into someone’s life like that? Each place so different, exposing a unique slice of one person’s existence. One dead person.

There were immediate impressions. First, usually, the amount of wealth, or lack of it. But then there were the color choices, the personal touches: artwork, dishes, furnishings. That gal had been clean but not especially tidy. Dishes still in the sink, clothes left on the bedroom floor. A lot of bathroom paraphernalia like makeup and toiletries, no medication in the cabinet or beside the bed, no outward signs of drug use. No indication of a roommate or male company.

Fran thanked the manager, who left them to do their job. Unlike many, he appeared glad to return to his own apartment. Fran disliked the ones that hovered, fascinated by the dissection of a life that was suddenly no more. What did that person leave behind? What dreams, aspirations were instantly dissolved? Who would soon be crying over them?

The last question concerned Fran. The driver’s license found in the wallet identified the victim as Libby S. Denham. To Fran’s knowledge, the third vehicular-related death north of the boulevard that day. Fran never liked the job of notifying next of kin, but then, who did? Especially when it was a kid that was killed. She’d rather pass the job on to someone else.

Daryl picked up an old Rolodex by a phone. There were few numbers in it. So often, the ones they needed were the ones that couldn’t be found. Who ever put their parents’ or children’s phone

numbers in a book or Rolodex? Those you knew by heart. Or they were programmed into your cell phone. Libby's wall phone was the only thing in the room Daryl touched. Even though this wasn't a murder scene, he followed protocol. When they returned to the car, they'd call dispatch and have an ident officer check out the apartment.

"I don't see anything under Denham. Here's her work. Ross Dress For Less in Tarzana." Daryl jotted the number in his notebook. The store would have an application on file with personnel. In case of emergency, contact . . . As Fran looked at a glass paperweight, the phone rang. Daryl met Fran's eyes, then picked up the receiver. Fran leaned closer to listen in.

"Yes?" he said.

"Who's this?"

Fran heard a faint female voice, full of irritation. "Where's Libby?" Daryl reacted to the surprise in the voice, like the caller knew a man didn't live here, or didn't usually answer this phone. Maybe the caller thought she had a wrong number.

"I'm afraid she's not here," Daryl answered carefully. "Are you a friend, or family member?"

Now Fran heard near hysteria. "What's happened? Has something happened?"

How is it they know? Fran wondered. Was it Daryl's official tone of voice, or some form of premonition? Was disaster something that could palpably travel the phone lines? She quietly mouthed a prayer, asking God to help Daryl through the next few minutes. Daryl didn't like it when she prayed for him, but she prayed anyway, knowing he could use the help. The things she saw in her line of work caused her to keep that direct hotline working overtime. She was sure God didn't mind at all.

"I'm afraid I can't go into detail, miss . . ."

"Oh no," the voice said. "Where's Libby? And who are *you*?"

"Detective Daryl Patterson, I'm a police officer. I'm afraid I can't go into any . . ."

"I'm her sister. I have a right to know what's going on!"

“And your name . . . ?” Daryl gripped his pen, poised to write more in his notebook.

The voice hesitated. “Debby. Debby Denham. *Please* tell me what’s happened.”

Fran watched Daryl’s face as he braced himself for the blow. Normally, family was not notified over the phone. Routine called for sending someone in person; that was the least you could do. As she listened, Fran was glad it was him and not her this time. She’d had too long a day to endure shock and grief directed in her ear. Lately, it seemed, homicides were cropping up in every corner. Years ago, in this part of the Valley, murder was a rare occurrence. Now you could walk down Ventura Boulevard and see gang graffiti scrawled on every bus bench and cement wall, muggings in front of Hughes Market in broad daylight. Who would have guessed? What with the riots, fires, mudslides, and earthquakes, Los Angeles was breaking apart chunk by chunk and no one able to do a blasted thing to prevent it.

Fran wandered through the bedroom to avoid hearing Daryl on the phone. That twenty-six-year-old woman’d had her whole life ahead of her. Soon, someone would come and empty out the contents of her apartment, strip away all personality, and leave a shell. Maybe just give all that stuff to Salvation Army and keep a few things: clothes, jewelry, personal memorabilia. Then the manager would slap on a new coat of paint and rent the place out to another stranger. Life went on.

Such a needless waste of life, and Fran had seen enough of it from car accidents. Mostly drunk drivers. Just last week a guy entered the freeway exit at Reseda and drove five miles the wrong way, sideswiping cars until he crashed into a couple on their honeymoon, heading to Santa Barbara. Metal was strewn along the freeway for a quarter mile. Now they’re buried side-by-side at Forest Lawn for eternity. Some honeymoon.

Fran wandered back into the living room and heard Daryl sketch out the accident. Then he frowned. Fran watched curiously as Daryl spoke.

“What do you mean? You don’t think it was an accident?” He listened and then asked, “Where can we reach you? Are you in Los Angeles? Can you come down and—” Daryl stopped, pulled the phone away from his face.

Fran asked, “What?”

“She hung up. She said don’t be so sure it was a hit-and-run.” Daryl replayed what he remembered, and he had a good memory. “She said, ‘he did it, I can’t believe he did it.’ When I asked her what she meant, she said, ‘Don’t be so sure it was an accident. Somebody wanted her dead.’ ” Daryl turned his attention toward his book and wrote some more, his brows furrowed. Now Fran recognized a similarity to her ex-husband in that expression of Daryl’s. The chronic look of disapproval masked as confusion.

Fran’s brain switched gears. That changed things. Batted the ball right into her ballpark, so to speak. They’d have to cordon off the apartment, now. “Do you think this woman’ll come down to the station?”

Daryl shrugged. “If she’s her sister, we’ll find her. Let’s go.”

On the way through the hall entry, Fran hesitated. Inset into the wall were three small shelves. She hadn’t noticed them when she entered the apartment because the picture frames faced the other way, in toward the living room. Pushing her unruly curls from her eyes, without touching, she examined an eight-by-ten photo encased in a silver frame. A man with a somewhat surprised smile being kissed on the lips by a woman Fran identified as Libby Denham. The face matched the photo off her driver’s license. A cute, warm exchange, just their faces. The background was a blur; it could be indoors or outdoors. A hint of natural sunlight illuminated their features.

Fran didn’t know it yet, but she was studying the face of Mike Jepson, of MJ Enterprises. A face she would soon know in great detail.

Chapter 2

Thursday afternoon, Alisa got out of her car and walked to the front door of her sprawling Spanish hacienda in Encino. After a hectic day at the preschool, she enjoyed the solitude and shade of her willow-laden yard. The house, set back off the road and down a long driveway, was surrounded by an acre of lawn—a rarity those days to find a home with that much property. Encino used to be olive groves, and when the farms were sold to developers in the 'fifties, they subdivided the flat, arable land into five-acre parcels and homes sprung up, styled after the California missions with terracotta-tiled floors and roofs, and white stucco walls. Her shoes clicked on the floor as she walked the long spacious hallway to the kitchen.

After setting her shoulder bag on the counter, she grabbed a Diet Coke from the fridge and went back outside. Lately, she'd been sneaking a cigarette from a cache she kept in one of the old barbecue drawers. She knew Mike hated smoking, and she “officially” quit when she met him. But when she felt stressed, it was the only thing that relaxed her besides a strong drink. Lately, it wasn't just the kids that had been grating on her; life in general upset her. If she dug deep, she'd have known it was from the pressure of her biological clock, but Alisa wasn't one to closely examine her motivations.

Today, anxiety floated just under her awareness. One of the mothers had introduced her new baby to the preschool staff that morning, had it all wrapped up in a snuggly. Alisa looked at the tiny

head full of wispy hair, the small fingers curled, the delicate features of the sleeping face. She carried the image home with her, imprinted on and uninvited in her heart. But all Alisa sensed as she stood smoking and looking out at the green lawn was a stirring of agitation.

She snuffed out her cigarette and went to the mailbox. As she returned to the house, her cell phone rang. Mike calling her from work. She sat down on the lounge chair beside the brick fireplace.

“Hey,” he asked, “how was your day?”

Alisa absently thumbed through a Spiegel catalog. “Oh, okay. How’s yours going?”

Mike apparently heard something in her voice. “Kids run you ragged?” She could tell he tried to sound cheerful.

“No more than usual.”

“Would you mind if I met Jeff at the club after work? You haven’t started dinner yet, have you?”

“No, I just got home.”

“That’s what I thought. I didn’t want you to go to any trouble.”

“I’m just planning linguini and a salad. Nothing fancy.”

Alisa was used to that arrangement. The days varied, but Mike met Jeff at least twice a week to play racquetball and lift weights. It didn’t bother her; she enjoyed the quiet time to read books and play solitaire on her laptop.

Often, when Mike went to the club, Alisa wandered through the house, reminding herself she was not alone anymore. How did she get here? One minute she was single, a sales rep for an accessories’ manufacturer, the next minute she was married to a passionate, devoted man, living in a beautiful house and teaching preschool. After three years, she still occasionally felt disoriented. As much as she loved Mike, she sometimes felt like she was playing house. Like a character from one

novel who walked off the page and into another story. The occasional cigarette seemed to connect her to that woman she was before. It grounded her.

As Mike talked to her on the phone about the wheelings and dealings of his day, Alisa absently flipped through the small stack of mail. Recently, the influx of junk mail had grown voluminous. So, that was what Alisa sifted through when she came upon the large manila envelope: Lillian Vernon catalog, Mutual of Omaha Life Insurance, Super-Sweepstakes, Mystery Book Club, the Recycler.

She eyed the envelope curiously as she hung up with Mike. It was addressed to her alone, which in itself was odd. When did she ever get any personal mail? The blue handwriting was distinctly feminine and a scent of perfume rose up from the paper.

Over the next few minutes, conflicting thoughts jarred Alisa's mind, coupled with a barrage of emotions. The predominant reaction was curiosity. And then humor. It didn't dawn on her to take the letter seriously. Even when she pulled the photos out of their white folder and studied them, she laughed. She'd heard about all of those women who paraded through Mike's bedroom before she had married him. Considering the type he used to date, Alisa was not surprised to get some crazy letter from a jilted nut, albeit they'd been married for three years now. But, here was what she read as her eyes perused the flowery script:

Dear Alisa, I felt I had to warn you about your scumbag husband. I doubt you know about the relationship Mike and I enjoyed for some time now. He swore you'd never find out. Well, now you will. That liar was going to take me to Mexico, and then he hooked up with some bimbo in his office. He wouldn't tell me who, but I'm sure it was that phony, Denise. When I found out that he was two-timing me I wailed on him. And he actually came at me with a pair of scissors—I swear it on my grave. He said if I told you or anyone about the affair, he'd kill me. Listen lady, the man's dangerous. Under all that sweet, calm, gentle demeanor is a walking time bomb. He thinks he had you fooled real

well. You think he goes to all those lunches and meets his pal at the club those evenings. That was me he was meeting there. He probably has a field day in that office with all those young, eager girls eager to impress the boss. You get my drift. If you know what's good for you, you'd dump the loser and fast. I don't need to tell you how he broke my heart and how many others! Your marriage, maybe even your life, is in big trouble.

Alisa stared at the name written neatly at the bottom of the page. Who was Libby Denham?

She took her time examining the four photos carefully. The first was a full shot of her husband and, she guessed, that woman, Libby. They were sitting outside at a table. A restaurant maybe? She could see part of the umbrella pole that came up through the center of the table, sodas in glasses, a small vase holding a couple of carnations. The light was bright, harsh. Probably midday sun. The background was hard to make out. Possibly the window and wall of the restaurant, but not enough to spark recognition. A piece of car was in the right bottom corner of the shot, indicating the photographer was a short distance away, perhaps across a parking lot. Maybe aimed from behind a car; it was hard to say.

But anyone looking at that photo would guess the two people were intimate. The woman's hand covered one of Mike's as the two gazed into each other's eyes. Alisa noted the woman was young and attractive; it caused her to cringe. Even with the fuzzy detail, she could tell they were both smiling, having a great time together. But what did that prove? That Libby could have been an old friend playing a trick on him. Alisa did not doubt for a second that this was someone's idea of a joke. She looked again closer at Libby's face—plenty attractive.

Alisa lit another cigarette and took a long, hard drag. Maybe these pictures were taken a long time ago and something caused the woman to send them now. But who took the photos? That was the question that unsettled her. That Libby must have hired someone. But why? A whole mystery lay

veiled before her. If that was someone's idea of a joke, why would they go to the expense of hiring a photographer?

Even though Alisa didn't know photography, she guessed right. Those pictures were not snapshots or digital printouts, but taken by someone with a good camera, with some experience. They were black-and-white, for one thing, and most recreational photographers took color and used some cheap digital camera. Alisa guessed the woman's hair was blonde. It was really a light red, but of course she couldn't tell that from the photo. She'd heard the endless stories from Nance and Jeff about Mike's parade of blondes. Surely, Libby had to be one of the ghosts from Mike's past.

Alisa scrutinized the second photo, a closer shot, as were the remaining two in her lap. This one was noticeably more intimate. Libby was kissing Mike, her hand cradling his head. Mike's eyes were closed. In the other two five-by-eights, his look was almost one of surprise, like he wasn't expecting the kiss. But overall, he was smiling, pleased. Nobody was forcing him to do this.

Alisa studied Mike's face. She startled at the realization these were recent photos; last year he had noticeably more hair.

Now the coup de grace.

Alisa set the letter and photos down on the small outdoor table. She snuffed out her cigarette and fingered the manila envelope again. She realized she missed something, pinching a bulge at the bottom of the envelope. She reached in and pulled out a handful of folded stationery.

Alisa slowly unfolded the beige pages. She recognized the paper; all Mike's personal letters were written on that linen stock with his letterhead across the top. Alisa occasionally used that stationery herself. He kept a stack at home, in his desk drawer in the den.

The expression on Alisa's face changed. Even though the letters were unsigned, she knew her husband's handwriting. She read his words with morbid fascination as a subtle terror tugged at her heart. The letters exploded with sexual detail, confessing a passion that almost embarrassed her. She

shook her head in disbelief, in denial, yet read on. The lewdness expressed in those pages made Alisa blush. Confusion paralyzed her. These were words she'd never heard leave her husband's mouth, not even in his most angry or passionate moments. Her eyes remained riveted to the pages, then snagged at one passage.

I'll tell Alisa I have a convention in Santa Barbara and pick you up Friday around ten. She never questions me. I can't wait to . . . Alisa's jaw dropped as she shook a disgusting image from her head. Enough!

She threw down the pages as if they scorched her fingers. She started to shake with a chill that contrasted with the heat of the afternoon. She wanted to deny it all, but how? The evidence lay before her, in her husband's handwriting. Alisa searched her memory. Mike had left the number of his hotel in Santa Barbara when he went, two, maybe three weeks ago, but hadn't she called him? She gritted her teeth, trying to remember. No, he called her, twice, to check in. And she would have called his cell phone, anyway.

With her heart hammering in her chest, Alisa counted the pages—sixteen. Different letters, not dated, all containing similar sentiments. In them, Mike confessed his burning love and commitment to Libby, his desperate need to be with her at all costs. Another excerpt: *Alisa is clueless. How could you think she compares to you in any way? She can't hold a candle to you. It's not just your unbelievable body, but the way you move . . .* The letter went on to describe the passionate desires Mike had for Libby and how he couldn't stop thinking about her.

Alisa threw the pages onto the concrete patio. That was not her husband. She was not stupid; she knew Mike well. She would know in their intimate moments if there was someone else. Surely she'd feel it intruding upon their passion.

As she snuffed out her cigarette, she decided to confront Mike as soon as he got home. She hid the envelope and its disturbing contents way in the back of the drawer where she stashed her

cigarettes. But as the evening advanced and Mike was, supposedly, at the club, her nerve slipped. As eight o'clock neared, she managed to calm down immeasurably. The night had cooled and a few stars pierced the luminescent sky. Mike would pull up any moment. She had to find out the truth, but was afraid if she dumped it all on his head, and if it was true, he'd deny it. How could she even think that? Every word smacked of a lie. So, that was the kind of merry-go-round her brain was riding on when Mike came through the door.

He noticed her agitation the second he slammed his car door shut and saw her sitting on the veranda. She guessed what passed through his mind. That maybe they needed to spend more time together, maybe he'd been neglecting her. The kids at work were probably hellions today. A good drink would cure that. She followed him into the house where he fixed her a vodka and cranberry juice before they sat down to a dinner. He gave her a tender kiss and looked in her eyes.

"What's bothering you?" he asked.

Alisa answered, "I guess I'm a little tired." It wasn't not a lie; she would never lie to him. She hoped, wryly, that Mike was as upstanding with her.

Over dinner they talked their usual chitchat, stuff that upwardly-mobiles talked about. Alisa chewed her food thoughtfully as Mike complained about an order that got all screwed up. He assured her, though, that things were going great. Another six months and he'd be ready to expand big-time. He told her to go out and buy something new, some new clothes, jewelry, whatever she liked. A magnanimous gesture. He was probably thinking, like most men, that his offer would make his wife happy, make her grateful for his hard work. But she responded weakly.

"That's okay. I don't need anything, really." She wondered why he didn't just surprise her with a gift, a necklace or whatever. That was a lot more romantic than telling her to go out and buy something. She chided herself; just last week he sent her a beautiful floral arrangement, for no special occasion. The card had read, "My life was so full of love, thanks to you."

Yet, wasn't that the kind of thing men did when they were seeing someone on the side? No denying it—she was being critical. That package from Libby had set her on edge. Time to tackle the subject.

“Mike, do you know anyone named Libby Denham?” She tried to sound disinterested, but her heart pounded as her words came out in a flutter. She was sure Mike could read her like the proverbial book. She avoided eye contact, twirled her fork in her noodles. The long quiet moment dragged on forever.

“Libby Denham. Oh, yeah.” He shook his head slowly as Alisa stole a glance. She watched his brain calculate. He bought a few seconds while taking a sip of wine. “She was a purchasing manager for some company in Santa Monica. Just placed a hefty order for some lapel pins and personalized pens—stuff like that. I set up a fulfillment program for her.” He paused. “Why'd you ask?”

In that brief moment, Alisa assessed Mike's body language. If she knew anything at all about him, she read that her husband was innocent. Because, if those letters were true, then her husband was the best actor on the face of the earth. He'd win an Academy Award. A sense of relief filled her heart, only to be quickly replaced by confusion.

If that woman was not an old flame, why had she done this? And how could she, Alisa, deny the letters her husband wrote? She couldn't deny them. Pain filled in the spaces behind her eyes; her head throbbed unmercifully. Mike looked at her quizzically, awaiting an answer.

“Oh, she called for you, here at the house. Just wondering.” Now she'd done it—crossed that line she never meant to cross. She made up a lie. But, she'd had to think of something to say. She craved a cigarette real badly at that point.

“Called me here?” Mike startled her with a laugh. “*That* was one weird woman.” Alisa's ears perked up. She waited for him to say more. “She's one of those customers that needles you to death. She called me at the office every day for weeks over that order. A real perfectionist, I guess.” He

thought aloud, “or completely neurotic. I don’t know why she’d call. The order’s already come in. Great, I hope she’s not trying to change it again.”

Alisa ventured a telling question. “Known her long?”

Mike furrowed his brows. “Three, four weeks maybe. But, I don’t really know her.” He brushed away the subject casually; he had nothing more to say. He got up and started clearing the table. “Want to go for some Haagen-Dazs?”

After they returned from the ice cream parlor, Mike retreated to his den. He told her he needed to make a couple of calls. Although Alisa was partially consoled, she knew she couldn’t shelve it. As she undressed for bed, she strained to hear what Mike was saying on the phone. Was he talking to *her*? She hated herself for the thought. All evening, Mike seemed relaxed. Not at all the way you’d expect he’d behave if he was having an affair. And what about all that stuff about violence, his attacking a woman with a pair of scissors? Alisa tried to conjure up an image of an outraged Mike, wielding scissors, pinning Libby to a wall. It was just too much for one night.

Alisa’s stomach wrenched. The letters had permanently tainted her, like a penetrating dye she couldn’t wash off her hands. All evening, thoughts careened through her head. That wasn’t a woman from his past, he said. Yet, if he’d only known her three weeks, where did all the letters and photos fit in? Nothing made sense. Why would a stranger go to all that trouble to fabricate something so hurtful and incriminating? Why did someone take those pictures? *Who* took them?

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As you could imagine, by the time Mike joined Alisa in bed, she was a wreck. In contrast, Mike actually felt content, relaxed and sated. Tonight, after working out, a surge of energy raced through his limbs. He reached over to Alisa and pulled her face close to kiss her. To his dismay, and even annoyance, she pulled away, pushing his hand back. He flopped back on the bed, exasperated. What now?

Alisa fumbled for words. “I’m sorry. I know this sounds like a cop-out, but I really have a headache.”

Mike loosened; he could understand. It was not an excuse Alisa used like other women did. “Here,” he said, turning her so her back faced him. “Let me rub your neck.”

“Thanks,” she muttered. “That’s wonderful.” She felt like a rat with Mike treating her so kindly. She reminded herself how good he was to her, how much he showed his love. How well he listened to her, drank her in. She tried to relax.

“What is it?” he asked pointedly. Alisa picked up a brooding tone in Mike’s voice. “It’s the baby thing, isn’t it?”

Here we go again. Alisa tensed, a wave of sick anxiety flooding her. “No, it’s not that. Really.”

“Every time I try to touch you lately, you do this.” Why did he have to bring that subject up?

“Not *every* time,” she protested.

“Can’t you see what a wreck this is making you? I really resent you pressuring me.” Mike made no attempt at masking his irritation.

“I’m not pressuring you at all! Have I said anything about it?”

“You don’t have to; I can tell.”

Alisa felt her anger swell, like a balloon inflating uncomfortably in her gut. “Why do you presume to read my mind? You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“I do know that you want a baby, that we always end up talking about this. Why can’t you just wait, just a few more months?”

“And what if I can’t get pregnant right away? I’m thirty-five already!” Alisa didn’t want to say that, but with the oft-repeated argument, the lines came easy, like a memorized script. Like inserting a DVD into the machine and pushing play. The argument unfolded effortlessly.

“And I’m not ready. Don’t I count?” Mike moved away from her, breaking contact. “Enough. I’m not in the mood to fight. If you want a baby, then let’s have a baby already. I’m sick of being pressured.”

Even though his words were conciliatory, Mike used them as a weapon, not as a peace offering. The tone of his voice made that clear. When Alisa married Mike, she was startled by an intense need to have children, something she had given little thought to before. Now, working at the preschool, her obsession was fueled daily and had become a raging torrent inside her. Mike may have taken the big leap into matrimony, but Alisa knew he was far from ready to become a father. On more than one occasion he said he regretted encouraging her to work at the preschool. All she could talk about, it seemed to him, was how much she wanted a baby. That had been going on for two years now and Alisa knew something, or someone, had to give.

Without meaning to, Alisa started to cry. She hated women who cried to inspire pity, but she couldn’t hold back the torrent of tears. The last straw breaking her resolve at the end of a perturbing day. She knew Mike looked upon her with disdain.

“I’m sorry,” she said in between gulps.

Mike didn’t know if she was apologizing for crying or for wanting a baby. Whatever it was, his temper was at short fuse. He forced himself to take a deep breath and dispel it all. He reached for her, stroked her hair as she managed to control her sobbing. They didn’t need to talk about it anymore; they’d been through volumes.

“Maybe we should just go to sleep. It’s been a long day,” he suggested.

Alisa smirked as she turned to the wall. *You don’t know the half of it!* Mike embraced her from behind, holding and stroking her gently. Nothing like an argument to kill desire, she pondered bitterly, infused with guilt. She flashed on all the arguments they’d had recently, little ones. There had

undeniably been tension in bed. She had never admitted it to herself before; it just seemed normal.

Didn't all couples go through these phases?

Instantly, an image filled her mind. Mike stealing kisses in a restaurant, leaning over the table and touching Libby's hand. Watching them in the backseat of his car, on the floor of some living room rug, his hands all over her.

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