

Chapter 1

The loud sound of the alarm clock went off in the Manhattan penthouse at 5:30 AM, but Lily Harrison was already up. Dark circles under her eyes as she looked at the ceiling. Her heart still beating fast from a hard night. The Egyptian cotton sheets stuck to her sweaty skin, showing the fear that held her just a few hours before. Next to her, Nick slept well. His breathing was steady and calm—something Lily had not had in weeks.

"Another nightmare," she said quietly to herself. She got out of bed slowly, hoping she would not wake her husband. The floor felt cold to her bare feet as she walked across their big bedroom.

Lily walked across the marble floor to the large windows, looking out at the city that never slept. The early morning darkness made Manhattan look gray and gold. People were already walking on the sidewalks far below. She was thirty-four and known in New York for being one of the toughest criminal defense lawyers. People talked about how smart she was and how she worked hard for justice. Her Harvard law degree was on the wall in her corner office. It showed all the years of hard work and drive that got her here.

The image in the glass showed a woman she did not really know. Her cheeks looked thin. Her hands shook. Her eyes had dark circles that were even deeper than the morning shadows over the Manhattan skyline.

"Morning, beautiful," Nick's voice said from behind her. He sounded sleepy but kind. "You're up early again."

She turned and saw her husband of eight years as he stretched in their big bed. Nicholas Harrison was just as good at his work as a lawyer on Wall Street. He had the kind of charm that made her fall for him back when they went to law school together. His sandy brown hair was messy from sleep. Even in the morning, he still looked neat and put together. This look helped him do well in meetings at work.

"Couldn't sleep," she said, trying hard to smile even though it hurt. "Big case work."

Nick sat up. He looked at her face with worry. His blue eyes, that would shine with fun most days, now had lines of worry. These lines seemed to get deeper every morning. "Lily, you have said that for months," he said. "When did you last sleep all night? I mean, really sleep through the night?"

She did not look at him and walked to their walk-in closet. The space was big. It was bigger than most places to live in New York. That room had many designer suits and costly shoes. These things showed what they had. "I'm fine, Nick. Just busy with work," she said.

"That's what you always say." His voice showed a bit of feeling upset as he sat up on the bed and put his legs down. "Maybe you could talk to someone."

Dr. Martinez helped Sarah with her problems last year. Do you remember how much better she was after only a few talks with him?"

"I don't need a therapist," Lily said quickly. Right after, her voice got softer. She was surprised by how sharp she had sounded. "I'm sorry. I just want to finish this case, and then things will be normal again."

"Normal?" Nick got up. He ran his hand through his hair. "Lily, there is nothing normal about you waking up and screaming almost every night. There is nothing normal about you jumping when the phone rings. There is nothing good about us not talking much these days."

The questions came at her hard, almost like real hits. She turned to look at him. She could see the pain on his face. She knew she had caused it. It was because of her secrets and her not talking.

"You think that I don't notice," he went on, but his voice was softer now. "You think I don't see that you check the locks three times before bed, or that you stay away from the windows after it gets dark. Something is scaring you, and I do not know how to help you because you will not let me in."

Nick threw the covers at his side and walked to her. He put his hands on her shoulders in a gentle way. It was warm and felt like something he had done many times before. But, even with his comfort, the cold feeling in her bones would not go away.

What case are you working on that makes you feel this way? You do not tell me much these days. We used to talk about all sorts of things—our

work, our hopes, our worries. Now, you seem like someone I do not know living in our home.

Lily felt secrets pulling on her, almost like real weight on her chest. She wondered how she could talk about the case with three people dead. It was all that filled her mind. She did not know how to tell him about her client, a man who made her feel cold all over. His face stayed with her, even when she was awake.

"It's private. You know this," she said in a soft voice, almost whispering. "Attorney-client secret."

"Right." You could see how upset Nick was, with new lines showing up near his eyes. He let go of her shoulders and moved back. "This is the same excuse that you have used for months. I'm your husband, Lily. I am not asking about your cases. I just want my wife with me again."

The silence grew big between them. It was like a wide space that stood in the way. Neither know how to get over it.

"Well," Nick said, his voice full of sad acceptance, "I'll be in Vegas this week for the Morrison merger. Maybe some time away will help you get some real rest. I know you can't seem to get it when I'm here."

The words hurt because they were true. There was a part of her that was happy he would leave. She would not have to tell people why there was

screaming. She did not have to act like everything was okay when her world was falling apart.

As Nick went to the shower, Lily picked out her normal outfit. She wore a sharp black suit that made people listen to her in any court. The suit was made of good Italian wool and fit her very well. As she put it on, her hands shook a little. She first noticed the shaking three weeks ago. That was when the dreams started, too.

The nightmare last night felt more real than ever before. She could still feel what it was like to float above her own body. She watched as her spirit left the bed, just like smoke coming from a fire that is almost out. It was so real that she could smell the lavender fabric softener on the sheets. She could also hear the sound of traffic far below their windows, high up in the building.

In the dream, she looked down and saw that she was not moving while a dark shape knelt next to the bed. The shape was tall, with wide shoulders, and it felt like she knew him. He did not move at all, and it felt like a very long time. His being there felt both safe and scary. She felt him watching her as she slept, looking at her with a strong gaze. This made her spirit feel afraid and want to get away.

"No," she said in a soft voice, shaking her head hard. "It was only a dream."

But even now, in this bright morning light coming through the windows facing east, she could say she smelled a strange scent in their bedroom. It smelled like fancy cologne mixed with something deeper. It could be

tobacco or leather. It was a smell that was all male and did not feel right in the space they worked so hard to make their own.

She went over to Nick's side of the bed and got down on her knees. She pressed her nose on the carpet, right at the spot where she had seen that figure in her dream. The new smell was much stronger here. It could not be missed, and it made her feel scared.

"Lily?" Nick said from the bathroom as steam poured out when he opened the shower door. "Are you okay out there?"

"Fine," she called back. Her voice broke a little. "Just looking for my earring."

An hour later, Lily was sitting in her law firm's meeting room. It was on the forty-second floor of a shiny Manhattan tower. There was a great view of Central Park from up there. The room had leather chairs around a big, shiny wood table. The sun from the morning bounced off the table. Files and boxes with evidence were all around her, almost like walls. But they did not help her feel safe from the worry that would not leave her chest.

Her assistant, Maria, poured the coffee quickly and smoothly from a silver set that cost more than what most people pay for rent each month. Maria Gonzalez had worked at the firm for fifteen years. She was a woman in her fifties who had kind eyes and a natural sense of what her employers needed.

"Mrs. Harrison, you look tired. Are you feeling okay?" Maria asked. Her accent was strong, and you could hear how much she cared. She looked at Lily and saw her pale face. "You have lost weight too. Are you eating?"

"I'm fine," Lily said, though it was not true. She took the hot mug with thanks. The cup was thin and warm in her hands. It helped keep her mind here and now. "What is the plan for today?"

"Your ten o'clock meeting with Mr. Rodriguez will now be at eleven. He wants more time to talk about his defense plan." Maria checked her tablet and looked at the list of today's meetings. "He said that he does not want any other staff there. It will be just you and him."

When Lily heard the name of her client, she got a cold feeling. It was like ice in her blood. Her hands started to shake, and the coffee cup hit the saucer.

"Mrs. Harrison?" Maria asked, sounding worried. "What happened? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Carlos Rodriguez was known as the man who people said brutally killed three people. This case was so gruesome that even tough crime reporters in New York were surprised. The people trying to prove him guilty said that he was the leader of a crime group. They said he had a strong link with drug gangs from Colombia. But there was something about him that made her more curious, not just for her job. He was smart and spoke well. He had a kind of charm that was both interesting and scary at the same time.

"Has he come yet?" she asked. She tried to keep her voice even as she put down the coffee cup so she would not drop it.

His car just showed up. There is a big group with him today, and there seems to be more security than normal. There are three black SUVs, and you can see that their windows are dark. The building's security team is on high alert. Maria looked out the window and frowned. She said, "He travels like a head of state."

Lily nodded. Her stomach turned with a feeling she could not name. Was it fear? Was it hope? Maybe it was worry. She had won cases before that seemed too tough, and she had stood up for people other lawyers would not help. But this case was not like those. This time, it felt close to her. It was like her whole self was on the line, not just how people saw her at work.

"Maria, before he gets here, I need you to do something for me." She took out her phone and put on the camera. Her fingers moved over the screen, a bit shaky. "I want you to put this in the corner and let it record the whole meeting."

"Mrs. Harrison, this is not how things are usually done. If Mr. Rodriguez finds out you are recording him and he did not say it was okay, he might tell the bar association. You could lose your license." Maria looked worried as she saw her boss act strangely.

"He will not find it. I need to have documents for everything. There is something about this case..." She stopped, trying to say why she felt worried. "Just trust me. Please."

"But why? In the last fifteen years, you have never asked for this. What is different about this case?" Maria's voice showed that she cared about Lily deeply. She had seen her go from a new worker to one of the top lawyers in the city.

"I can't say why. Not right now. Maybe I never will. But I need to know for sure what goes on in this room today." Lily spoke so quietly that you could just hear her. The things she didn't say were clear in how she spoke.

As Maria slowly put the phone behind a pile of law books, she tried to make sure it could show the full conference table. Lily was thinking about the dream she had last night again. In the dream, the person kneeling looked up at her as she floated like a ghost. For a short and scary moment, she saw his face. It was Carlos Rodriguez, but it was not him in the same way she knew. His face looked harder and different, and his eyes seemed to pull her in like quicksand, making her feel heavy.

"Mrs. Harrison?" Maria said, breaking through her thoughts. "He's here. Security is bringing him up now."

The elevator made a soft sound far away. After that, Lily could hear pricey shoes tapping on the marble floor. Her heart started to beat faster, and she listened to voices in the hall—Carlos was speaking in his deep voice, and his guards answered him in short replies.

"Should I stay?" Maria asked. Her caring side showed worry when she saw how upset her boss was.

"No. I need to talk to him alone. But..." Lily held Maria's hand. She was surprised by how much she needed help. "If I am not out in two hours, come back. Do not wait for me to call you. Just come back."

Maria's eyes got big with worry. "Mrs. Harrison, what are you not saying? What are you scared of?"

Before Lily had a chance to speak, the door opened with a soft sound. Carlos Rodriguez walked in with his normal sure walk. The air in the room seemed to shift as soon as he came in. It felt heavier and full of energy.

He was tall, about six-foot-three, and he looked like someone used to power. Other people often seemed to respect him. He wore a charcoal suit that fit him very well. The suit made his broad shoulders and slim build stand out. It showed that he worked hard to stay in shape. His dark hair had some silver by the sides, and always looked neat. His olive skin had a tan that made it clear he had money and time to relax.

But what really got her attention were his eyes. They were dark brown, almost black. There was something in them that made her feel like he could see right into her. She had seen these same eyes before, in her dreams. They were also the eyes that had watched her as she slept, sitting by her bed.

“Counselor,” he said. His voice sounded smooth, like old whiskey. There was something about it that made her feel uneasy. “You look tired. Are you getting enough sleep?”

The question hit her hard and made her lose her breath. She did not know how he could know about her trouble with sleep. Her bad dreams were something she kept close and did not tell anyone.

"I'm fine, thank you," she said. Her voice was higher than normal as she pointed at the chair in front of her. There was not enough space between them. "Shall we talk about your case?"

Carlos went over to the chair but did not sit down right away. Instead, he walked to the windows and put his hands behind his back. He looked out at the city below. The morning sun hit his face. It showed his strong jaw, straight nose, and lips that always seemed to have a small smile.

"Such a beautiful view from here," he said in a relaxed way. "You can see all of it—Central Park, the Hudson River, and even some parts of Brooklyn far away. I think it makes you feel powerful, since you can look down at the world like this."

"Mr. Rodriguez, please sit down. We have a lot to talk about today." Lily tried to sound strong, even though she felt nervous inside. She was glad that her voice did not show how shaky she was feeling.

He moved away from the window with smooth ease. When he sat down across from her, the leather chair seemed to welcome him like it was an old friend. The way he sat showed he was fully comfortable. Most clients

looked a bit uneasy in this place, but he was calm. There was something about him that made you notice.

"Yes," he said. His voice had a bit of an accent, but she could not figure out where it was from. "But first, I want to say, you have a lovely home. Is it the penthouse on 87th Street? The one on the twenty-third floor that has the terrace that goes all the way around? That place with the special art deco front?"

Lily felt suddenly cold, as if ice water replaced all the warmth in her body. She knew she did not give him her address. It was also not out there for people to find on the internet. Her home address was kept safe on purpose, and the firm did a lot to keep the places where senior partners lived private.

"How do you—"

"I like to know the people who have control over my life," he said, breaking in. He leaned a bit closer. The smell of his cologne was strong in the space between them. It was the same smell she noticed in her bedroom today. "Your husband goes away for work often, right? You must feel lonely in that big apartment when you are by yourself."

The room felt colder, and Lily could feel the air was icy. It was like the temperature dropped fast. The morning sun was coming in through the windows, but it looked less bright. It seemed like clouds might be over the sky, but when she looked, there was only clear blue above.

"Mr. Rodriguez," she said. Her voice was almost shaking as she tried to keep herself calm and look professional. "Let's talk about your defense. The people against you have made a strong case. There are three victims. All were found in your warehouse district. The security cameras got your vehicles at the scene. We need to—"

"Tell me about your dreams, Counselor." He spoke in a soft, but firm way. His dark eyes looked right into hers with a deep and strong focus.

The question broke her calm. The case file fell from her trembling hands and the papers went all over the shiny table. Crime scene photos and witness statements spread out, mixing together. They made a dark mix of pictures and words about violence and the next steps in the case.

"I don't know what you mean," she whispered. Still, her voice gave her away. Even she could hear that her denial was weak and empty.

Carlos smiled. It was meant to look nice, but it made him seem like someone to be careful around. His teeth looked perfect. They were very white, like fresh snow in winter. Still, when she saw them, it made her think of sharp fangs.

"Don't you?" He reached across the table to pick up the scattered papers, taking his time. "Don't you dream of me, Lily? Don't you feel me in your room at night, looking out for you while your husband is next to you, not knowing what's going on so close to him?"

Hearing her name when he spoke made her feel a sudden chill run through her body. In all the times they met before, he was always formal. He used words like Counselor or Mrs. Harrison when he talked to her. This time was different. Using her name like that felt strange and wrong, almost as if he stepped over a line that should not be crossed. It was done without asking first.

"That's impossible," she said quietly, but even when she spoke, she knew that it was not. The dreams felt too real and too clear. The smell in her room, the mark on the carpet, and the way she woke up knowing things she should not know.

"Is it?" Carlos leaned back in his chair. He looked calm, while she sat across from him, shaking. "Is it truly impossible, or just not likely? In your work, you know that things we do not expect happen every day. People who never thought they would break the law still do it. Normal people can turn evil if pushed hard enough. The world is much easier to change than most people think."

"You're talking about psychology, not—" She could not finish what she wanted to say. Not what? Not a ghost coming to see her? Not something that can happen to show up in her room each night?

"Not what, Counselor? What am I saying that makes you so scared?" His voice pulled her in, making her listen more. She felt trapped in this talk, and she really wanted to get out.

"Nothing. This makes no sense. We are here to talk about your legal defense. This is not about my life. But her hands kept shaking as she tried to sort out the papers."

"Your life and my legal defense are more connected than you think." Carlos stood up and walked around the table. He stopped right behind her chair. She could feel him standing there. His cologne was stronger now. It mixed with another smell, like flowers at night and the feel before a storm.

"Don't," she said in a soft voice. She did not know if she was talking to him or to herself.

"Tell me about your dream from last night," he said in a soft voice. He was so close she could feel his breath on her ear. "Tell me what it was like when you watched your spirit leave your body like smoke. Tell me how you saw me on my knees next to your bed, staying by your side while your husband slept. He did not know that his wife was having a quiet but deep talk with me, and we did not even need words."

Lily's chair turned on its own, and now she sat facing him. She looked up into his dark eyes. They were deep, and she could not know just how deep they really were. He was so near she could reach out and touch him. She saw gold bits in his eyes. It felt like he was everywhere, like he filled all the air in the room.

"How?" The word came out of her mouth soft, almost like a whisper or something she could not help but say. "How can this be?"

"Does it matter how?" He reached out and softly touched her face with his fingers. "Does it matter if what you feel is real or if it is not? The main thing to ask is this: will you help me win this case, or will you let fear ruin all that you have worked for?"

The touch of his hand made her feel a rush all through her body. For a moment, it was like the conference room was gone. She could see quick pictures of another place. She saw a bedroom in the dark, and someone beside the bed. She felt like she was floating, watching, and knowing something deep about how two people can connect with each other.

"I don't know what's going on with me," she said in a soft voice. Tears started to run down her face. She did not even know she was holding them back.

"Understanding is given too much value," Carlos said, as he used his thumb to wipe away her tears. "It is much more useful to let things be. You have to let it be that there are things in this world that do not follow what is written in laws or what happens in court. You have to let it be that you and I share something special that does not fit into the usual roles of attorney and client."

"This is insane," she said, but her voice did not sound sure.

Is it? Or could it be the most normal thing that has happened to you in years? When was the last time you felt really alive, Lily? When was the last time you felt passion that was more than just work success?

The questions stayed there between them, almost like smoke in the air. Lily saw that she did not have the answers. She could not even say when she last felt something more than just the quick happiness of winning cases or stacking up praise from others.

"I need to think," she said at last, getting up with shaky legs. "I need some time to take this in."

Carlos moved back a bit. He gave her some room but kept looking at her with his dark eyes. "We do not have much time. My trial starts in three weeks. The prosecution thinks they have a strong case. If you do not give all of yourself to this defense—if you do not help fully—I will spend my whole life in prison."

"And if I give you that effort? If I... give in? What will happen then?"

His smile came back. It held something old and unknown. "Then you get to see what you can really do. Then you find out that the law is only the start of justice, not where it ends."

The intercom made a low sound, and Maria spoke. "Mrs. Harrison, your next meeting is here. Do you want me to send them in?"

The spell went away, and Lily was back in the conference room she knew well. The law books and all the legal papers were around her. But Carlos was still near in her mind, and she could still smell him in the air.

"Our time is up," she said. She tried hard to look calm and be professional.

Carlos nodded and went to get his coat. "For now," he said. "But we will talk about this again tonight. That time right before you fall asleep or wake up. That's when the truth feels stronger than proof."

He got to the door and stopped. He turned to look at her one last time.

"Tell me, Counselor," he said. His voice was deep and full of meaning. "Do you dream of me?"

The question shook her and made her lose all calm. When the door shut behind him, Lily Harrison knew that her nightmares might be real. She started to see that winning this case could cost her more than her name at work.

Outside the conference room windows, dark clouds came over Manhattan very fast, and thunder started to rumble somewhere far away.