

## Chapter 1

Dr. Evelyn Harper had always been a woman of order.

Her life moved with the same precision as the ticking hands of her watch—black coffee at 6:30 AM, a brisk walk-through Central Square by 7:15, patient notes reviewed by 8:30, and at her office by 8:45 sharp. Every day, without fail. Not one day she missed the clock and as the fingers of the clock so did her life.

Routine was comforting. It meant control. And control was everything to her.

Her apartment on Prospect Street was spotless; minimalist furniture in muted tones, bookshelves organized by subject and then alphabetically, not a stray item in sight. Even her refrigerator contents were arranged with precision: yogurt containers aligned perfectly; vegetables stored in glass containers labeled with expiration dates.

Every morning, she laid out her clothes the night before; typically a tailored pantsuit or a pencil skirt with a silk blouse, colors coordinated by season. Her dark hair was always styled in the same elegant bob, not a strand out of place. Her colleagues often joked that Dr. Harper's appearance was as structured as her therapeutic approach.

At her practice near Harvard Square, her appointment book was a marvel of efficiency. Each session lasted exactly fifty minutes, with ten minutes between for notes and preparation. Evelyn's patients valued this predictability, her office was a sanctuary of calm in their turbulent lives.

In the evenings, she followed another set routine: dinner at 7:00 PM (often a simple, balanced meal she prepared herself), followed by an hour of reading academic journals, then perhaps a glass of red wine (only on Fridays and Saturdays) while listening to music. By 10:30, she was in bed, ready to begin again the next day.

Her patients came to her seeking guidance, relief from the chaos in their own minds. Anxiety, trauma, paranoia; Evelyn was their anchor, the voice of reason that helped them see clearly. She had spent years building that reputation. People came to her with their issues and it was Evelyn's job to figure out solutions for them.

And yet, lately... something felt off. It was hard to explain. Just trivial things, moments that didn't quite fit. Like how she would catch her own reflection in a window and feel, for just a second, like she was looking at a stranger. Or the way she sometimes recognized people she *knew* she had never met before.

There were days when Evelyn would wake up totally disconnected from this life. She would have no memories reminding her of the past that everyone has. It seemed that somebody just erased the memories and offered her a new brain chip or something.

The thought itself was scary and comical at the same time. Such things did not happen in real life. Moreover, these were just unimportant things. Things that could be easily dismissed. So, she dismissed them. Until the day Jacob Wells walked into her office.

## **Chapter 2**

It started as an ordinary day. Evelyn was reviewing her schedule when the receptionist, Anna, knocked lightly at her door.

“Dr. Harper, your 2:00 o clock appointment is here. Jacob Wells. I believe I had told you about him”

Anna was her confidante and a help in all trying situations. From arranging all her appointments to offering a shoulder to cry Anna meant everything to Evelyn.

Evelyn looked at Anna, nodded and made a note.

“Thanks Anna, he is the same guy who had a meltdown in the shopping arcade, right?”

“Yes, Evelyn, his brother is very worried for him. It seems his grueling work schedule has taken a toll on his mental health. But I am sure you can fix him up. You always do; I will send him in.”

Jacob was a new patient, referred for anxiety and paranoia. Evelyn welcomed him in, observing his twitchy demeanor. His eyes darted around the room as if searching for an unseen threat. She quietly assessed him. Jacob Wells must have been a handsome man at some point before his mental health took a toll.

Now he had a whimsical look on his face and the under-eye bags showed his life had changed for the worst. However, Evelyn was not one to judge people on their looks. She decided to start the conversation on a cordial note.

“Mr. Wells, what brings you here today?” she asked, her voice soft and professional. It was years of practice and now there was nothing that could deter Evelyn’s calm demeanor.

Jacob leaned forward, his voice barely above a whisper. “I know this will sound crazy, but...I saw you yesterday night.” Evelyn frowned. Her heart did a flip. What was this guy talking about? How could he have seen her? Last night, she was resting in her bedroom. But maybe he was having another bout of paranoia. She decided to initiate further conversation with Jacob.

“You saw me? Where?”

“Last night. In Briarwood. You, you weren’t yourself. You were... different.”

Her stomach tightened. “Mr. Wells, I wasn’t in Briarwood last night.”

Jacob’s hands trembled as he gripped the armrests of his chair. “But it was you. Same face, same voice. But the way you looked at me... it was empty, hollow. And then you” He stopped, shaking his head.

“Then I what?” Evelyn pressed gently. Jacob’s voice dropped lower. “You stabbed a man in the alley.”

The room fell silent. The clock on the wall ticked steadily, but Evelyn’s pulse quickened. Her blood froze and she realized she was holding her breath. What was he saying, how was this possible? She was not stupid enough to believe in a man suffering from paranoia.

“That’s impossible,” she said firmly. “Are you absolutely certain it was me? I was in my home the entire time. You must be mistaken.”

Jacob nodded; his eyes dark with fear. “I’d swear on my life. I saw you kill him.”

Evelyn opened her mouth but closed it again feeling a loss of words. This man had a sincerity in his eyes and she knew he was probably not lying.

The weight of his words settled deep within her, coiling like a serpent in her gut. Had he mistaken her for someone else? Or was something far more sinister at play? But, how could this be possible?

### Chapter 3

Evelyn couldn't shake the unease that Jacob Wells' account had instilled in her. After he had left she still sat thinking about what he had said. It was clearly a case of mistaken identity. The notion that someone could mistake another for her was unsettling, but the specificity of his claim gnawed at her. She decided to go deeper into Jacob's background, hoping to find a rational explanation. Anna soon brought her the file with all the necessary details.

Accessing his patient file, she noted that Jacob was a 32-year-old graphic designer who had recently moved to Elderton. His records indicated a recent history of anxiety and mild paranoia, but nothing that suggested delusions of this magnitude.

Evelyn pondered the possibility of a doppelgänger; a look-alike inhabiting the same city. She had read about the concept, which was rooted in German folklore. Basically, it referred to a wraith or apparition of a living person, often considered an omen of bad luck or even death.

Never before had Evelyn felt so disheartened and so she decided to discuss it with Anna. After calling her in the room she got ready to have the toughest discussion of her life.

“Yes, Evelyn you called me, is there a problem? Anna seemed to be a little off today.”

“Nothing, Anna how much do you know about this guy Jacob? He told me that he had seen me in Briarwood yesterday. Yet, I am quite sure that I was at my home the entire night.” Evelyn decided against telling Anna the entire conversation she had with Jacob.

“Hmm, I know that he is suffering from anxiety so maybe he made a mistake. But the truth is that his brother told me that he has an amazing memory. So, if he said that he has seen you it is better you get to the depth of the matter. This could be a case of stolen identity. Do something before things go out of your hand Evelyn. Rest, you yourself are pretty intelligent.”

Anna was looking pensive and Evelyn realized that the matter was too serious to just ignore like that. Determined to find clarity, she decided to visit Briarwood herself. The district was known for its labyrinthine alleys and historic architecture, a stark contrast to the modernity of Central Square.

As she wandered through the maze of Cobblestone streets, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Ever so often, she caught glimpses of figures in her peripheral vision, only to find empty spaces when she turned. Was she being followed or was this all a figment of her imagination. The darkness and shadows were playing games with her mind and she felt tired as hell. Maybe coming here was a big mistake.

Turning a corner, she stumbled upon an alley that matched Jacob's description. The dim lighting and narrow passageways exuded an eerie atmosphere. As she ventured deeper, a sudden movement caught her eye. There was somebody there or was her mind playing tricks with her.

A figure stood at the far end, partially obscured by shadows. She was absolutely sure of that. "Hello?" Evelyn called out, her voice echoing off the brick walls.

The elusive figure stepped forward, revealing a face identical to her own. Evelyn's breath caught in her throat as she stared into eyes that mirrored hers, yet lacked the warmth and familiarity she saw in the mirror each day.

Her heart dipped as she realized that Jacob had been absolutely right. "Who are you?" she demanded, her voice trembling. The doppelgänger tilted its head, a cold smile playing on its lips. "I am you, Dr. Harper. Or perhaps, the part of you that you've long suppressed. We are the same aren't we."

Before Evelyn could respond, the figure turned and disappeared into the darkness. She stood there, heart pounding, grappling with the surreal encounter. Was this a manifestation of her own psyche, or was somebody about to ruin what she had made? This thought sent a chill down her spine. She had to get to the bottom of this.

#### Chapter 4

The following days were a blur for Evelyn. She immersed herself in research, delving into psychological journals, folklore, and case studies on doppelgängers and identity disturbances. The phenomenon of encountering one's double had been documented across cultures, often interpreted as a harbinger of death or a manifestation of internal conflict.

Evelyn also explored the concept of heautoscopy, a term used in psychiatry for the hallucination of seeing one's own body at a distance. This phenomenon is considered a possible explanation for doppelgänger experiences and can occur as a symptom in conditions like schizophrenia and epilepsy. But she had no mental illness history so far.

What had happened? Had she lost the control on her brain? Evelyn wanted to go outside and scream loudly. A person who had been helping others understand problems with the mind was now losing hers.

Despite her efforts, any rational explanations provided little comfort. The encounter felt too real, too tangible to be dismissed as a mere hallucination or psychological projection.

Her professional life had also begun to suffer. During sessions, she found herself distracted, her thoughts drifting back to the alley in Briarwood. Patients noticed her detachment, and she could sense their trust in her waning. If she did not do something her practice of so many years was going to get ruined.

Whoever was trying to impersonate her had a full idea of her schedule and life. The thought of what next was awaiting her was chilling to the core.

One evening Evelyn was busy studying the notes of one of her new patients. The wind was howling at full speed and she realized that her staying alone was complicating matters. What if one day her doppelganger killed her and took her place. There was no one except Anna who knew about Evelyn's whereabouts.

She decided to do more severe research. Maybe there was something that she was missing out upon. With a heavy heart Evelyn opened her laptop and began searching for more information on mistaken identities and what should a person do.

There was nothing major to think or study about. All she could do was to keep waiting for her duplicate to take the next step. Evelyn decided to sleep over the problem and take things one at a time. As she took off her robe and slipped in the bed covers her phone started ringing.

"Who is calling me at this hour?" Evelyn wondered only to see an unfamiliar number on the screen.

"Hello, this is Dr. Evelyn Harper." She continued but was greeted by a chilling silence on the other side. "Who is it, why are you not speaking?" Evelyn was hysterical but all she could hear was deep breathing on the other side. She disconnected the call and lay down on her bed. Sleep would remain elusive as she had no idea what the next morning would bring for her.

The next morning, she reached her clinic quite early. Anna had not yet arrived and it was only Evelyn and her thoughts. She opened her laptop and decided to check her emails.

Evelyn had received an anonymous email. The subject line read: "You are not alone."

Her heart was pounding in her chest. What did this message mean?

Hesitant, she opened the message to find a single sentence: "Meet me at the old clock tower in Briarwood at midnight."

By now Evelyn was sweating profusely. Whoever it was now wanted to confront her. What should she do now. It was better to go as these questions were bothering her. But what if this clone of hers had separate plans for her? Her mind was now racing at top speed.

Against her better judgment, driven by a need for answers, Evelyn decided to go.

## Chapter 5

The clock tower stood tall against the night sky, its stone surface weathered by time, its massive gears groaning as the hands inched closer to midnight. The city beyond was eerily

quiet; too quiet. The usual hum of distant traffic and late-night wanderers seemed muffled, as if the night itself was holding its breath.

As the clock struck twelve, a figure emerged from the shadows. She tried to identify him but it was too dark. Soon the clouds cleared and the moonlight revealed his face to her. It was Jacob Wells.

Evelyn felt it too. The thick, pressing air of anticipation. Her coat barely shielded her from the cold, but it wasn't the weather that sent a chill through her spine. It was the feeling that she wasn't alone; not just with Jacob Wells, but something else.

Something unseen. A presence lurking in the shadows of the night. His silhouette stretched long beneath the dim glow of the streetlamp, his posture stiff with something unreadable; fear? Urgency?

"Dr. Harper," he greeted, his voice steady but low, as if he feared being overheard.

Evelyn inhaled sharply, gripping the strap of her bag. "Mr. Wells. Why did you call me here?" Jacob hesitated. His eyes darted around the deserted plaza before he reached into his coat, pulling out a worn, creased folder.

"I needed to show you something," he said, his fingers twitching as he handed it over. Evelyn took the folder, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. The weight of it felt heavier than it should have. A slow, creeping dread curled in her stomach as she flipped it open under the dim glow of the streetlamp.

Inside were photographs. Dozens of them. Of her. Or rather—someone who looked exactly like her. In each image, she stood in various locations across Elderton—places she had never been.

An alley near Briarwood.

A café she had never stepped foot in.

A bridge overlooking the river, staring into the water.

Evelyn's breath hitched. In every single photograph, her expression was vacant. Distant. Like a ghost haunting the city.

"These were taken over the past few weeks," Jacob murmured. "At first, I thought I was losing my mind. That I was imagining things. But then I realized..."

He swallowed, his voice dropping even lower. "It's not just me. Others have seen you, too." Evelyn's fingers tightened around the photographs, her pulse quickening. The implications were staggering. Her first instinct was to dismiss it as an elaborate prank, a mistake, a fabrication. But as she flipped through the images, that denial crumbled.

The angles, the lighting; these weren't altered. They were real. Evelyn's hands trembled as she held the last photograph up to the light. It was of her or rather, the other her standing outside her own office building. Watching. Her stomach lurched.

"What does this mean?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the wind. Jacob hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. His voice, when it came, was grim. "I don't know." He took a shaky breath. "But whoever or whatever that is... it's not you."

Evelyn snapped her gaze up to meet his. "Then who the hell is she?" Jacob's face was pale, his expression troubled. "I was hoping you could tell me." A sharp gust of wind rattled the clock tower, making the iron beams groan. The streetlamp above flickered once.

And in that brief moment of darkness, a shape shifted in the distance. A figure standing at the edge of the plaza. Evelyn's breath hitched. Her own silhouette. Watching them. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

## Chapter 6

Evelyn felt her entire body go cold. "Did you see that?" she whispered, her voice barely carrying over the night air. Jacob followed her gaze to the spot where the figure had been just a second ago. But there was nothing there now—only the shadows stretching across the Cobblestone Street.

"I saw something move," he muttered, his jaw tightening. "But I..." He stopped himself, shaking his head. "I am not sure what I see these days. Everybody says I am mentally sick but I am absolutely sure this woman is not you."

Evelyn's mind raced. That wasn't just paranoia. That wasn't a trick of the light. Someone or something had been watching them. And it looked just like her. She flipped back through the photographs, her eyes scanning every detail. Her pulse pounded as her gaze landed on the final image again, the one outside her own office.

Jacob was still talking, but Evelyn barely heard him. Her breath came in short, sharp bursts. Because in the bottom corner of the photo, barely visible in the dim lighting, there was something even more disturbing than the vacant expression on the other Evelyn's face.

Her reflection. It was in the office window behind her. And it did not match. Evelyn's blood ran ice cold. In the photograph, the other Evelyn's body was turned slightly to the side—but the reflection was staring straight at the camera.

Watching. Aware. The sensation crawled up Evelyn's spine like cold fingers tracing her nerves; an impossible awareness that shouldn't have existed. Her instincts screamed. She slammed the folder shut with a sharp snap, her palms slick with sweat. Her breath came faster, heart hammering against her ribcage. "We need to leave," she muttered, her voice tight with urgency. Jacob didn't question her. One look at her face, pale and stricken, was all the confirmation he needed.

They turned toward the edge of the plaza, footsteps quickening, but before they could move more than a few strides, the air trembled with sound. A heavy, metallic chime rang out deep and echoing, as if the clocktower above had chosen that moment to awaken. The noise fractured the silence around them, sending ripples through the air. Then came something far more chilling. Faint, almost lost to the wind, a voice whispered, a soft, hollow murmur that slid under their skin.

"You're not supposed to be here."

Evelyn froze, spinning around, eyes wide. Her breath hitched; each inhale laced with dread. But the plaza behind them remained empty. Deserted. Lifeless. Just the shifting of wind, rustling papers, and the long stretch of shadows across stone.

Still, she knew.

She wasn't alone.

Something, someone was watching. Not from a camera. Not from behind a window. It was more primal than that. As if the very place had become sentient. And whatever presence lingered in that plaza... it wasn't finished with her yet.

## Chapter 7

The morning rush at the café hummed around Evelyn, the air filled with the scent of roasted coffee and the distant chatter of customers. The place was familiar, she had been here before, many times. The worn wooden tables, the chalkboard menu listing overpriced lattes, the barista behind the counter taking orders with a tired but polite smile. She had called Jacob here to discuss the impact of what they had seen yesterday.

Except today, when she stepped inside, the barista's smile faltered. It was as if she had just seen a ghost. Evelyn approached the counter, smoothing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Morning. I'll have my usual, black coffee."

The barista, a woman in her late twenties with sharp eyes and auburn curls tucked under a beanie, hesitated. Then she started working on Evelyn's order. Her eyes had a dash of suspicion in them.

"You're back early," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. Evelyn frowned. "Early, what do you mean by that? I have not come here in the last few days"

The barista nodded, motioning toward the seat by the window. "You were here yesterday morning. Sat right there. In fact, I was the one who took your order"

Evelyn's stomach tightened. Was her double here as well? How far would she go to hurt her. "I wasn't here yesterday, you must be mistaken" she said slowly her breaths coming in shallow. The barista's brow furrowed. "Yeah, you were. Same coat, same face. You even ordered a black coffee." She paused, then added, "But you were acting... strange."

Evelyn exchanged a glance with Jacob Wells, who stood slightly behind her, listening intently. Jacob leaned forward. "Strange how? Can you elaborate please." The barista frowned, tapping her fingers on the counter. "You didn't talk much. Just sat there, staring out the window."

Evelyn's pulse spiked. "That's it?" she pressed trying to get more information out of the girl. Maybe she held the key to some of her secrets. The barista hesitated. Then, as if remembering something, her eyes brightened with unease.

"Well..." she said, lowering her voice. "Your hands were shaking." Evelyn stilled. "Shaking?" she repeated. The barista nodded. "Like you were trying to hold yourself together." She bit her lip. "I almost asked if you were okay but something about the way you looked..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

Jacob tensed beside her. "And you're absolutely sure it was her?" The barista gave him an odd look. "Of course. It was her." Evelyn's mind raced. Whoever had been here looked like her. Dressed like her. But, wasn't her. Her throat felt dry. "Did she, did I, say anything?"

The barista shook her head. "Not really. Just sat there, staring out at the street. But right before she left..." Evelyn leaned in. "Yes?" The woman hesitated. "She looked at me. Like, really glared at me. And then she... *smiled.*"

Evelyn's blood rushed. "So, was there anything strange about the smile?" Jacob asked. The barista exhaled sharply. "It wasn't normal. It looked... *forced*, like she was trying to remember how to do it. Like someone practicing a facial expression in the mirror."

Evelyn's fingers curled into her palm. A version of her had been here. A version of her had smiled wrong. She took a slow breath, steadying herself. "Did she leave anything behind?"

The barista frowned, thinking, then suddenly snapped her fingers. "Actually, yeah. She left a napkin with a note on it. I almost threw it away. Maybe you would want to have a look at it."

She rummaged under the counter, pulling out a crumpled, slightly stained napkin. Evelyn took the slip of paper with trembling fingers, her hands colder now than they had been moments before. It felt almost weightless in her grasp, yet the message it carried settled over her like a stone. She unfolded it carefully, smoothing the creases as her eyes scanned the hurried, uneven handwriting scrawled in red ink.

*"Find me before they do."*

That was it. No signature. No name. No indication of who had written it or what they were running from. Just a warning raw, desperate, and chilling. Evelyn stared at the words, her heart pounding, her pulse a thunderous roar in her ears. She could feel Jacob shift beside her, his breath sharp and uneasy. "Well," he muttered, trying for calm but missing it by a mile. "That's... unsettling."

Unsettling didn't begin to cover it. Evelyn's throat tightened. This wasn't cryptic. This wasn't mysterious. This was terrifying. Her eyes snapped back to the barista who had handed it over. "Do you have security cameras?" she asked, her tone sharper than she intended.

The woman blinked, startled. "Yeah," she said slowly, glancing toward the back room. "You... you want to see the footage?" Evelyn nodded, already moving. "Yes. Now." Whoever left that message hadn't just been trying to pass a note. They were sending a signal. And if Evelyn didn't find out who they were, someone else would.

## Chapter 8

The barista led them through a cramped hallway behind the counter, the scent of roasted coffee giving way to the faint tang of printer ink and dust. They entered a tiny office, walls lined with shelves of old paperwork and syrup boxes. A single desk sat wedged against the far wall, a flickering monitor casting pale light over the clutter. Claire, the girl whose name tag now felt far too ordinary for what was unfolding, settled into the chair and began clicking through timestamped footage with practiced efficiency.

“Here,” she said after a moment. “This is from yesterday morning about the time you said you were here.”

“It wasn’t me,” Evelyn murmured, her voice hollow. “Somebody’s trying to *be* me.” Her breath caught as the black-and-white footage crackled to life. Grainy and jittery, the camera panned over the cafe floor and there, seated at the window seat, was *her*. Or rather... the version of her who had left the napkin. The double.

She sat unnaturally still, hands flat on the table, eyes fixed on the street outside. Evelyn leaned in, studying every detail. The hair. The posture. The clothes. All of it identical. Jacob squinted, visibly unnerved. “That’s definitely you. I mean there’s no mistake. She *is* you.”

But Evelyn barely registered his words. Something was off. The double didn’t fidget. Didn’t sip the coffee in front of her. Barely blinked. Her stillness was unsettling—too controlled. Like someone pretending to be human but not quite knowing how.

And then, without warning, the double moved. Her hand jerked upward, the motion stiff, mechanical, as if her body had just remembered what movement was. Jacob inhaled sharply. “Did you see that?”

Evelyn nodded, her stomach turning to ice. The figure remained motionless again for several long minutes before standing with robotic precision. Then, without hesitation, she turned to face the camera.

Evelyn felt her chest constrict. Her double was staring *right at them*. Not at the cafe. At the lens. At the future viewers of the footage. It was deliberate.

Slowly, almost ceremoniously, she lifted a napkin and placed it on the table. Her hand hovered for a moment. And then—that smile.

The one Claire had mentioned.

Evelyn’s breath caught. It was all wrong. The curve of the lips too exact, too stretched. It didn’t reach her eyes. It wasn’t human.

The double held the smile too long. Just long enough to make Evelyn’s skin crawl. Then she turned and walked away.

Except she didn’t.

One moment, she was walking toward the door.

The next gone.

Not out of frame. Not obscured. Just *vanished*.

Jacob swore, stepping back instinctively. “She, she just disappeared. This can’t be real. Evelyn, we have to go to the cops. This is beyond us.” But Evelyn couldn’t move. Her fingers gripped the desk like it was the only thing anchoring her to reality. Her pulse thundered in her ears. Because just as Jacob finished speaking, the screen flickered.

Then glitched. For the briefest instant, something else flashed across the footage. A dark, humanoid shape—just behind the double. Towering. Still. Watching. Then static. And the screen went black.

Claire let out a shaky breath. “What the hell *was* that?” Evelyn said nothing. She couldn’t. Because deep inside, something primal had awakened sense that went beyond fear.

This wasn’t just a copy. Not a clone. Not a twin. It was *something else*. Something that had stepped into her life like slipping on a mask. Something *wrong*.

And worst of all... it wasn’t alone.

## Chapter 9

The cold air outside the café bit into Evelyn’s skin, but she barely noticed. The napkin with its eerie message was still clenched in her hand, the ink slightly smudged from her damp fingers. Jacob walked beside her, his shoulders tense. He kept glancing over his shoulder like he expected something to lunge out of the shadows.

“She was here,” he muttered, half to himself. “Sitting right there, in the same damn coat as you. The barista was sure. But if that wasn’t you...” He trailed off, rubbing a hand down his face. Evelyn’s mind raced. She could still hear the barista’s words echoing in her skull.

***Same face. Same voice. But something was off.***

She stopped in her tracks and turned to Jacob. “If I have a double, someone who looks exactly like me, why would she leave a message for me?”

Jacob considered the possibility for a moment, his brow furrowed. “Maybe she’s trying to warn you.”

Evelyn’s breath caught in her throat. The thought unsettled her, not because it offered comfort, but because it opened the door to something far more terrifying. *What if her double wasn’t the real threat?* The idea made her skin crawl.

Without a word, she picked up her pace, weaving through the crowd with growing urgency. The city moved as it always did; cars honking, voices rising, a blur of color and sound but to Evelyn, it all felt wrong. Off. Like reality had shifted a few degrees, just enough to slip its seams, and she was the only one who noticed.

They were only steps away from the next street corner when Evelyn felt it, a strange, sickening pressure. A presence. The undeniable weight of being watched. She tried to ignore it at first, focusing on the rhythm of her steps, the sound of her heels against the pavement. But the sensation clung to her, wrapped around her neck like invisible fingers, tightening with every breath.

She couldn't take it anymore. Evelyn stopped and turned.

And froze.

Across the street, standing utterly still among the sea of movement, was her double. Her exact likeness—same dark coat, same auburn hair catching the light, same face—was locked in a direct stare with her. The expression was unreadable, the lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to speak but couldn't.

Jacob followed her gaze, and the tension in his body snapped taut. "Evelyn—" he started, voice low and wary. But before he could finish, the double moved.

Or rather—*didn't*. She didn't walk away. Didn't run. She simply vanished. One blink, and she was gone in the mist. The space where she had stood now empty. No trace. No sound. No flutter of movement in her wake. Just absence.

A hollow chill carved its way down Evelyn's spine. She sucked in a breath, sharp and shaky. "Did you see that?" Jacob's jaw clenched, his fists tight at his sides. "Yeah. Yeah, I did." And for the first time, Evelyn understood something deeper, colder, and far more frightening.

This wasn't just about her anymore. Whatever this was, it was real. And it was getting closer.

## Chapter 10

Back at Evelyn's townhouse, the silence pressed against them like a weight. Every creak of the old wood, every tick of the wall clock, sounded amplified in the stillness. Jacob paced near the window, his eyes flicking anxiously toward the street, expecting, dreading the reappearance of Evelyn's double. Evelyn, meanwhile, sat completely still at her desk, the napkin with the cryptic message lying in front of her like a loaded gun.

*Find me before they do.*

She stared at the words until they felt like they were etched into her skin, heavy and urgent. "Okay," Jacob finally said, breaking the silence. "We need to figure this out. Let's start with what we know."

Evelyn turned to look at him, his furrowed brow, the tension in his shoulders, the quiet strength in his voice. He was supporting her, standing beside her in all this chaos, even though he didn't have to. Even though he was her patient. Maybe, in another life, she might've loved him for it.

But not this one. In this life, he was her client. And she... she was falling apart. She pushed the thought aside and focused. "She looks like me. Moves like me. But she's scared. She's being hunted." Jacob nodded slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Which means both of you are victims. There's someone else behind this. And they're dangerous."

Evelyn felt her pulse thrum at her temples. "But why me? Why her? What is this..." She stopped. A strange, electric sensation crept over her skin. She turned, eyes drawn to the hallway mirror. Her reflection stared back.

Too still. Too perfect. Something was wrong. She took a step forward, the air tightening around her like invisible walls closing in. Her breath fogged up the glass, just barely.

But the reflection's breath didn't. A sharp jolt of fear surged through her. She lifted her hand slowly. Testing. Hoping. The reflection did nothing. Her throat closed in panic. Then—it moved. But not in sync. Not like a mirror should do.

It tilted its head, slowly, deliberately watching her. Studying her.

Then came the smile.

Too wide.

Too unnatural.

The corners of its mouth curled up and kept going, bending the shape of her face into something grotesque and wrong.

Evelyn's heart pounded like a drumbeat against her ribs. The light above them flickered. In that split second of darkness, she felt something shift. And when the lights came back—everything was normal again.

Her reflection mimicked her expression. The room looked the same. But Evelyn stumbled back, her breath caught in her throat, just as Jacob rushed to her side and caught her. "Evelyn—what happened?" he asked, alarmed, his voice trembling. His forehead glistened with sweat, and there was real fear in his eyes.

She couldn't answer, not right away. Her hand pressed over her mouth, bile threatening to rise. Because she knew what she saw. It wasn't a hallucination.

It wasn't her imagination. Something had been *in* the mirror. Watching her.

## Chapter 11

Jacob noticed the tremor in her hands. “Evelyn?” he asked gently, but she didn’t answer. Couldn’t. Her mind was spinning, her stomach twisting into knots. Everything felt too surreal, too terrifying to process—and yet too vivid to deny. She needed proof. Something tangible to anchor her to this unraveling reality.

Without a word, she grabbed her phone and began scrolling through her photo gallery. Selfies. Professional portraits. Snaps from medical conferences and lectures. Headshots for journal profiles. She scanned them all with growing dread, her thumb swiping faster, her breath quickening. Then she paused, zooming in on a photo she had taken just a few months ago. Her chest tightened. There was something off; subtle, but unmistakable. Her eyes in the image were... wrong.

The pupils too dilated, the stare too flat. The warmth she usually carried was missing, replaced by an eerie vacancy. Jacob leaned over, concerned. “Evelyn, what are you looking for?” he asked. She didn’t respond, just kept flipping through the images. Some looked fine. Normal. But others had the same disturbing quality—expressionless faces, uncanny smiles, glassy stares that didn’t belong to her.

And then she found it. A photo from last month, taken in her office. She had forgotten it even existed. But now, looking closely, both of them saw it at once. In the reflection of the glass cabinet behind her, a dark figure loomed. Not clearly defined, not sharp—just a vague shape, humanoid and wrong, standing over her shoulder like a shadow with intent.

Evelyn’s heart started racing. Her fingers numbed as she gripped the phone. Jacob inhaled sharply, his voice barely above a whisper. “What the hell is that?” Evelyn didn’t answer. She snapped the phone shut with a shaky breath, her thoughts racing. She didn’t need more evidence. She already knew. It had been there. All along.

## Chapter 12

That night, Evelyn barely slept. Her mind swirled with questions. Was this a case of identity theft, a cruel prank, or something far more inexplicable?

Unable to rest, she paced her townhouse, the dim glow of streetlights filtering through her curtains. She stopped in front of her mirror, studying her reflection. She looked the same—dark eyes, composed expression, a hint of exhaustion in her features.

Yet, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was...off. With a deep breath, she whispered to her reflection, "Who are you?" For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, just as she turned away, something shifted in the glass. Her reflection did not move in sync with her.

Evelyn froze, every muscle locking in place. Slowly, she turned back to the mirror. Her reflection smiled. She had not.

Early morning Evelyn again called Jacob again. Nothing was making any sense at this point. He had by now become an integral part of her existence. She knew there was more to their relationship, she could feel it in his eyes. Yet at this point she could not commit anything. Her own life was such a mess, how could she allow love to creep in it at this moment.

Just then the phone started ringing, its shrill tone disturbing Evelyn in her thoughts. She hurried to pick the mobile and spoke "Hello" in a hurry. A low humming sound was coming from the other side. She was frightened but did not want the person on the other side to know.

"Hello?" Evelyn whispered, her voice barely audible. "Who is it?"

She sat frozen in place, the phone still clutched tightly in her trembling hand.

A whisper. Low. Distorted. Familiar.

Too familiar.

*"You need to stop looking."*

The words coiled around her like smoke, and Evelyn's stomach dropped.

"Who is this?" she demanded, though her voice betrayed her fear. Silence.

Then—*"You already know."* The line went dead.

Evelyn didn't move. Couldn't move. Her body felt locked, frozen in place while her mind spun in disoriented panic. There was something in the room with her, not physically, but a presence, like the air had thickened.

The door creaked open, and Jacob stepped in. His eyes landed on her immediately, on the tears sliding down her face, on the phone in her hand. He rushed to her side, grabbing her wrist gently. "Who was it?"

Evelyn struggled to find her breath, her chest rising and falling too fast. Because she *did* know. It had been her. Her own voice. Calling her.

But how? How could she call herself? Who was orchestrating this? Was she asleep? Was she hallucinating? A fog clung to her thoughts, warping her sense of reality.

*“You already know.”*

No. She didn't. Not really.

Jacob's voice pierced through the haze. “Evelyn. Look at me.”

She turned to him, slow and unsure. He was studying her, concern carved deep into his face. “You're shaking.” Evelyn looked down and realized he was right. Her hands trembled violently. She curled them into fists, trying to force control back into her limbs. “I'm fine,” she muttered, but even she didn't believe it.

Jacob shook his head. “No, you're not.” He hesitated. “Who was on the phone?” She let out a breath that trembled. “Me.” Jacob blinked. “What?” “It was me, Jacob. My voice. Exactly. My words. I *heard* myself.”

His body stiffened, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “That's... That's messed up. But let's think rationally. You know this can't be happening.”

Evelyn let out a short, brittle laugh. “Rationally? Jacob, I'm a licensed psychotherapist. I diagnose hallucinations. I *treat* delusions. And right now, I can't explain a single thing that's happening to me.”

Jacob ran a hand through his hair, his anxiety evident. “You said she left a message—‘Find me before they do.’ What if she's trying to help? What if she's warning you?”

Evelyn closed her eyes, pressing her fingers to her temples. “Then how do we figure out what she's trying to tell us?”

Jacob didn't answer immediately. Instead, he reached for the folder; the one filled with photographs of Evelyn's double, collected from surveillance and reports. “We start with these.”

Evelyn's stomach turned. The photos. The mounting proof that something—or someone—was out there, walking in her skin.

They spread the photos across the table, carefully arranging them in chronological order based on timestamps and locations. Evelyn leaned in, the cold knot of fear deepening in her gut.

And then; something clicked.

Jacob's brow furrowed. "She keeps showing up in the same places." Evelyn's eyes scanned the photos. Her pulse quickened. "She's been circling something. Not hiding it. Protecting it?" Together, they traced the locations—her favorite café, the old bridge downtown, the narrow alley in Briarwood, the street outside her office.

And then Evelyn saw it. Her breath hitched. In every photo; *every single one*—there it was. In the background.

The clock tower. Always present.

Unchanging.

Watching.

## Chapter 13

The realization sent a sharp chill through Evelyn's bones.

Every single photograph, no matter where her double appeared, had one thing in common.

The clock tower loomed in the background, its dark silhouette stretching over the city like a silent observer. Why was this happening? What relevance did the Clock tower hold in her life. As far as she knew she had never been to that place before that day. Or had she been there and did not remember?

Jacob noticed it too. "That's not a coincidence." Evelyn's mind raced. She had been to that clock tower before. But only once. Years ago. And she had never been back.

Her skin prickled. What was it about that place? Was something sinister happening or had already happened there. God, her memory had such loose ends, if only she knew the truth of the Clock Tower.

Why did her double keep returning to it? What was special or was there some secret that place held. Jacob grabbed his jacket. "We need to go there." His persistence to get her out of this turmoil was so endearing. Evelyn knew that if Jacob had not been there she would have collapsed by now.

She hesitated. Something deep inside her screamed.

Don't go.

Don't go.

But she swallowed the fear down and forced herself to nod. She had to be brave. There was no other alternative left. Because there was only one way to end this. They had to find out what her double wanted. Evelyn knew she had to fight back and get her identity.

Before it was too late. Jacob pulled her hand and now there was no looking back. They rushed out the door as the night slowly spread its tentacles around them. Evelyn had never been out so late in the night, yet with Jacob around she felt comforted.

As they were about to enter the car he turned around and pulled her close. With a haste Jacob wiped the tears from her face. He took her face in his hands and softly uttered.

“Evelyn, this could lead to anything, be prepared for any outcome. I just want you to know that I am always by your side. We will fight this together, OK”

Evelyn was thrilled by his touch but with so much going on in her mind she kept staring at him. They separated, prepared to fight whatever demon awaited them.

## Chapter 14

The clock tower stood like a monolith, stretching into the sky, its edges worn by time and weather. There was an eerie silence all around and the stifled air gave the signs of a storm approaching.

Evelyn’s breath clouded in the cold night air as she and Jacob approached the sinister place. The street was empty. Too empty. It was as if someone had erased all the residents living around here. Like the city was holding its breath. It was waiting for something to happen, something dark and cruel.

Jacob pulled out a flashlight. “Let’s make this quick.” There is no point in delaying the inevitable. He took Evelyn’s hand in his and gave her a quick kiss. Don’t worry, things will work out fine.

They pushed open the heavy iron gate and stepped inside. A mouse ran across the ground as if alerting them to the danger around. The interior smelled of dust and time. The old wooden stairs groaned under their weight as they climbed higher.

With every step, Evelyn felt something pulling her forward. It was as if something or someone was already waiting for her there. It was only a matter of time before she reached there.

A force which was invisible but undeniable.

As they moved ahead Evelyn knew there was something dark inside her. The darkness which might get unveiled today in front of Jacob. The worry lines on her forehead deepened as they reached the top and opened the door to the terrace.

Everything was quite, a dark lull hung over the objects. Just then Jacob pointed towards something. “What is that?” he exclaimed. A mirror. It was Tall and an Antique piece. Something like neither of them had seen before. Its frame was covered in strange carvings. The rough edges appeared used and depicted an era long gone.

Evelyn’s heart hammered in her chest, “Why is this here?” She mumbled softly.

Jacob stepped forward, reaching out to touch it. It was obvious there was more to the mirror than what they could see. “Wait, Jacob.” Evelyn’s voice snapped. He froze. “What, is something wrong?” Evelyn couldn’t explain it, but every instinct in her body screamed danger. She could sense something was seriously bad here all though she could not spell it out.

Jacob hesitated, but seeing the expression on Evelyn’s face he slowly lowered his hand.

And that’s when the whisper came. Both Jacob and Evelyn turned around to see who it was. But they were all alone. Who could it be? The voice was Low, Faint yet clear enough for them to hear.

Just like breath against the glass.

“You’re late.” Evelyn’s looked here and there. Her brain was going crazy or was she daydreaming. She turned sharply. “Did you hear that?” Jacob’s face had gone pale. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. It is quite clear”

Evelyn swallowed. She was now onto the point of breaking down. Who was doing this to her? The feeling of helplessness made her knees go weak. She was almost about to fall down when her gaze fell at the mirror.

She looked back at the mirror.

Despite Evelyn collapsing to the floor, her reflection didn’t follow. It didn’t mirror her movement. It just stood there—*staring*. Unmoving. Unblinking.

Watching.

And then—it *blinked*.

Evelyn hadn’t.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Jacob, sensing the shift in the air, stepped closer, his voice taut with alarm. “Evelyn, please... step back. There is something very wrong here.”

But she couldn’t move. Her legs felt rooted to the ground, her eyes locked on the thing in the mirror that wore her face.

Then the reflection tilted its head, the movement slow and deliberate—inhuman in its precision. Its lips parted.

A whisper drifted out, soft as breath and colder than ice.

*“You don’t belong here. Go back from wherever you have come.”*

Evelyn’s breath caught in her throat. Her knees buckled and she staggered backward, barely staying upright as Jacob rushed to catch her, steadying her with trembling hands. His confusion mirrored her terror—he didn’t understand what was happening, only that something had shattered the rules of reality.

And then—

The reflection *stepped forward*.

But it didn’t step *out* of the mirror.

It *peeled away* from Evelyn’s skin.

Jacob’s eyes widened, his mouth falling open as the impossible unfolded before him. The figure in the mirror didn’t escape from glass—it emerged from *within* Evelyn herself, like a second skin being shed, like a truth that had been hiding inside her all along.

And as the entity stood there, detached and whole, its grin widened—twisted and knowing—while Evelyn stood frozen, her body hollow with the realization.

She hadn’t just been watched.

She had been *inhabited*.

## Chapter 15

Evelyn’s world tilted. What was this supposed to mean now? All her energy seemed to drain out of her at that moment. Her double was now stepping out, peeling itself away from her reflection like a second skin. It was her. They were absolutely alike, the owners of the same body.

Identical in every way. But the eyes were wrong. Too dark. Too empty.

Jacob instinctively grabbed Evelyn's wrist, his grip firm, but it didn't help. She couldn't move. It felt like invisible ropes had wrapped around her legs, rooting her to the floor. Her breath came in shallow gasps as the double stood just a few feet away, smiling. Not the monstrous grin from earlier—this one was smaller. Softer. But somehow, more terrifying. Because that smile *meant* something. It was layered with secrets Evelyn didn't understand, with truths she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Jacob glanced between the two women, his expression filled with disbelief and rising panic.

"You were never supposed to wake up," the reflection said, her voice calm, but her eyes alive with something wild. Something fractured.

The words hit Evelyn like a punch to the chest. What did she mean? *Wake up?* Evelyn's throat tightened. Her voice cracked as she managed, "What... what are you? Who are you?" The double stepped forward, slowly, deliberately. Her posture was perfect. Confident.

"I am the real you," she said. "The real Evelyn Harper." Evelyn's stomach twisted. "No. That's not possible." The double tilted her head slightly. "Isn't it?"

Jacob pulled at her arm, trying to get her to move. "This is wrong. We need to get out of here, now." His voice was sharp, urgent. He could feel something dangerous brewing in the air. Something ready to snap.

But Evelyn couldn't tear her eyes away. Her entire body was numb, and yet her mind was racing. She needed answers. She *deserved* answers.

Something shifted. Like a switch flipping in her brain. A flash. A flood. Memories.

Blinding lights. People in masks. Machines humming. Cold metal beneath her body. She had tried to scream, tried to open her eyes, but the overhead lights seared her vision. A voice had whispered, urgent and terrified: "*This one is waking up too soon. It's not night—do something. She'll ruin everything.*"

Then—a scream. *Her* scream.

The memory slammed into her like a wave, leaving her gasping, her head splitting with pain. She stared at her double, uncertain now, terrified.

The reflection's smile deepened. "You were made to replace me," she said. Evelyn shook her head violently. "No. No, this can't be real—this *can't* be true." But the double leaned in slightly, her voice low and steady.

"You are the copy." And in that moment, Evelyn's world cracked. She wasn't real. She was the *double*.

*Was it true?*

And now, the real Evelyn Harper had returned to reclaim what was hers. Jacob saw the look in her eyes, the horror, the crumbling certainty. He yanked her arm hard. "RUN!"

The command broke the trance. Evelyn stumbled backward, breath caught in her throat—just in time to see the double's smile stretch into something cruel.

And then, behind her, in the mirror,

*Something else moved.* Not the double. Something worse. And it wasn't human.

Chapter 16

The air inside the clock tower turned thick, pressing against Evelyn's lungs like invisible hands. Her double stood just inches away, its gaze eerily calm, its eyes too knowing.

*"You were made to replace me."* Evelyn's heartbeat slammed against her ribs. No. That wasn't possible.

She was real.

She was real.

Jacob's grip tightened around her wrist. "Evelyn, please—we *need to go*." But she couldn't move. Because her double wasn't attacking. It wasn't afraid. It was waiting.

And in the mirror behind it, something shifted. Something that wasn't a reflection.

Evelyn's breath caught.

A dark shape, just beyond the glass, moving in the way a person shouldn't move. Its body twisted, its limbs stretching unnaturally. It was watching them.

No—it was watching her. The real her. The one who wasn't supposed to exist.

And then, it spoke.

Its voice was a chorus of whispers, layered and broken, as if spoken from a thousand mouths at once.

*"You do not belong here."*

Evelyn's stomach dropped, she was experiencing knots in her heart. This was beyond her understanding and she could not provide a realistic explanation to whatever was going on.

Jacob yanked her backward. “That’s enough let’s GO. *NOW!*” Her double smiled for one last time and then it lunged.

## Chapter 17

Evelyn barely had time to react before her double’s fingers wrapped around her wrist. Her fingers were cold like ice and twined around Evelyn’s wrists. She was laughing a maniacal laugh and staring at Evelyn crazily.

She staggered, trying to pull away, but the grip was really strong. Evelyn tried to pull herself away but her feet refused to budge.

The double whispered against her ear, almost gently. *“It’s time to go back.”*

It yanked her toward the mirror. Evelyn’s body lurched forward, her face inches from the glass.

And in that moment—

She saw something horrible.

Beyond the surface, past the distorted reflection, was a place.

A room filled with people, lying down on the floor grimacing with pain.

Evelyn noticed that all these people looked like her.

They stood motionless, their expressions empty, hollow.

They weren’t copies.

They were the originals.

Jacob shouted her name. “Stop, Evelyn where are you going? This is a trap to pull you in. Don’t go, come back to me. I love you Evelyn and will take care of you always.”

Evelyn’s mind reeled. She looked carefully and noticed that the mirror wasn’t a reflection. It was some sort of a door. There was some power there that was pulling her inside. Then she realized the truth. This was a door to where they kept the real ones. All the real people.

They kept them waiting. Kept them asleep. Now the same power was pulling her in. Evelyn screamed her blood curdling at her own voice. This had to stop, she had to give this power a taste of her strength.

She fought harder than she ever had and at the last second, she ripped herself free. The force sent her stumbling backward, crashing into Jacob. He was taken by surprise but then did not let go of her. The mirror shuddered and the glass cracked with a loud noise.

## Chapter 18

The moment the glass shattered, the world around them shifted. Evelyn noticed that everything around them was moving. The tower groaned like it was alive. The air grew thick with something Evelyn couldn't see—but could feel.

Jacob grabbed her arm, dragging her toward the stairs. "MOVE!" She panicked and ran down towards the stairs holding Jacob's hand steadily. Before going down she turned once around to see the mirror.

Her double was still standing there, perfectly still, head tilted slightly. But now, its face had changed. Its features were twisted, distorted as if in some pain. Her skin cracked, splintering like porcelain. It wasn't human. It never had been.

A deep, rumbling whisper filled the space, the same voice from before, echoing from the mirror.

*"They are waking up."*

Evelyn's chest tightened. It was then that Jacob yanked her harder.

"GO!"

They raced down the stairs, the air warping around them, the whispers growing louder. But before they reached the exit, a figure stepped into their path.

"A man stood there."

He was dressed in a long black coat, his figure still and imposing, partially veiled by shadows that seemed to cling to him unnaturally. His face was difficult to make out, obscured by the dim light, but his eyes... his eyes were unmistakable. Dark, hollow, and ancient, they locked onto Evelyn's with a weight that made her legs freeze beneath her.

She skidded to a halt, unable to tear her gaze away. There was something deeply *wrong* about him, not in the way her double had been wrong, but in a far more terrifying, primal way. This man wasn't just unnatural. He felt *old*, like he had stepped out of some place far beyond time, carrying with him a darkness that didn't belong in the world of the living.

Jacob stepped in front of her protectively, his fists clenched. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded, voice sharp and trembling.

The man didn’t respond. He simply smiled.

Slow. Deliberate. Chilling.

And that was all it took. Evelyn *knew*, deep in her bones, in the parts of her mind that still struggled to make sense of what was happening. He was one of *them*. One of the ones who had created the doubles. Who had locked away the originals. Who had turned lives into simulations and reflections into replacements.

And now, after all this time, he had found her.

## Chapter 19

Evelyn’s breath came in short, panicked gasps as the man in the black coat stepped forward, his movements slow and deliberate, as though time bent around him. “You weren’t supposed to wake up,” he said, his voice calm, too calm. The words sent a chill spiraling through her. Something about him was deeply wrong, not just inhuman, but ancient, as though he had existed long before her and would continue long after.

Evelyn’s stomach twisted violently. Jacob, sensing the danger, grabbed her arm. “We have to go. Now,” he urged, his voice tight with fear. But the man didn’t flinch. His lips curled into a faint smile as he raised his hand with casual menace. Instantly, the walls of the clock tower groaned and shuddered. Shadows in the corners began to stir like they were alive, and the very air thickened, pressing against Evelyn’s lungs until she could hardly breathe. Then he spoke again; “They are all waking up.” The sentence wasn’t just heard, it echoed through her skull, vibrating with impossible weight.

And then came the shift. A memory surfaced, sharp and vivid, as if someone had pulled it straight from the depths of her subconscious. She was in a hospital. Bright lights above her. Machines humming steadily. Figures in black coats moving around her, whispering. She remembered one voice, clipped and urgent “This one is different.” Another answered, quieter but troubled; “Really? Something seems off with her. What do we do?” There was silence, then a cold verdict “Keep her asleep.” And after that... darkness. Years of it. An empty void where her life should have been. That memory wasn’t supposed to exist. It didn’t belong. But it was hers now, and it had awakened something terrible.

Jacob’s voice tore her back to the present. “EVELYN—RUN!” She blinked, the trance broken, and realized the man hadn’t moved. But his shadow had. It stretched across the

floor, crawling toward her like a living thing, reaching. Without another thought, Evelyn and Jacob bolted.

They burst through the door and sprinted into the night, hearts pounding, feet slamming against the pavement. She didn't dare look back, but she knew they had made a terrible mistake. The wrong one had woken up. And now, those who maintained the fragile balance were coming to fix it.

The night air outside felt sharp and suffocating, wrapping around Evelyn's throat and making each breath a struggle. She and Jacob ran through the silent streets of Elderton, shadows flaring unnaturally beneath flickering streetlamps. Behind them, the clock tower stood still and silent, but the energy around it had changed.

The air around them felt distorted, like reality itself had buckled under the weight of what had just been unleashed. Something was moving. Watching. Hunting. Evelyn kept her eyes forward, terrified that one glance over her shoulder would unravel her completely.

They turned into a narrow alley, finally stopping to catch their breath. Jacob collapsed against the wall, panting. "Evelyn... what the hell just happened?" he managed between gasps. Evelyn couldn't answer at first. Her body shook violently, every nerve ending on fire.

Her hands trembled, her breath came unevenly, and her entire sense of self felt like it was crumbling. "I don't know," she whispered, but it wasn't the truth. She did know. She just wasn't ready to say it aloud. Something else had woken up inside her. Something buried. Something dangerous. Maybe she didn't want to face it. Maybe she wanted to protect Jacob from it too.

He turned toward her, more serious now. "That man. The one in the coat. He wasn't just some random guy, was he?" His voice was gentle but pressing, filled with genuine concern. Evelyn hesitated, her throat dry, her thoughts screaming. There was no point in hiding it from him now. He had seen too much. He had stayed. He deserved to know. "No," she said softly.

Jacob stared at her. "Then who was he?" Evelyn met his eyes, her voice barely a whisper. "One of them." His brows furrowed. "One of *who*?"

She clenched her fists, the truth crawling out of her like something long caged. "The ones who watch us. The ones who make sure we don't wake up. He was one of the guards." She shivered as she spoke. "They keep the doubles hidden. They keep them under control."

Jacob's expression turned dark, the weight of it settling in his chest. "And what happens when one of them gets out?" Evelyn exhaled; her voice shaky, haunted. "They put them

back.” She paused. Then added, almost too softly to hear “Or worse... they erase them. Forever.”

## Chapter 20

A slow, crawling dread twisted in Evelyn’s gut, coiling tighter with every passing second. Desperation gnawed at her as she pulled out her phone, her trembling fingers fumbling to call *someone, anyone*. But as soon as she tapped the screen, it flickered with static. The image distorted, lines crisscrossing like a corrupted signal. Then, without warning, it died. Just *died*. No low battery alert. No glitch. The screen simply went black. Lifeless.

Panicking, she turned to Jacob. He had already pulled out his own phone, frantically pressing the buttons. “Mine’s dead too,” he muttered, his voice low and tense. He looked up, his expression hardening. “That’s not normal.”

Evelyn shook her head slowly, heart thudding in her chest. No, it wasn’t. There was something horribly wrong. Something that couldn’t be explained away by dead batteries or bad reception. And deep down, she knew, they were running out of time to figure out what it was.

Then, they heard it. A sound so faint, it was almost not a sound at all. A whisper, carried on the still air. But Evelyn felt it. In her chest. In her bones. It wasn’t just heard it *resonated*. Jacob’s head snapped up, eyes wide. “Do you hear that?”

Evelyn’s stomach dropped. It was like the air itself had turned sentient. Something was inside it. Inside *her*. And then a voice emerged, fractured, layered, far away but unmistakable.

*“You should not be awake.”* The words chilled Evelyn to her core. Her body went limp, instinct screaming at her to move. She grabbed Jacob’s hand, her voice a harsh whisper.

They ran from the alley, feet slapping the pavement, lungs heaving. They didn’t look back. They couldn’t. The fear was thick and rising fast, clinging to them like smoke. And then, one by one, the streetlights began to die.

Each light overhead flickered once, twice and then went out. Darkness crept across the city like a living thing, consuming every street, every building, every breath of safety. The blackness swallowed them whole.

Evelyn’s breath hitched, her steps faltering as she squinted into the growing dark. And there, under the very last dying bulb of light; she saw her. But this wasn’t the same double from before. This one was *worse*.

The figure had Evelyn's shape, her frame, but the face was blurred, unnatural. Her mouth was stretched impossibly wide into a smile that tore across her face like a wound. And her eyes, if they could be called that, were voids. Gaping black sockets, bottomless and empty.

This wasn't a version of Evelyn. This wasn't human. Jacob saw it too. He didn't hesitate. He grabbed her arm with a forceful tug. *"Move!"*

And then the final light died. Total darkness. And in the pitch black Evelyn heard them. A rustling. A hissing sound, like fabric sliding across stone.

Then footsteps. Loud, many, synchronized. Echoing through the streets.

They were coming. Surrounding them. Closing in. Then came the whispers. Not one voice but many. Dozens. Hundreds. All around them. Above them. Inside them.

*"You are not real."*

The words crashed into Evelyn like a wave. She screamed. And the darkness screamed back.

## Chapter 21

Jacob pulled her through the darkness, their footsteps wild and uneven. The whispers grew louder, sharper, crawling into her skull. Evelyn wanted to lie down so that all these voices would just die down. There was no respite from them.

Then, the air shifted. Like something had stepped forward. Like something had entered the world. Evelyn skidded to a stop, her body frozen in place. Because ahead of her, standing at the end of the street, was HIM. The man in the black coat.

He was still waiting for her. Smiling his evil smile ice. It wasn't one voice. They were many voices together. A chorus of voices, layered over each other, as if a thousand mouths were speaking through one.

Evelyn's breath hitched. Now she wasn't shaking from fear.

She was shaking because something inside her remembered. She looked down at her own hands. And for the first time, they didn't feel like hers. Her fingers twitched. Her skin felt off, too smooth, too perfect. Like something made. Not born. Made.

She turned to Jacob, her voice breaking. "Jacob... I don't think I'm human." Jacob's eyes widened with concern. "What the hell are you talking about?" Evelyn stared at her reflection in a nearby window.

The other Evelyn was smiling. Her real self. And again, she wasn't smiling back. Jacob grabbed her. "Evelyn, we need to" But it was too late. The man in the coat lifted his hand. The air collapsed. And the world ripped open. Evelyn screamed as everything turned black.

## Chapter 22

When Evelyn woke up, she knew immediately, this place wasn't real. Or if it was, it wasn't *right*. There was no sky above her, no air to breathe, no sound to ground her. Just endless gray, a suffocating nothingness stretching in all directions. Shadows moved across the space, slow, aimless shapes that drifted around her like ghosts. Whether they were people, remnants, or something else entirely, she couldn't tell.

In front of her stood a long, vast room lined with glass chambers, each one humming faintly, pulsing with dim light. Evelyn staggered closer, her breath catching in her throat. Inside each chamber was a version of herself. Hundreds of them. All staring back. Some stood motionless, eyes vacant and hollow. Others were awake, screaming silently behind the glass. But some, some were different. They were staring *at her*. Unblinking. As if they *knew*.

Her throat tightened. She then heard a whisper. It was soft and cold but sounded menacing enough.

*"Welcome back."*

She turned slowly, the blood in her veins on fire. And there she was. Herself. The *real* one. The original. The one who had been taken, buried somewhere in memory and time. The realization spread through Evelyn like poison. It wasn't just fear. It was the collapse of everything she'd believed about herself.

She wasn't the original. She wasn't human. She was just *one of many*. A copy. A placeholder. And now, she had woken up in the wrong world.

She tried to move, but her limbs felt strange, disconnected. Her joints ached in the wrong places. Her skin felt too tight, too smooth like a suit she was wearing instead of something she was born in.

Panicked, she looked down at her hands. But they weren't hers. The fingers were too long, the skin too pale, too flawless. She noticed something; a faint seam running along the inside of her wrist. A line. Like stitching in reality itself. Her breath hitched.

“No...” she whispered. “No, no, no.” With shaking hands, she dug her nails into her skin, clawing at the seam. And it shifted under her touch. Not like flesh. Not like anything human.

It felt *artificial*. Wrong. Her stomach turned violently. With trembling fingers, she gripped her wrist and pressed hard. The seam split slightly and for a moment, she saw what lay underneath. It wasn't blood. It wasn't muscle. It was *black*, smooth, fluid, *alive*.

She choked on a scream, the horror of it overwhelming. Her vision blurred, her legs buckling. She dropped to her knees, gagging, trembling violently. She wasn't wearing skin she was wearing a *costume*. A body that didn't belong to her.

And then came the voices. Soft. Disjointed. From the chambers. All the other Evelyns spoke in unison, their whispers overlapping, layering like a broken symphony.

*“Don't peel it off.”*

*“They'll see.”*

*“They'll know you're awake.”*

*“You have to stay asleep.”*

Evelyn clamped her hands over her ears. “Stop. Stop. Stop” But the voices weren't just around her anymore. They were inside her. Inside her *head*. Something pulsed beneath her skin. A heartbeat that wasn't hers. A pressure, like something trying to rise. Trying to *wake up*.

Another voice. Not from the chambers. Not inside her head. But behind her. A voice just like hers.

*“If you take it off, you can't go back.”*

Evelyn turned. And there she was. The double. The one who had stepped through the mirror. Standing perfectly still. Watching. Waiting. Evelyn staggered backward. “*What are you?*” The double smiled.

*“I'm what you were supposed to be.”*

Then, without hesitation, she reached up, gripped her own face. And slowly, *peeled it off*.

Chapter 23

Evelyn screamed.

The face came clean away, stretching like wax, like something artificial. Beneath it was black, featureless skin. It looked like a mannequin. But it was worse. Because it was moving. The skin shivered and shifted, its mouth forming and reforming, like it hadn't decided what a mouth should look like.

No nose. No eyes. Just a smooth, undulating surface that pulsed like something alive.

Evelyn looked around for Jacob only to realize that he had been left outside. What was she supposed to do now? Her mind fractured. "No. No, this isn't real. This isn't real" At this her double's voice came from nowhere, from everywhere. "*You thought you were human?*" Evelyn gagged. Her body convulsed, her fingers twitching like she wasn't in control of them anymore.

Her double took a step forward. "*You were made, Evelyn.*" It tilted its featureless head. "*You weren't the first.*" Then it took another step. "*You won't be the last.*"

Evelyn backed up against the glass chambers. All the other Evelyns were watching. Some of them were whispering. Some of them were crying. Some of them were smiling. Evelyn mustered some courage and then whimpered. "Why... why am I awake?"

Her double's form pulsed. "*You woke up wrong.*"

And then, from the dark came another voice. A new voice. It was hollow, cold and too familiar. "*Because she took your place.*" Evelyn's breath caught. A shadow stepped forward from the darkness. And when it did her real self too stepped into the light. The original. The one they had kept asleep. And she was staring at Evelyn with wide, unblinking eyes. Eyes filled with something inhuman.

Something hungry. Evelyn felt the ground drop beneath her. Because she knew the secret. She wasn't supposed to exist. And now, the real one had come to take her place.

## Chapter 24

The original Evelyn stepped closer. Evelyn couldn't move. She was trapped between them. The one without a face. And the one with her true face. The real Evelyn Harper tilted her head. "You woke up wrong," she whispered. Evelyn's pulse spiked. "I, I don't understand," she stammered. The real one smiled. "*That's because you weren't meant to.*" Evelyn shook her head. "No. No, I" A horrible sound split the air.

A tearing and stretching sound. It sounded like flesh splitting open. Evelyn's legs buckled. She felt it before she saw it. Her own skin was shifting. Her own body unraveling. The seam at her wrist split further, widening. Something beneath her skin stirred. It wasn't human.

Her stomach twisted violently. She choked on a scream. No. NO. The real Evelyn was watching calmly and patiently.

"You're one of them," she whispered. Evelyn's breath was stuck in her throat. No. No, she was, she was real. She was real. The faceless double twitched. *"Take it off."* The real Evelyn smiled wider. *"Show me what's underneath."* Evelyn's vision blurred. Something was tearing inside her. Her skin wasn't hers.

This body wasn't hers. She wasn't hers. The whispers swelled and became louder making the glass chambers tremble. And as Evelyn looked down at her own hands, her own peeling skin, her own collapsing reality. She realized the worst truth of all. She had never been real. She had always been one of them. And now, the real one wanted to come back to take her place. Evelyn screamed. And the lights went out.

## Chapter 25

Darkness swallowed Evelyn whole. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. The voices; hundreds, thousands of them whispered inside her skull. Crawling and digging trying to eat her up.

*"You were never meant to be." "You are an error." "A mistake."*

She clawed at her skin, her hands trembling, nails scraping against the seams she had felt before. And now, now she knew the truth. The skin wasn't real. The body wasn't hers. Beneath it was something else. Something that was born from the dark. And it was waking up.

## Chapter 26

Light flickered. The room, the chamber of copies appeared before her again in a dim, sickly glow. The real Evelyn Harper stood before her, calm, patient, her eyes unreadable. "You feel it now, don't you?" she murmured. Evelyn shook violently. "I, I'm real. I am. I have memories, I have a life" The real one tilted her head, like she was observing an insect struggling under a microscope.

"You have what we gave you." Evelyn swayed, her legs barely holding her weight.

No. No, that wasn't true. She remembered her childhood. She remembered her mother's perfume. She remembered the laughter, summer nights, the first time she fell in love. That was all real. She could recollect them even now. Then Evelyn started having second thoughts.

Wasn't it? The other Evelyns in the glass chambers whispered now. Their voices were layered, broken, uneven. *"Those aren't yours." "You borrowed them." "You stole them."* Evelyn let out a shaky breath, her vision wavering. No. No, they were wrong. They had to be wrong. Her pulse pounded, too fast, too erratic, like her body wasn't designed to handle the panic.

She stumbled toward the real one, shaking her head violently. "If I'm not real; then what am I?!" The real Evelyn smiled. A slow, pitiful smile. You are what was left behind." She lifted her own hand and started peeling back her skin.

## Chapter 26

Evelyn screamed. Beneath the skin, the real one wasn't human either. But she was different. Her form was shifting, crawling, undulating like liquid glass, perfect, controlled, sleek. Not broken. Not an error. Her body wasn't struggling to hold itself together. She had been made correctly. Evelyn was the defective piece.

It was then that her skin cracked apart. Pain seared through her like static, like wires misfiring in an electrical circuit. The others in the chambers watched, their faces pressed against the glass. Some of them were laughing. Some of them were crying. Finally, the man in the black coat, the one who had been watching from the shadows, spoke.

"You were a trial version," he murmured. "An unfinished copy. We let you run your course." His head tilted. "Now, you are being recalled." "Fix her quickly" he said before going away from there. Evelyn's chest clenched. No. No, she wouldn't, she wouldn't let this happen.

Her fingers dug into her skin, pulling, tearing, beneath it. Something black and wet and shifting writhed. She was never made of flesh. She had always been this. Just hidden. Wrapped in stolen memories. In a stolen face. Evelyn let out a choked sob. "No. No, I!" The real Evelyn stepped forward, her voice gentle.

*"Shhh."* She reached out—and placed a hand on Evelyn's face. Her fingers sank through the skin. Sinking into Evelyn's cheek, her forehead, her jaw, like her body was softening, melting.

*"You weren't supposed to wake up."*

Evelyn tried to fight it. But her arms, they weren't working anymore. Her mouth wouldn't open. Her lungs wouldn't pull air. Her body was folding in on itself. Like a dying star. Evelyn felt the world tilt beneath her feet. "What does that even mean?"

The double paced the dusty floor. "Do you ever feel like your life is too *perfect*? Too controlled? Like every decision you've ever made was never truly yours?" Evelyn frowned. "I..." She stopped. The truth was, she *had* felt that way. Her entire life had been meticulously structured, like a carefully laid-out path she had simply followed.

The double nodded at her expression. "That's because you weren't meant to be alone." Evelyn shook her head. "I don't understand." The woman sighed. "You and I were created as part of something...larger. A project. An experiment." She hesitated, watching Evelyn carefully. "You are not the only one. There are others. Copies. Shadows of people who exist in a controlled reality."

Evelyn's stomach twisted. "You're saying I'm...what? A clone?" "Not just a clone," the double said. "A *replacement*." Evelyn's heart pounded. "No. That's not possible." The double reached into her pocket and pulled out a worn, yellowed piece of paper. She handed it to Evelyn. She unfolded it and gasped. It was a birth certificate. The name at the top read Evelyn Harper. Two identical sets of numbers were listed under "Date of Birth." One of them was crossed out. A single word was written in red ink over the crossed-out date. "Erased."

## Chapter 27

Evelyn's vision blurred as she stared at the paper. The double placed a hand on her shoulder. "You weren't always *this* Evelyn. The one they let live. The one they kept." The room swayed around her. "No. I have memories, a family." They gave you memories," the double cut in gently. "They gave you a life. But it wasn't always *yours*."

Evelyn shook her head. "This is insane." The woman sighed. "I know. And I wish I had more time to explain, but those men out there? They're part of the ones who made us. And they don't like loose ends." The door rattled violently. A deep voice shouted, "Open up, Harper. We *will* find you." The double grabbed Evelyn's arm. "We need to leave. Now." "But" "There's no time! If they catch us, they'll *erase* you again." Panic clawed at Evelyn's chest, but something in her gut told her to trust the woman who shared her face.

Bursting out of the back entrance, Evelyn followed her double through winding alleyways, the sounds of pursuit close behind. Near the clock tower they saw Jacob, and Evelyn gave him a shout. They ducked under fences, climbed fire escapes, and sprinted across rooftops.

"Where are we going?" Evelyn gasped. "A safe house," the double replied. "There's someone who can help us, someone who knows everything." They slid down a drainpipe into another alley, but as soon as their feet hit the ground, headlights flooded the narrow space. The

men in black suits stepped forward, blocking their path. "Dr. Harper," the leader said, his voice almost kind. "Come with us, and we can fix this mistake." The double stepped in front of Evelyn. "We're not mistakes."

Evelyn felt her pulse hammering. If they were caught, if these men had the power to *erase* people, what would happen to her? The leader sighed. "Very well." A gun clicked. Evelyn's double shoved her backward. "Run!" A gunshot rang through the alley. Evelyn and Jacob ran for their lives.

## Chapter 28

Evelyn didn't know how far she ran. Only that she kept going, her lungs burning, her vision swimming. Somewhere, behind her, the sounds of pursuit faded.

They both collapsed onto a bench in Central Square, trembling. The city hummed around her as if nothing had happened, as if her entire world hadn't just shattered. But as she sat there, a single thought rose above the fear and exhaustion. She had to know the truth. No matter what it cost her.

Evelyn and Jacob sat on the cold bench in Central Square, her pulse slowing but her mind still racing. She had lost her double. She had lost everything, her certainty, her control. Her hands trembled as she looked at the crumpled birth certificate in her pocket. Erased. The word burned in her mind. She wasn't alone anymore.

But if what her double had said was true, she wasn't supposed to exist at all. A voice pulled her from her spiraling thoughts.

"You look lost." Evelyn's head snapped up. A man stood in front of her, his face partially hidden beneath the brim of a cap. He was tall, with dark, intelligent eyes that studied her carefully. "I don't know you," she said, her voice hoarse. "No," the man admitted. "But I know you."

Evelyn's fingers curled into fists. "Who are you?" The man slid his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Someone who's been watching over you for a long time." She stood, wary. "Are you one of them?"

The man shook his head. "If I were, you wouldn't still be breathing." A chill ran through her. "They're not going to stop," the man continued. "They don't leave loose ends. Your double knew that. And now, so do you." Evelyn swallowed. "Who are they?"

The man glanced around before lowering his voice. "The *Orion Project*." She frowned. "What?" The man exhaled. "Sit down, Dr. Harper. Because you're about to learn why you've never truly belonged to yourself."

## Chapter 29

“The Orion Project started over thirty years ago,” the man said, keeping his voice low as he sat beside her. “A classified government initiative. The goal was to create perfect replacements for key individuals; people in positions of power, wealth, and influence.”

Evelyn’s skin prickled. “You mean clones.” The man nodded. “And not just clones. Improved versions. Ones that could be controlled, molded into ideal citizens. Versions without trauma, without resistance, without, unpredictability.”

Evelyn shivered. “Why me? I’m just a psychiatrist.” The man tilted his head. “Are you?”

Her breath hitched. “What are you saying?” “You ever feel like your entire life was designed to be just...right?” the man asked. “Like everything you are, everything you’ve achieved, was set up too perfectly?” Evelyn thought of her pristine townhouse. Her controlled routine. The way she had *always* felt that her life followed an invisible path she could never quite explain. Her silence was answer enough.

The man nodded. “That’s because you were *chosen*.” She felt her stomach lurch. “Chosen for what?” The man turned to face her fully, his gaze piercing. “To replace the real Evelyn Harper.”

## Chapter 30

Evelyn’s entire world tilted. “That’s not possible.” The man studied her. “Think about it. Have you ever questioned your memories? Felt like something was...off? Like gaps in your past that don’t quite fit?” Evelyn’s throat went dry.

A childhood memory flickered in her mind, her sixth birthday. The cake, the candles, the smiling faces. But the more she focused, the more it felt like a story rather than a memory. “Who am I?” she whispered. The man sighed. “You’re Evelyn Harper. But not the first one. The real Evelyn...she died.”

A sharp pain lanced through Evelyn’s chest. “No.” “Yes.” The man hesitated before adding, “And you were made to take her place.” Evelyn shook her head, stepping back. “That’s insane.” The man simply watched her, as if waiting for the realization to settle in.

And deep down, she knew he was right. She didn’t remember breaking a bone as a child. She had no scars, no medical history beyond basic vaccinations. No hospital visits. No childhood injuries. Because she hadn’t been a child at all. She had been created.

A sudden noise shattered the silence; a car door slamming in the distance. The man tensed. "They found us." Evelyn's pulse spiked. "How?" The man cursed under his breath. "They've been tracking you since Briarwood. You left a trail." Evelyn's breath quickened. "What do we do?" The man grabbed her wrist and they started running, Jacob followed nervously."

They took off through the park, weaving between trees as dark figures emerged from the street. A gunshot split the air. Evelyn barely had time to react before the man yanked her down behind a stone wall. "They're not trying to capture you anymore," he muttered.

Evelyn swallowed hard. "So, they're going to kill me." Jacob touched her shoulder trying to comfort her. The man met her eyes. "Not if I can help it."

## Chapter 31

They ran until their lungs burned, until they reached an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city. The man ushered her inside, bolting the door behind them. He pulled out a phone and dialed. "We have a problem," he said. "She's awake." Evelyn stared at him. "Who are you calling?" The man exhaled. "The only person who can help us disappear." Evelyn's mind whirled.

"Why are you helping me?"

The man hesitated before replying. "Because you were never meant to wake up. And because I was part of the project that made you." Evelyn's stomach turned. "You?" He nodded. "I was a scientist for Orion. I helped create you but I never wanted things to turn bad for you."

Evelyn felt like the ground had been ripped from beneath her feet. "And now," the man added, his voice grim, "I need to help you survive." Evelyn clenched her fists. No more running. No more lies. It was time to take control of her own life; before someone else erased her forever. Jacob turned towards her "I am with you, don't you worry."

Evelyn Harper had spent her life untangling the thoughts of others. Now, for the first time, she was the one unraveling. Every certainty she had ever clung to her career, her memories, her very sense of self was slipping through her fingers.

The night air pressed thick and heavy around her as she followed the man, her supposed *creator* deeper into the abandoned building. Their pursuers were close, but for now, they had a few stolen moments to breathe.

"Start talking," Evelyn demanded, her voice sharper than she intended. "You said you were part of the project that made me. What does that mean? How do you know all of this?" The man who still hadn't given her a name sighed and leaned against the peeling brick wall. "I worked for Orion for nearly twenty years. Genetic research, behavioral conditioning, neurological imprinting... I was part of the team that *built* you."

Evelyn recoiled. "Built?" He met her gaze. "You were designed, Evelyn. Not born." She crossed her arms, refusing to let him see the tremor in her hands. "Then why do I remember a childhood? Parents? Friends?"

"Because we gave them to you." He tapped the side of his head. "Implanted memories. Think of them like... a carefully crafted script. You were given just enough detail to believe your life was real, but not enough to question it too deeply." Evelyn's breath came fast and shallow. She had thought she was strong, unshakable. But now she was standing in the ruins of her own existence. "You're lying," she whispered.

He shook his head. "I wish I were." "Why would they do this?" she asked. "Why create... copies?" The man hesitated. "Because the original Evelyn Harper was meant for something greater. But she died. And instead of letting that loss disrupt their plans, Orion *replaced* her. They placed you in her life, making sure no one questioned your existence."

Evelyn clenched her jaw. "So, I'm... what? A backup?" "You're an *experiment*," he corrected. "A prototype for a much bigger operation. You were the first successful replacement model. But you weren't supposed to question it. You were supposed to live your life, follow the script."

A bitter laugh escaped her. "And yet, here we are." "Because something went wrong," he admitted. "You weren't supposed to wake up." A cold realization settled over Evelyn. "My double... she was another version, wasn't she?"

The man nodded. "Yes. A failed one. She retained too much awareness, too much independence. Instead of integrating into the life we assigned her, she *fought* it. That made her dangerous. Just like you are now." Evelyn swallowed hard. "And the men chasing us?" "Cleaners," he said grimly. "They're here to erase both of you from existence."

## Chapter 32

Evelyn felt like she was suffocating under the weight of her own reality. But she had no time to process it. Suddenly, she could hear footsteps on gravel. The distinct metallic click of a gun being cocked. The man reacted instantly, grabbing Evelyn and Jacob and shoving them into a darkened corridor just as a burst of gunfire shattered the silence.

They started running blindly. The building was a maze of forgotten hallways, rusted doors, and crumbling stairwells. Evelyn could hear the pursuers closing in, their voices crackling through earpieces. "She's here. Secure the exits." Evelyn's pulse pounded. "How do we get out?" The man glanced up. "The roof."

They bolted for the staircase, taking two steps at a time. Behind them, shadows shifted men in dark suits with unreadable faces, their guns glinting under the flickering lights. They burst onto the rooftop, the cold night air hitting Evelyn like a slap. "Now what?" she gasped.

The man pointed across the gap between buildings. "We jump." Evelyn's stomach lurched. "Are you insane?" But he was already running. He leaped, clearing the gap easily. Evelyn hesitated only a second before the sound of approaching footsteps pushed her forward. Jacob followed her, he was as confused as she was.

She ran. Her body soared through the air, weightless for a terrifying second before she hit the rooftop hard, rolling to absorb the impact. Behind her, one of the pursuers aimed his gun. A sharp whistle sliced through the air. A single gunshot rang out, and the man crumpled.

Evelyn turned in shock to see another figure on the rooftop; a woman, dressed in black, rifle in hand. "Time to go," she called out. She barely had time to register what was happening before the woman waved them toward an open stairwell. "Who the hell is that?" Evelyn asked as they sprinted downward.

"An ally," the man replied. "For now."

## Chapter 33

They didn't stop running until they were deep underground; in an abandoned subway tunnel, far from the reach of Orion's agents. Evelyn slumped against the cold wall, trying to catch her breath. She had not yet left Jacob's hand, their bond getting stronger every minute.

The woman lowered her rifle and smirked. "I see you finally found her, Carter." Evelyn frowned. "Carter?" The man sighed. "That's my name. In case you were wondering."

Evelyn filed that away. "And you are?" The woman extended a hand. "Reyna. And if you want to live, you'd better start trusting me." Evelyn didn't take the offered hand. "Why should I?" Reyna's smirk widened. "Because I just saved your ass." Carter rubbed his temples. "Reyna used to work for Orion, like me. But she got out. She knows how to survive." Evelyn crossed her arms. "And why would you help *me*?"

Reyna's expression turned serious. "Because Orion doesn't just replace people, Evelyn. They *steal* them." Evelyn's stomach twisted. "What does that mean?" Reyna leaned closer. "They don't just create copies. They take the *real* people, too. The ones who go missing? The ones who disappear without a trace? Orion doesn't just erase them. They... reprogram them."

Evelyn could not believe him. "So, my real self"" Could still be out there," Reyna finished.

A sharp silence settled over them. Evelyn had spent her whole life believing she was real. Now, she wasn't sure if she even existed at all.

"We need to stop them," Evelyn said, surprising even herself. Carter sighed. "Easier said than done." Reyna tilted her head. "Are you sure you want that, sweetheart? Because if you go after Orion, you'll never have a normal life again." Evelyn exhaled slowly. "Was my life ever normal to begin with?" Reyna grinned. "Fair point."

Carter ran a hand through his hair. "We have to be smart about this. Orion has resources; money, power, and government protection. Taking them down isn't just about exposing the truth. It's about surviving long enough to do it."

Evelyn met his gaze. "Then we do both." She had spent her life listening to other people's fears, their nightmares. Now, she was living one. And she was done being afraid. Reyna slung her rifle over her shoulder. "Looks like we have a fight ahead of us." Carter nodded. "We'll need allies." Evelyn straightened. "Then let's find them." Because if Orion thought she would go quietly into the dark, they were about to learn just how wrong they were.

## Chapter 34

Evelyn Harper had spent her life believing she was in control; of her career, her emotions, and her carefully structured world. But as she stood in a cold, dark subway tunnel with two former Orion operatives planning an all-out war against the people who had *made* her, she realized she had never truly had control at all.

That was about to change. Carter leaned over a makeshift table, spreading out a blueprint of an office building. "This is one of Orion's shell companies," he said. "On the surface, it's a research facility, but below ground..." He tapped a specific section. "That's where they keep the records. If we want to expose them, we need to get in there and find proof."

Reyna smirked. "I love a good break-in." Evelyn crossed her arms. "We're not just exposing them." Both Carter and Reyna looked at her. Evelyn's eyes darkened. "I want to find the original me. If she's still out there, I need to know." Reyna exhaled. "Alright then, sweetheart. Let's burn this whole thing to the ground."

Evelyn then turned towards Jacob, "This is my fight and I need to do it alone. Will you wait for me once I am back." There were tears in her eyes as she revealed her feelings for the first time in front of him.

"I Love You Evelyn, take your time and you will find me praying and rooting for you." Jacob muttered slowly; he was scared for her but did not want to show. He then exited from the rooftop making sure no one noticed him.

## Chapter 35

Breaking into Orion's facility wasn't going to be easy. Security was tight, with biometric scanners, surveillance, and armed guards patrolling every floor. They needed a way in. "Orion still thinks you're *their* Evelyn," Carter pointed out. "That gives us an edge."

Evelyn frowned. "You want me to just walk in?" Reyna shrugged. "Not the worst idea. If you pretend you're still clueless, they might let you get close to the real files." She swallowed. It was risky, but what choice did they have? Carter handed her an earpiece. "We'll be watching from a safe distance. If anything goes wrong, get out."

Evelyn forced a breath. *If anything goes wrong, I might not get the chance.* Still, she slipped on a tailored blazer, straightened her posture, and walked right up to the Orion building like she belonged there. And for the first time, she wasn't sure if she did.

The moment she stepped inside, the air changed. The receptionist smiled at her. "Dr. Harper. Welcome back." Evelyn's heart pounded. They think I belong here. She gave a polite nod and walked past security, scanning her stolen ID badge at the elevator. The doors slid open, and she stepped inside, pressing the button for the restricted floors. As she descended, her fingers curled into fists.

I am not theirs. I never was and will never be. The doors opened into a dimly lit corridor lined with glass rooms. And inside them;

Her breath caught. There were people. Lots of them.

Some of them were awake, pacing in agitation. Others sat still, their expressions vacant. And some, she felt sick. Some looked *exactly* like her. Rows of Evelyn Harpers. A cold hand clutched her spine. How many had there been before me? How many would come after? The sound of footsteps made her spin. A man in a lab coat stood in the hallway, watching her.

"You weren't supposed to come back."

## Chapter 36

Evelyn didn't move. She studied the man's face, gray-haired, sharp-eyed, familiar in a way she couldn't place. "Who are you?" she asked. He smiled faintly. "Someone who knew you before you even existed." Her skin prickled. "I need to see the files."

The man nodded toward a locked door. "They're in there. But I think you already know the truth, don't you?" Evelyn's throat was dry. "The real me. Where is she?" The man sighed. "Follow me." He led her past the glass chambers, deeper into the facility. Carter's voice buzzed in her earpiece; "Evelyn, what the hell is happening? Talk to me."

She ignored him. At the end of the hallway, the man swiped a keycard. The heavy door unlocked with a beep. Inside was a single hospital bed. And in it a woman lay still, hooked up to machines. Pale, unmoving. But there was no denying it.

She was looking at her own face.

## Chapter 37

Evelyn stared at the unconscious woman; her *original self*. Carter's voice in her ear: "Evelyn. Get out. Now." But she couldn't move. "She's been here for years," the scientist said softly. "She was meant to be the perfect candidate. But she resisted. So, they put her to sleep."

Evelyn's pulse roared in her ears. "Wake her up." The scientist shook his head. "She's not ready." Evelyn grabbed a scalpel from a nearby tray and pressed it to his throat. "I *said*, wake her up." His Adam's apple bobbed. "You don't understand, she..."

The monitors beeped. The woman's eyelids fluttered. And then—she opened her eyes. The real Evelyn Harper looked straight at her. And she screamed as loud as she could.

The next few minutes blurred. Alarms blared. Security swarmed the hallways. Evelyn yanked the wires from the woman's body and pulled her upright "Can you walk?" she demanded.

The woman; her original self; stared at her in shock but nodded weakly. Carter's voice was frantic. "EVELYN, GET OUT OF THERE NOW." Gunfire erupted in the halls.

Reyna's voice cut in: "You're about to have company. MOVE." Evelyn grabbed the original's hand. "We're leaving." The woman gasped. "Who *are* you?" Evelyn looked at her own face and whispered, "The one they let live." Then she pulled her into the chaos.

They ran. Security guards fired, but Reyna appeared out of nowhere, taking them down one by one. Carter crashed a stolen car through the side gate, honking wildly. “Get in!” Evelyn shoved the original Evelyn inside. They sped into the night, sirens wailing behind them. Reyna grinned. “That went well.” Evelyn exhaled, staring at the unconscious woman beside her.

She had found the original. Now, she had to figure out who she was supposed to be. And as long as Orion existed she would never stop fighting.

## Chapter 38

The stolen car sped through the backstreets of Elderton, the city lights blurring as Evelyn gripped the dashboard. Beside her, the original Evelyn Harper was still dazed, barely aware of her surroundings. Carter drove like a man possessed, eyes flicking between the road and the rearview mirror.

“They’ll be coming,” he muttered. “They’re already here,” Reyna corrected from the backseat, reloading her rifle. Evelyn’s mind was spinning. She had spent her entire life believing she was the only Evelyn Harper. And now, the real one sat just inches away, her breathing shallow, her skin pale from years of being kept in stasis.

“What the hell do we do now?” she asked. Carter tightened his grip on the wheel. “First, we get somewhere safe. Then, we figure out what the hell Orion is going to do about this.” Evelyn glanced back at her original self, who was beginning to stir. Her lips parted, her eyes unfocused.

“...Where am I?” she whispered. Her voice sent chills down Evelyn’s spine. It was her voice. Her exact voice. Evelyn clenched her fists. *Which one of us is real?* The original Evelyn’s gaze finally landed on her, and the confusion in her eyes deepened. “Who... are you?” Evelyn swallowed hard. “I don’t know anymore.”

Carter drove them deep into the outskirts of Elderton, far from Orion’s reach. Their safe house was a nondescript cabin in the woods, a place Carter and Reyna had used in the past to lay low. Inside, Evelyn helped the original Evelyn to the couch, offering her a blanket.

The woman flinched away. “I don’t understand,” she whispered, staring at Evelyn. “You look just like me.” Evelyn forced herself to stay calm. “I am you. Or, at least... a version of you.” The woman’s eyes darted to Carter. “What did they do to me?”

Carter sighed, rubbing his temples. “You were the original candidate. But you fought back. Orion doesn’t like resistance.” The woman, *the real Evelyn Harper*, shook her head. “How long was I...?” Evelyn exhaled. “Years.”

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken questions. The real Evelyn clutched the blanket, her fingers trembling. “And you? What are you?” Evelyn hesitated before answering. “I was... your replacement.”

The woman flinched. “They erased me.” “No,” Evelyn said softly. “They replaced you.” The woman’s face twisted with pain. “Then... if you exist...” Her voice broke. “What am I supposed to do now?” Evelyn had no answer. Because she was asking herself the same question.

## WHO CAN CLAIM TO BE EVELYN HARPER?

### Chapter 39

The news broke within 24 hours. A fire had erupted in an Orion research facility. Officials claimed it was an accident, but Evelyn, Carter, and Reyna knew better. Orion was covering their tracks. And they weren’t done yet.

“They’re erasing evidence,” Carter said, scrolling through his laptop. “Every record, every trace of the program. It’s like it never existed.” Evelyn’s stomach twisted. Loose ends. That’s what she and the original Evelyn were now.

She turned to Carter. “If they’re wiping everything... does that mean they’re coming after us?” Carter’s jaw tightened. “Yes.” Evelyn inhaled sharply. She had expected this, but hearing it aloud made it real.

“We need to hit them before they hit us,” Reyna said. “Expose them before they can silence us.” Evelyn nodded. “We need to go public.” The real Evelyn, who had been silent all this time, finally spoke. “And if that doesn’t work?” Evelyn met her gaze. “Then we burn Orion to the ground.”

### Chapter 40

The plan was simple but dangerous. Carter had connections in the media; whistleblowers, journalists who had been sniffing around Orion for years but never had enough evidence to act. With the files Evelyn had stolen from the facility, they had everything they needed.

At exactly 9 PM, a live anonymous broadcast aired across multiple networks. It showed grainy footage of Orion’s underground labs. The glass cells. The duplicates. The Evelyns. A digitally distorted voice narrated:

*"For decades, a secret organization has been replacing people. What you see here is only the beginning. The world deserves to know the truth."*

The reaction was immediate.

Social media exploded. Conspiracy theories, news reports, frantic government statements denying everything. Orion responded. Within hours, bounties were placed on Evelyn and the others. The hunt for them was on. Jacob was worried sick, would he ever get to meet his Evelyn again.

They knew Orion wouldn't just let them walk away; not after everything they had uncovered. The illusion of safety at the remote cabin shattered within days, as the quiet hum of drones filled the sky and armored vehicles began weaving through the dense forest like predators closing in.

Carter stood by the window, his expression dark as he took in the patrols. "They've found us," he said, voice low with certainty. Reyna, ever defiant, didn't flinch. She slung her rifle over her shoulder with a sharp, practiced motion. "Good," she said, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "I was getting bored."

Behind her, the real Evelyn, tired, frightened, but no longer willing to hide clutched her arm. "We have to run," she urged. But the other Evelyn, the one who had been forged in fire and betrayal, stood firm and shook her head. "No more running." She turned to Carter, her voice steady and resolute. "We end this. Tonight."

There was a moment of silence as Carter met her gaze, then nodded slowly, accepting the weight of what was to come. Reyna's grin was fierce as she chambered a round. "Let's make some noise." The time for hiding was over.

They set the trap with precision born of desperation. Every window and doorway of the cabin was laced with explosives, every step Orion's men, took pre-calculated for maximum chaos. When the strike team stormed in, expecting resistance, they found only silence and the blinking lights of a countdown.

The explosion tore through the forest, a deafening blast that sent shockwaves through the trees and confusion through Orion's ranks. That was when the real fight began. Gunfire cracked like thunder as shadows darted between trunks and brush.

Evelyn and Reyna emerged from the darkness, striking first and hard, ghosts in the night, eliminating patrols with brutal efficiency. Carter, stationed deeper in the woods, hacked their communication systems, feeding false coordinates that sent enemy units chasing ghosts.

Hidden behind a fallen log, the real Evelyn frightened and fragile watched in stunned silence as the other version of herself waged a war she had never imagined being part of. But when an agent stumbled too close, instinct took over. She didn't hesitate. She had spent her life guiding others out of mental prisons. Now, she was breaking free from her own. Together, they moved like a unit forged in pain and purpose, and one by one, Orion's men fell. Until only one remained.

## Chapter 41

### **The Final Stand**

The final shot echoed into the stillness; the sound swallowed by trees that had borne witness to a battle far greater than themselves. Carter lowered his weapon, sweat and smoke clinging to his skin. Reyna let out a shaky breath, her face smudged with dirt and triumph.

The air was thick with the scent of gunpowder and pine. Evelyn stood still, her chest rising and falling, hands trembling. At her feet, the last Orion agent lay still; no more threats, no more running. It was done. Orion was gone. And yet, the silence that followed wasn't peace, it was possibility. Evelyn turned to face the real Evelyn, the woman whose life she had once mirrored, maybe even stolen. "What now?" she asked, her voice a fragile mix of guilt and hope.

A memory flashed through her mind; Jacob's face the last time she'd seen him, his eyes wide with disbelief as he discovered what she truly was. The woman studied her with eyes no longer clouded by fear. "You can take my life," she said quietly. "It was never yours to begin with." Evelyn's jaw tensed. "Or," she replied, voice steady, "we could start over. Both of us." The words hung in the air like an offering. Slowly, the woman nodded, tears barely held at bay.

Carter stepped forward with a lopsided grin. "Guess we'll need new names." Reyna laughed, the sound like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. "I vote for something badass." "What about Jacob?" Evelyn asked softly, knowing the unspoken truth that hung between them.

Evelyn or whoever she was now turned toward the horizon. The sun was rising, its golden light spilling over the scorched earth, washing away shadows of the past. For the first time, her future wasn't written in someone else's ink. She had lived her whole life running from a fate that wasn't hers. But now... now, she was free. And perhaps, not entirely alone.

### **Epilogue**

Months had passed since the fall of Orion. The world, relentless in its pace, had already turned its attention elsewhere. The explosive leak that had once dominated headlines, footage, files, and testimonies from an anonymous source had sparked global outrage, then quieted into the background noise of conspiracy forums and government denials. The public moved on. The questions faded. The name Evelyn Harper never resurfaced. Because Evelyn Harper no longer existed.

After everything; the betrayal, the truth, the bloodshed; the two Evelyns came to a choice. They could destroy each other. Or they could disappear together. They chose the latter. A pact was made: neither would claim the life they once fought over. Instead, they would both vanish and start anew.

The original Evelyn, the woman whose identity had been stolen, chose solitude over vengeance. With Carter's help, she slipped away, reborn under a different name in a distant seaside town where no one asked questions.

There, she learned to live again; without pills, without wires, without fear. For too long, her life had been dictated by others, her mind numbed for the sake of control. Now, she watched the tide roll in and out each day, reminding herself that freedom could be quiet.

As for the other Evelyn the clone, the survivor, the one who had walked through fire and come out scarred but standing, she remained. Her past was stitched together by lies, but her future was hers to shape. She was not the original. But she was real. And she was done running.

She now called herself Mara. The name had no history, no attachments just like her. It meant "bitter" in some languages, but to her, it meant rebirth. She'd chosen it while standing in the rain one night, letting water wash away the person she'd been forced to become.

But there was one thread from her past she couldn't sever. One person whose face haunted her dreams still reminding her of things left unsaid.

The small café sat on the outskirts of a town too insignificant to appear on most maps; exactly why Mara had chosen it. Rain pattered against the windows, blurring the outside world into watercolor strokes of gray and green.

She nursed her coffee, its warmth doing little to calm the storm in her chest. The burner phone on the table remained silent. Three days she'd waited here, sending a message to a ghost through channels only one other person would know to check.

The bell above the door chimed. Mara didn't look up immediately. She'd learned that survival often depended on appearing uninterested. But when footsteps stopped at her table, she finally raised her eyes.

Jacob stood before her, thinner than she remembered, with new lines etched around his eyes and a scar running along his jawline. His dark hair was longer now, streaked with premature gray. His eyes; those deep brown eyes that had once looked at her with love, studied her cautiously.

"You changed your hair," he said simply. Mara touched the short, copper strands self-consciously. "Seemed appropriate." He slid into the seat across from her, hands resting on the table. She noticed they were shaking slightly.

"I didn't think you survived," he whispered. "When the facility burned..."

"I got out. Barely." "I've been hiding ever since. Moving every few weeks. Living on cash jobs and borrowed identities."

Silence stretched between them, filled with unspoken questions. Finally, Mara reached across the table, her fingers hovering inches from his. "I'm not her," she said, the truth she'd always feared speaking aloud. "I'm not Evelyn Harper. I never was."

Jacob's expression softened." His hand moved to meet hers, their fingers intertwining. "And I fell in love with you anyway." The confession hung in the air, as fragile as glass. Mara felt something crack open inside her chest something she'd kept locked away for too long.

"I'm starting over," she said, her voice steadier now. "Somewhere quiet. Somewhere they'll never find either of us." She tightened her grip on his hand. "Come with me?" Jacob's thumb traced circles on her palm, sending warmth cascading through her. "What would we be? Two fugitives hiding in plain sight?"

"Two people," she corrected. "Just two people trying to build something real from all the lies." Her eyes held his, unwavering. "I don't know who I am yet, Jacob. But I want to discover that with you."

He leaned forward, his free hand coming up to cup her cheek. "I've crossed oceans of boundaries because of you. Following you to the end of the world seems like the logical next step."

When his lips met hers, Mara felt the last walls around her heart crumble. This wasn't a desperate, frantic kiss, this was gentle, patient, a promise of time. "I love you," she breathed against his mouth. "Not because I was programmed to, not because of borrowed memories. I love you because you saw me when no one else did."

Jacob smiled, pressing his forehead to hers. “Then let’s disappear together.”

### **Reyna & Carter’s Mission**

Reyna and Carter never said it out loud, but they knew they were different after it all. The war with Orion hadn’t ended with the final bullet it had simply changed shape. There were still threads of the old monster hiding in dark corners of the world: rogue labs, corrupt officials, projects that should have died years ago. So, they hunted.

They became nomads, driven not by revenge, but by justice. Reyna remained lethal and fearless, her wit as sharp as her aim. Carter, always two steps ahead, navigated the world of underground data and backdoor alliances. Their bond wasn’t romance it was fire-forged loyalty. Together, they moved like whispers between borders, exposing secrets, dismantling experiments, silencing the last echoes of Orion.

They called themselves ghosts. And in many ways, that’s exactly what they had become, shadows of the lives they once lived, lingering just long enough to make a difference, then disappearing into the dark.

Years passed, and eventually they found something resembling permanence a safehouse that became a home, in a country where questions weren’t asked and bribes kept records clean. They’d discovered, somewhere along the way, that their loyalty had deepened into something more.

Jacob and Mara’s partnership bore unexpected fruit; they adopted twin children. The twins a boy and a girl now ten years old had never known the truth about their mother. To them, she was simply Mara.

On quiet evenings, when Mara watched her children sleep, something like fear would grip her heart; fear that one day, they would learn the truth. That one day, the past would catch up to them all. Jacob would find her in these moments, his arms around her from behind.

“They’ll never know,” he would whisper. “They’ll never have to.”

Sometimes, Mara wondered if keeping their children in the dark was another form of the deception she had fought against. But then she would remember the nightmares, the blood, the things she had done to ensure their freedom. And she would choose silence, again and again.

The children grew up loved, safe, and blissfully unaware that their bedtime stories tales of brave heroes fighting shadowy organizations were watered-down versions of their moms’ reality. They didn’t know that when their mother kissed their foreheads and promised to always protect them, it wasn’t just maternal instinct; it was a soldier’s vow.

Sometimes, on rare occasions when they felt safe enough, they would meet with Carter and Reyna. In remote cabins or anonymous hotel rooms, the four of them would share information, resources, and brief moments of normalcy card games, takeout food, laughter that felt almost forgotten.

During one such meeting, as dawn broke after a night of planning, Carter caught Mara watching Jacob with unguarded tenderness as he slept.

“Was it worth it?” Carter asked quietly. “Giving up everything for...”

“For love?” Mara finished, a small smile playing on her lips. “I didn’t give up everything, Carter. I found everything.” She looked down at her hands—hands designed in a lab, yet capable of genuine touch, genuine feeling. “They created me to be someone else’s shadow. With him, I’m my own light.”

As they parted ways that morning, Reyna embraced Mara fiercely. “Stay safe, whoever-you-are-now,” she whispered. Mara watched them drive away, Jacob’s arm around her waist. They would return to their small house by the sea, with its blue shutters and garden of wildflowers. To their quiet life built on second chances.

Some nights, she still woke gasping from nightmares of labs and needles and stolen faces. But now, Jacob’s arms would find her in the dark, anchoring her to the present, to what was real.

“I’m here,” he would murmur against her hair. “We’re both here.”

And somewhere in the world, another woman who had once been Evelyn Harper walked barefoot on a beach, finally writing her own story.

The end was just another beginning.