

Want to know a secret?

# LOVE, MOM

A large, brown, triangular envelope is positioned diagonally across the center of the image. It is covered in several red blood splatters of varying sizes. The background is a grey, textured surface, possibly concrete or metal, with more blood splatters scattered around the envelope.

**A best-selling author.  
A mother.  
A murderer.**

**ILIANA XANDER**



LOVE, MOM

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# **LOVE, MOM**

A psychological thriller

**ILIANA XANDER**

LOVE, MOM

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## PROLOGUE

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

### *BEST-SELLING AUTHOR FOUND DEAD*

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

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

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

Oh, the lies...

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

She had it coming.



She deserved to die.

I just wish it had happened sooner.

# **PART 1**

# ONE

## MACKENZIE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as she walks off, her smile disappears.

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

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

Now, the man is forced to leave again.

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

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

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

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

We cremated Mom several days ago in a private arrangement attended only by a dozen or so people. Still, there were no tears.

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

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

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

*Screw them.*

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

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

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

“And wear something appropriate.”

I almost always wear black. Coincidentally, that's very appropriate for a memorial service. Just like my black eyeliner and the lipstick I put on anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

I want to cry, I really do, but I can't. For the last week, since the accident and while I was staying home instead of at my studio apartment in town, I constantly thought about her, what we had, our little screwed-up family. I felt sad, just not overwhelmingly sad like I am supposed to be, I guess.

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

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

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

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

The hell?

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

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

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

"Get out. Now."

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

"Who?"

"Mackenzie."

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

"Don't you dare mention my daughter."

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

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

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

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

*Dammit.*

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

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

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

“Were you arguing with someone?”

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

“Do you know that man?”

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

That’s a clear lie.

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

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

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

*“You okay?”*

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

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

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

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

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

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

My phone rings.

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

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

"You are coming over, right?"

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

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

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

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

"You okay?" he asks.

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

*From #1 fan. XOXO*

## TWO

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

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

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

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

"Something crazy?"

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

"Did you forget to lock it?"

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

"Open it! It might be entertaining."

EJ is always excited about Mom's fan stories.

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

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

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

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

“Read them.”

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

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

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

“Come on!” EJ urges me impatiently.

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

The first page only has several lines that I slowly read out loud:

*Want to know a secret?*

*Love, Mom.*