

In The After

By

John Gilstrap

Tony Emerson piloted the Mercedes up the long driveway toward the twelve thousand square feet of colonial grandeur that he called home. Eleanor—Ellie—his wife of twenty-one years yawned noisily and stretched in the seat next to him. “I don’t think I can feel my legs anymore,” she quipped.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to take the trip up from Chapel Hill in one long gulp like this. Tony was beat—ready for a short scotch and a long nap. “If dropping her off at college is this hard, how am I going to cope with her getting married one day?”

Ellie gave a dramatic shiver. “God, don’t even talk about that.” She found his hand in the dark, across the center console. “She’ll be fine. Her neighbors seem delightful. I bet she’s already found a brand new best friend.” Finding friends had always been easy for their daughter.

Tony pushed the button for the garage door and pulled into the rightmost bay of the four-car garage. When the engine stopped, Ellie made a beeline for the house while Tony policed the four empty water bottles and too many snack wrappers. He walked them out to trash bin.

On his way inside, he looked right at the severed telephone line, but he never saw it.

#

The intruder held a gun to Ellie’s head, the crook of his elbow tucked under her chin. He was a young man—a kid really, certainly not twenty-five—and on a different night under different circumstances, he might have been handsome. Dark eyes and dark hair complemented an olive complexion. His chiseled jaw and thick neck spoke of someone who labored hard, either at work or at the gym.

Ellie’s eyes bulged with terror, giant circles, red with tears.

“Is Amber all settled in?” the intruder asked.

Tony jumped back and yelled when he saw them. It was an animal sound, pure fear.

He felt a rumbling in his gut that made him think he might shit himself. As adrenalin flooded his body, he tried to look calm. “Are you all right, Ellie?” Somehow he knew that if he surrendered to the panic, violence would follow. If Tony could stay calm, so would Ellie, and in a world where things made sense, calm would beget calm. Whoever this guy was, just let him steal whatever he wanted and get the hell out.

“He’s hurting my neck,” Ellie gasped.

“She’s okay,” the intruder said. “I’m not hurting her.”

“Yes you are,” Ellie insisted.

The man smiled without humor. “Trust me, Ellie. I know how to hurt people. This is not pain.”

Tony raised his hands as if to ward off an angry dog. “Easy, okay? Who are you? What do you want?”

The intruder smiled broadly. “Two very fine questions.” He tightened his grip on Ellie and brought his mouth close to her ear. “You’re going to just die when you hear the answers.”

The next few moments passed in a kind of dazed blur. Carrying an oversized black gym bag in one hand and his pistol in the other, the intruder led his captives to the dining room.

He instructed Tony to sit in the massive master’s chair that dominated the north end of the inlaid mahogany table.

Tony followed directions and allowed Ellie to use the intruder’s duct tape to bind his ankles, wrists and elbows to the heavy wooden frame. He appreciated his wife’s efforts to keep the tape loose, but in the end, it didn’t matter. The man with the gun insisted that she wrap each point of attachment so many times that there was no such thing as loose by the time she was done.

With Tony thoroughly trussed, the intruder forced Ellie to secure her own ankles and one wrist to the matching chair at the south end of the table. When she was three-quarters restrained, the intruder felt it safe to finish the job by binding Ellie’s remaining wrist.

“Ah!” he proclaimed as he finished. He stood to his full height. “Everybody comfy?”

“Please don’t do this,” Ellie begged.

Tony saw the tears on her eyelids and was surprised by the anger he felt toward her. “Don’t beg, El,” he said. “Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

The intruder laughed. “That’s right, Tone. You tell her. God I love that tough talk. I can only imagine how safe Amber must have felt growing up with a tough-guy writer as a father.”

Tony’s stomach tensed. That was the second time this lunatic had mentioned her.

The intruder dropped his gym bag heavily on the table and opened it. “You’re pretty tough with words, aren’t you, Tone?” He pulled out a laptop computer, opened it, and started the boot-up procedure. When he didn’t get an answer to his question, he paused and glared. “Don’t consider any of my questions to be rhetorical,” he threatened. “I expect answers.”

Tony made a puffing sound that was supposed to be a bitter laugh. “What’s the point?” Despite his galloping heart and fiery stomach, he managed not to sound terrified. “You’ve clearly determined the right answers, so what do you need me for?”

The humor evaporated from the intruder’s face. “How do you do it, Ellie? How do you process such genius day after day?”

Tony’s ears went hot as his wife shot him a pleading look.

The intruder never broke eye contact with Ellie. “I’ll give you the same warning that I gave to Asshole. I ask questions because I want answers.”

Ellie stammered, “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“The truth will do.” He returned his gaze to his computer screen. “Don’t you find him to be such an ass sometimes?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “He’s a brilliant man. A terrific writer. A wonderful husband.”

The intruder scowled as he clacked the computer keys. After a few seconds, he turned the screen to display what clearly was an email. “From two days ago,” he said. He recited from memory: “Ellie to Amber. ‘Your father continues to think that he’s king of the world. He can be such an ass.’ Those are the very words you used. Such an ass. Sorry, Tone, that’s your bride talking, not me.”

“You spied on my email?” Ellie gasped. “Who are you?”

The intruder laughed too loudly. “Isn’t that just like a wife, Tone? You catch ’em red-handed in the act of doing wrong, and right away it’s somehow your fault.” He spun the computer back to face him and started typing again.

“I’m sure she was taken out of context,” Tony said.

“Oh, no she wasn’t. In fact, she wrote essentially the same things to her friends Sharon, Melissa and Sam. Should I pull those up, too?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I think you’ve made your point. You spied on us and found embarrassing things. Do I sense a blackmail pitch coming?”

The intruder remained focused on the screen. “This isn’t about money, Tone. This is about retribution. If it was about money and blackmail, I’d have threatened to tell Ellie about Marcie.”

The words landed like a fist in Tony’s gut. This was not possible. The look he shot to Ellie was supposed to scream innocence, but clearly it missed its mark.

“Oh, Ellie,” the intruder said. “You don’t know about Marcie? I could show you pictures, text messages, emails, or credit card receipts. Which would you like?”

Ellie stared, her face blank. Overwhelmed. “Marcie McLean?” she asked.

“It’s not like he says,” Tony tried.

“Oh, it’s exactly like I say,” the intruder said. “Jesus, Tone, this is a critical moment in your spiritual journey. One of you’s going to be dead in a few minutes. You don’t want to shed this mortal coil with a lie on your soul, do you?”

Tony felt his world closing, strangling him. Somehow this man had accomplished a surveillance miracle. He knew things that no one could know, and he’d somehow obtained proof to back it all up. Tony’s mind raced. If he tried to deny, the man would make a fool of him. If he owned up . . .

“It was only physical,” Tony said, finally. “It was never love.” Even as he spoke the words he knew how awful they sounded.

Ellie’s face had hardened into something awful. “Marcie McLean.”

The intruder made a clicking sound with his tongue. “If it helps, Ellie, I have no idea what he sees in her. You look way better naked than she does. Although I think you might want to have that mole on your tummy looked at.”

“Stop!” shouted Ellie.

The man finished making a connection in cyberspace and seemed pleased with himself. “Isn’t it remarkable how quickly a happy family can transform into something ugly? It’s almost like watching a smile turn to cancer, isn’t it?”

Tony flexed his wrists, testing the strength of his bonds. They remained impossibly secure. “Why are you doing this?”

The intruder looked to Ellie, his eyes wide. “Did you hear that? Did you hear that change in his voice? Did you hear the whine in Tone’s tone? I’m doing it because I can, Tony. I’m doing it to hurt you. To ruin things. Same reason a man brings a baseball bat into a china shop. I want to make pretty things ugly.”

He spun the computer around again so they could see it. At first, it appeared to be a smear of black and gray, indiscernible. Then the angle shifted, and as the picture resolved, Tony’s insides dissolved.

The intruder looked so proud. “So you see it,” he said. “You were quicker than I thought. Amber’s pretty while she sleeps, isn’t she?”

Tony gaped, his mouth dry and his brain numb with fear. “What have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything. At least not yet. Certainly nothing as terrible as what you’ve done.” The intruder leaned in closer. “I haven’t *killed* anyone. That’s more than you can say.”

Tony reared back in his chair. “What are you talking about? I’m a writer, for God’s sake.”

“A famous one at that,” the intruder agreed. He removed a phone from his pocket—the kind that doubles as a walkie-talkie—and pressed the button. “Okay, Max, we’re online now and I have their attention. Move the camera in closer so that our new friends can see just how close you are to lovely Amber.”

The image on the screen jiggled and jerked as the camera moved closer to the sleeping teen.

Ellie gasped, “Jesus, Tony, what have you done?”

“What?” How could she ask such a thing. “What have *I* done? Don’t listen to him. I never killed anyone.”

“Always listen to me,” the intruder corrected. Into the radio, he said, “Pull the covers down so we can see her pretty nightie.”

Tony shouted, “No! Stop! Please stop!”

A man’s hand appeared in the screen, and with just two fingers it pulled down the blanket and sheet far enough to reveal the girl’s bare shoulder and pink teddy.

“For Christ’s sake, stop! Just tell me what you want and I’ll do it. Please leave her alone.”

The intruder regarded Tony for a moment, then keyed his microphone. “You can stop now, Max.”

The hand retreated, but the cover remained down.

“She’s drugged, of course,” the intruder explained. “What with all that money you’ve got, I know you thought you were doing her a favor by getting her an apartment to herself, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am. You made all of this much easier for my brother and me.” He looked to Ellie. “He should have listened to you, Ellie.”

Tony felt light-headed. How did this madman know these things? He and Ellie had argued repeatedly over Amber’s safety while living alone, but it had always been in private. Jesus, they’d bugged his house!

“You said I killed someone,” Tony said, hoping that something would make sense. “Who did I allegedly kill?”

“*Whom*,” the intruder mocked, leaning on the M. “Whom did you *allegedly* kill?” He shook his head sadly, as if dealing with a dim-witted child. “There’s no alleged about it, Tone. You killed my father.”

Ellie gasped.

“I did no such thing! Ellie, he’s lying.”

The intruder turned his attention back to the gym bag and withdrew a bag of fluid in a sealed plastic container, followed by a coil of intravenous tubing. “I’m hurt that you don’t remember, Tony. It sure was a momentous day for us. Maybe even for history. On that day, you proved literally that the pen is mightier than the sword. How can you not remember? It’s only been eighteen years. Do you really kill that many people that they run together?”

Eighteen years. Something stirred in Tony’s memory. Something about a bad source.

“My name is Frederick Reasoner,” the intruder said. He spelled it out for them, letter by letter, enunciating carefully. “Freddy to my friends and to people I’m going to kill. My father was Chad Reasoner. Ring a bell?”

Oh, Christ yes. That was the guy Tony felt the blood leaving his head.

Ellie saw it in his face. “Did you kill his father?”

“Of course not,” Tony snapped. But he knew the words had come too quickly; that he’d sounded dismissive. Disrespectful. Still, there was a larger point to be made. “The man committed suicide.”

Freddy froze, his eyes hot. “You drove it to him,” he seethed. A long moment passed before he turned his attention back to the IV bag. “You reporters amaze me,” he said, inserting the tubing into port on the bottom of the bag. “Everyone else is accountable to you, yet you’re accountable only to yourself. You’re free to slander anyone—free to *ruin* anyone—so long as unnamed sources tell you the lies you want to hear. Facts don’t matter so long as you get to see your name in the byline.”

“That’s not what happened,” Tony insisted. His mind screamed at him to do something, but what? This madman was going to poison him to death!

“What did happen?” Ellie asked him.

Tony closed his eyes. If he enveloped himself in darkness, maybe he could make it all go away.

“Tony?”

“It was a long time ago, El.” He opened his eyes to look at his wife, praying that her look of betrayal and sadness would not be the one that he took with him into death. He tried to ignore Freddy’s ongoing preparations. “This man, Chase Reasoner—”

“*Chad* Reasoner,” Freddy corrected.

“Chad Reasoner, then. He was a high-ranking civilian with the Army, as I recall.”

Freddy corrected again: “A civilian after twenty-seven years of active duty and retiring as a colonel.”

“I’d be happy to let you tell the story,” Tony offered. “I’m sure you know it better than I.”

“What are you *doing*?” Ellie snapped.

Freddy’s eyes rolled up from the tangle of IV tubing to glare at Tony. He brought his phone to his lips and keyed the mike. “Hey, Max, Tony’s being a smart ass. How about you let us see Amber’s nipples?”

Ellie gasped, “Oh, my God, no.”

Freddy swiveled the computer so that they could see again. The hand eased the strap of the teddy down the girl’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “Please, God, I’m—”

A finger hooked the fabric of Amber’s nightie and gently pulled it straight down.

“—sorry. I was just—”

When the fabric was down far enough, the hand tucked it under the crease of her left breast.

“—frustrated by the question. It’s been—”

The hand massaged the exposed nipple between thumb and forefinger.

“Stop it!” Ellie bellowed, making them all jump. “For God’s sake, she’s just a girl. She’s done nothing to you.”

Freddy stopped her with a raised forefinger. “No,” he said. “That’s where you have it wrong. That’s what you’re not understanding. Amber is not *just* a girl. She’s Tony Emerson’s daughter.” He pointed the forefinger like a gun at Tony. “Daughter of the same man who taught me at age seven that

innocence can't buy justice. Not when a reporter is out to do damage." He gathered up the mess of tubing into both hands. "Isn't that right, Tony?" He moved carefully to keep track of the dangling ends as he edged over to Tony's side of the table.

"Tell Ellie what really happened."

On the verge of tears, she waited for it, her eyes pleading.

Tony wracked his mind, trying to come up with the right thing to say. It's hard to focus on details when a psychopath is readying a needle for your arm. Freddy seemed particularly interested in the bulging veins on the back of Tony's hand, made even more pronounced by the tight binding of the duct tape.

"I did a story," he said. "It was a piece on government corruption. We got tipped by a source that Chad Reasoner was guilty of taking bribes and we printed it." He winced as the needle found its mark and Freddy slid it into the vein.

"Don't stop there," Freddy said, jiggling the needle and extracting a yelp of pain.

"We had two corroborating sources," Tony said. He could hear the defensiveness in his voice. "I don't remember how much money was involved, but it was substantial."

Freddy slapped him in the face, hard enough for Tony to smell blood. "Tell *all* of it."

"I am telling all of it! We did our jobs to inform the public, and we did it responsibly."

Freddy slapped him again.

Ellie made an animal sound, pure anguish. "Stop! Good God, what could be worth this? Tony, give him what he wants!"

Tony locked his jaw, fought the fear. The next blow Freddy delivered hit harder than the others, and it nailed him in front of his ear, igniting a flash of agony through his teeth. "The sources were lying!" he blurted. "I wrote a perfectly good story that turned out to be wrong. There, is that what you're looking for?"

Freddy steadied the IV connection with one hand while he withdrew the needle and tossed it onto the table, leaving the flexible catheter in the vein. He remained quiet as he inserted the IV tube into the catheter and rolled the valve to get a drip going.

“What are you putting in him?” Ellie demanded.

Freddy looked at Tony. Looked through Tony. “Just saline for now,” he said. “Perfectly harmless. Why did your sources lie?”

“Why does *anyone* lie?”

Freddy drew back to deliver another slap, but stopped himself. He picked up the discarded needle from the table. “You know, Tone, I’m beginning to change my mind here.” He steadied Tony’s head by grabbing a fistful of hair and brought the needle to within an inch of his face. “Maybe I shouldn’t kill you. Maybe I should just blind you and leave you here. One stab each of this needle in your eyes and then in Ellie’s. Sure would put a new spin on the phrase eyewitness.” He moved the needle closer still.

“Personal vendetta!” Tony yelled. When Freddy didn’t retreat, he repeated, “They lied because of a personal vendetta. Chad Reasoner was an easy take-down because he was new to the political system, and the other side conspired to make him the scapegoat for taking bribes, when in fact no bribes were ever taken. We published a retraction, for God’s sake. We made a mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake!” Freddy bellowed. “Don’t you dare call it a mistake! It was your duty to print the truth, but you printed a lie.”

“Mistakes are going to happen,” Ellie offered, ever the peacemaker.

“Except it wasn’t a mistake, was it, Tony?”

Tony wanted to lie. He opened his mouth to deny it, but he knew it was useless. “I should have known better,” he said. “The sources were from the President’s opposition party, and it was an election year. Procurement was a hot issue at the time, and the facts were all a little too convenient.”

“And it told the story that you wanted to tell,” Freddy helped. “It was an election year and you and your paper were backing the other guy. This story played right into the theme of your editorial page, didn’t it?”

Tony closed his eyes and hung his head. He hadn't thought about any of this in years.

"And the fact that a man commits suicide and leaves his family without a father is just so much collateral damage, isn't it. It wasn't your fault, right? Any man whose sense of honor drives him to take his own life to protect his family from shame just has to be unstable, doesn't he? You and your paper didn't cause any of that. Isn't that right, Tony?"

When Tony opened his eyes and looked at the intruder, he tried not to see the disappointment in Ellie's face. "You make it sound simple, cut-and-dried. It was anything but. That incident triggered a massive internal review."

"Navel gazing," Freddy said. "After five straight days of incisive investigative journalism that caused a good man to kill himself, all on the front page, you printed a three hundred word mea culpa three weeks later on page A5. Way to stand up, Tone."

Freddy turned to Ellie. "Do you now see what your husband does? He gets paid to fabricate stories, and then hides from the consequences. Then, when he feels a little randy, he picks someone at random and fucks her." He leaned in till he was nose-to-nose with Ellie. "But don't worry. It was never love." He pointed back to the computer screen. "That's not love, either. So I guess by Tony's standard, Max can do whatever he likes."

Tony was working very hard now not to throw up.

Freddy stood to his full height again. "So, Tony, what happened to those sources who lied to you after you revealed their names?"

Tony's heart hammered at a deadly rate and his breathing chugged. He knew where this was going, but he was powerless to stop it. "Nothing happened to them," he said. "We never released their names."

"Aha. And why is that?"

"Because we never reveal our sources."

Freddy moved behind Ellie and rested his hands on the back of her chair. "This is what we've come to, El. This is what your husband calls ethics. One man drives another to suicide, then gets to hide

from the consequences because he was—” Freddy used finger quotes in the air. “—only reporting what he had been told. Then the real guilty parties get to live their lives without consequence because they are protected sources. This isn’t collateral damage, is it, Tony? This is murder. Isn’t that what you call it when only the innocent die?”

Ellie jumped reflexively as Freddy tipped her chair backward until its front legs were in the air.

“Sorry to startle you,” he said. “We’re going on a little trip.” With the chair and its occupant tipped back slightly more than forty-five degrees, he dragged her down the length of the table, until she was elbow-to-elbow with her husband.

“So, now it’s time for consequences,” Freddie said. He attached one more length of IV tubing to the rig already taped to Tony’s arm, and then loaded up a hypodermic syringe from a small vial of medicine. “What you see here is enough sedative to make you sleep forever, Tone.” He held the syringe up against the light so they all could see the liquid level. “In fact, it’s the same drug we gave to Amber to make her so cooperative. She only got a tenth of what we’re going to give you, though.”

Tony started to tremble. Fear enveloped him like a wet rubber shroud, chilling his body and making it hard to breathe.

“Please don’t,” Ellie begged. “You’ve made your point. You’ve humiliated him. You’ve hurt our daughter. Isn’t that enough? Please don’t do this.”

Freddy positioned the needle against an injection port in the tubing.

Tony jumped as the intruder pierced the needle through the rubber cap. “For Christ’s sake, Freddy,” he said. “I’m so, so sorry. Please don’t do this.”

“Please don’t do this, please don’t do this,” Freddy mocked. “Can’t you people come up with your own lines? Tell you what I’ll do.” He placed the barrel of the syringe, connected to the IV tubing, between the first and second fingers of Ellie’s left hand. She closed her fist to be rid of it. “Don’t fight me, Ellie. This is almost over. Let me put this in your hand. I’m going to give you complete control over the plunger.” He slid the syringe between her fingers again. “There you go. Be careful, though. Press that plunger in, and Tony dies. It’ll take thirty seconds or so, but there’ll be no going back.”

Tony said nothing. He stared at the syringe.

“So, what do you say, Ellie? Want to kill him for what he’s done?”

“No!” she insisted. “Of course not.”

“But he’s a bad man. He cheated on you.”

“No.”

Freddy smiled. This seemed to be what he had been expecting. “Okay, that’s good. We have our baseline. Let’s see what it’ll take. At any time, all you have to do is say stop and push the plunger.” Into his radio-phone Freddy said, “Start having fun with the girl.”

He moved the computer monitor closer to Ellie and angled it so that Tony could not see the image. He watched the horror on Ellie’s face blossom and darken. “Oh, God,” she moaned. “Oh, sweet Jesus.”

“Good looking girl, Tony. Nice little body. You know, you can stop it at any time, too. You just have to say please, and Ellie and I will push the plunger and make it stop.”

Tony’s stomach cramped hard. Wetness spread on his trousers and chair, but he didn’t dare look.

“Don’t say it unless you mean it, though,” Freddy warned. “You only get one chance. You can’t change your mind. But think of the suffering you could save. Your daughter won’t have to be raped, your wife can be spared from killing you. Come on, Tony. Step up. Be a man. Make it all go away.

Tony knew what the right decision was. Hell, he watched the movies and read books just like everyone else. He knew what the noble father was supposed to do.

You only get one chance.

Freddy shifted his gaze. “What do you say, Ellie? Life is about choices. You can ruin one or end another. I’m sure Tony has insurance. You can be a rich woman and save your daughter’s virtue at the same time. How often will you get a chance to prove your loyalty to your child?”

Tony saw something change behind his wife’s eyes. “Ellie,” he whispered.

“He doesn’t respect you, Ellie. He’s a pig. Amber is all about the future. Jesus, look at the screen. You’re running out of time.”

“Ellie, don’t,” Tony begged.

She shifted her grip on the syringe to put her thumb on the plunger.

“God, Ellie, think about what you’re doing.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Her thumb depressed the plunger.

“Oh, God, no!” Tony yelled. “Oh, please, no.” The poison felt warm as it hit his blood stream.

“Congratulations,” Freddy said. “Nicely done. Give it thirty seconds, Tony. Say hi to Satan for me when you see him.”

Tony’s head screamed. For all he knew, his mouth screamed, too. This couldn’t be all there was. It couldn’t be this easy. You start the morning just like any other, filled with love and security, and then it could all be taken away on the whim of a crazy man? That wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. He had things he had to do for Christ’s sake. He had an unfinished column due in two days. He wasn’t ready to leave the world. Who was this asshole to think that he had the right to make it happen?

But the plunger had fallen. He could see the blunt black rubber flat against the stop, no liquid remaining in the tube.

He felt hot. A hundred degrees. Two hundred. Burning up. Jesus, it hurt.

He looked to Ellie for one last glance, one loving image to take with him, but she wouldn’t make eye contact. She was sobbing and pleading with Freddy to make the pain go away. Pain. That was the word she used. Hey, Ellie honey, I got your pain right here. Want to trade? At least you get a tomorrow. Tony was going to die trussed to a chair and soaked in his own piss.

Yeah, babe, want to trade?

Thirty seconds. That’s what Freddy had said. It would all be over in thirty seconds. How long could thirty seconds last? Tony gasped for air, breathing rapidly, almost convulsively, as if to stockpile oxygen and stave off the inevitable. If it was going to happen, please God let it happen soon.

But it didn’t happen. Nothing changed.

As the panic diluted to mere terror, Tony realized that Freddy was smiling at him. He stood there, smug with his arms crossed while Ellie's head bobbed with wracking sobs.

"It's not poison," he said, and whatever reaction he saw in Tony's face made him throw back his head and laugh.

Tony felt his body flush hotter. What the hell?

"It's just more saline," Freddy clarified.

Ellie's gaze shot to the computer screen, the question on her face obvious.

Freddy shrugged and started cleaning up his toys. "Well, she got the real stuff, but not enough to hurt her." He left the IV line connected. "You had me worried, Ellie. Once we had her naked, I'm not sure what we would have done. As long as you held out, I worried that I was going to run out of bluff."

Tony struggled to make sense of it. "A bluff? All this was a bluff?"

Freddy continued cleaning. "I'm not a killer, Tony, and I'm not a rapist. I'm a pissed off orphan, and everything shitty that has happened to me in my life is your fault. I needed to teach you a lesson."

Tony felt himself breathing heavily again. "Oh, my God. You're insane."

Another laugh. "Hardly. I'm a teacher with a lesson plan. You needed to know how quickly life can change. You needed to understand that death racks up an enormous debt that can only be paid by the survivors. That's where the real pain is. It's all in the after."

"This was a lesson?" Ellie mused aloud.

He was almost finished cleaning up. "A lesson about destroying lives. Collateral damage. Think about all we've learned in the last half hour. We know that Tony cares less about you, Ellie, than he does about his libido. He loves his own sorry life more than he does the future of his own daughter. And you're willing to kill him outright if the circumstances fit. I think we learned a whole lot."

Tony opened his mouth to say something, but words wouldn't come.

With his bag re-packed, he bounced it lightly in his hand. "Okay, then. I've arranged for a delivery to the house tomorrow morning that will require your signature. If you shout loud enough, I'm sure they'll hear you. When they do, they can cut you free."

“You’re going to prison,” Tony threatened.

“No I’m not. I’ve got unnamed sources who will swear that I was with them tonight. Amber will have no memory of any of this, and there’s been no physical harm done to her. You can try, but I think you’ll be frustrated. In the real world, you need evidence.”

Tony’s mind raced. It couldn’t end like this. There had to be justice. Then he remembered the surveillance. That would be the key—

“And if you’re thinking of tracking me down by the surveillance I’ve done on you, forget it. It’s gone.” He started walking toward the front door then stopped. “That’s a shame, too. I sure would love to hear what you two talk about after I’m gone.”

He left.

Alone now, unable to move, the Emersons sat in silence for a long while. They could make this work. Damage was done, but in the shared trauma of the evening, there had to be something left to salvage. It might take time, and it might take counseling, but surely there was a way.

“Ellie, I’m sorry. If we—”

“No,” she snapped. “Don’t say a word. It’s over.”

Tony felt pressure behind his eyes. “It doesn’t have to be. We can get counsel—”

Her eyes turned hot. Homicidal. “Don’t. Say. A word.”