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ISBN-13: 978-0-7783-0849-2

The Life She Wants

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This is for Therese Plummer, beloved narrator,
gifted actress and the voice of my heart.

The Life She Wants

Prologue

When the truth became brutally evident she wondered how it had escaped her for so long.

Emma Shay Compton knew that her marriage to Richard looked like a fairy tale to many and though she had loved Richard, she had always felt something was lacking. She couldn't put her finger on it, it was so vague. Richard was good to her, generous, though he was an extremely busy man, and soon after their wedding he became remote. Distant. She told herself mega-rich brokers don't sit around the house coddling their young wives; they work sixteen-hour days. They're never far from their phones. They seem to command multitudes. And if a person, even his wife, wanted to get on his calendar, she had to plan ahead. So, whenever she felt that something was wrong with her marriage, she'd blame herself.

When Richard's lawyers began to meet with him to discuss problems with the SEC, she barely noticed. When she asked him about media reports that his company was being investigated for securities fraud, he calmly said, "Slow news day."

Then he lectured her. “Pay attention to the financial pages—it happens every day. Several multibillion-dollar banking and investment corporations are currently being investigated. The SEC has to justify its existence somehow. I resent the time suck, but it won’t last long.”

She didn’t worry about it, though she did pay attention as he suggested. Of course he was right—there were many investigations, steep fines, reorganizations, buyouts, companies shutting down. The banking and investment world was under very close scrutiny.

Then he said they had to appear in court, he and his legal team. He wanted her by his side and asked if she could get it on her schedule and she laughed. “I’m not the one with a full schedule, Richard.”

He smiled his perfect, confident, calm smile. He touched her cheek. “You won’t have to do or say anything.”

The morning they were to appear in court he had noticed the suit she laid over the chair and said, “Perfect.” Then he went into his bathroom. Sitting at her dressing table, she was smoothing lotion on her legs. She heard the water running in his sink. And then she heard, “Son of a bitch!”

He’d cut himself shaving and swore—not unusual for him. But she met her own eyes in the mirror. Suddenly she knew. She’d been living a lie and everything said about him was true.

Her husband was a cold, calculating liar and thief. And she couldn’t pretend anymore.

One

It's the little things that will break you. Emma Shay had been thinking about that a lot lately. She stood strong while everything was taken from her, while she was virtually imprisoned at a little motel near the Jersey shore, while her husband was buried, while the media spun a sordid tale of deceit and thievery that implied she'd been aware, if not complicit, in her late husband's crimes. Stood. Strong. But, when the heel broke on her best sling-back pumps and she tumbled down the courthouse steps, she collapsed in tears. The photo was printed everywhere, even *People* magazine. When she was asked to please stop coming to her yoga studio, she thought she would die of shame and cried herself to sleep. No one had ever explained to her that the last straw weighed almost nothing.

Everything in her Manhattan apartment and vacation home had been auctioned off. She packed up some practical items to take with her and donated some of her casual clothing to women's shelters. Of course anything of value—the art, crystal, china, silver and jewelry had been seized quickly, even items she could prove had

nothing to do with Richard's business, including wedding gifts from friends. They took her designer clothing. Her Vera Wang wedding gown was gone. She was allowed to keep a couple sets of good sheets, towels, one set of kitchenware, some glasses, a few place mats, napkins and so on. She had a box of photos, most from before Richard. She stuffed it all in her Prius. The Jag was gone, of course.

She had been offered a financial settlement, since they couldn't establish that she had anything to do with Richard's Ponzi scheme; couldn't prove it since she was innocent. She hadn't testified against him—not out of loyalty or because it was her legal prerogative, but rather because she had nothing to say, nothing upon which to leverage some kind of deal. She hadn't been in court every day out of support for Richard but because it was the best way for her to learn about the crimes he was accused of. She had come into the marriage with nine thousand dollars in savings; she left as a widow, keeping nine thousand in a checking account. It would be her emergency fund. She started a trip across the country, leaving New York behind and heading for Sonoma County, where she grew up.

She'd given it all a great deal of thought. She'd been thinking about it for months before Richard's death. She could've kept the entire settlement and retired to the Caribbean. Or maybe Europe. She'd been fond of Switzerland. She could change her name, color her hair, lie about her past... But eventually people would figure her out and then what? Run again?

Instead, she surrendered the settlement, gave up everything she could have kept. She didn't want Richard's

ill-gotten gains. Even though she hadn't swindled anyone, she couldn't, in good conscience, touch any of it.

There were people she knew back in the Santa Rosa area, a few she'd stayed in touch with. The area was familiar to her. There wasn't much family anymore—her stepmother, Rosemary, had moved to Palm Springs with her third husband. As far as she knew, Emma's step-sister, Anna, and half sister, Lauren, still lived in the house they'd all grown up in. They'd all washed their hands of Emma when Richard was indicted. In fact, the last time she'd talked to her stepmother was right before Richard's death, when all the walls were tumbling down. Emma was literally in hiding from the angry victims of Richard's fraud—victims who believed Emma had gotten away with some of their money. Rosemary had said, "Well, your greed has certainly cost you this time."

"Rosemary, I didn't do anything," Emma reminded her.

And then Rosemary said what everyone thought. "So you *say*."

Well, Rosemary had always thought the worst of her. But Emma hoped the people she knew in Sonoma County wouldn't. She'd grown up there, gone to Catholic school and public high school there. And she thought it was extremely unlikely any clients, now victims, of Richard's New York-based investment company hailed from the little towns in Sonoma County.

Her closest friend, possibly her only friend at this point, Lyle Dressler, found her a little furnished bungalow in Sebastopol. Lyle and his partner lived in the town, so she had some moral support there.

Emma was thirty-four and had married Richard Compton nine years ago. He was a sharp, handsome,

successful forty-five when they married. At twenty-five she'd been completely under his spell. He might have been twenty years older than her, but forty-five was hardly considered old. He was fit, handsome, brilliant, rich and powerful. In fact, he was considered one of the most desired bachelors in New York City.

Rosemary and Emma's sisters had certainly liked him *then*. They were eager to travel to New York to attend any social event Richard would grudgingly include them in. But they hadn't offered one ounce of support to Emma during the takedown.

The few years of marriage before the investigation and indictment hadn't been heaven on earth, but they weren't bad. Her complaints seemed to be standard among people she knew—he was busy, preoccupied, they didn't spend enough time together even when they were traveling. The first friends she'd made through work in New York had gradually drifted away once she settled into her multimillion-dollar marriage. She'd never quite fit in with the elite crowd, so she'd been a little lonely. It seemed like she was always around people, doing her part with committee work, exercising, decorating, entertaining, feeling that she must be indispensable to Richard. However, he was all she really had. It was a dark and terrible day when she realized he was a complete stranger.

Before her fifth anniversary, the investigation had begun. Before the seventh, indictments had been handed down and assets frozen. She spent her eighth anniversary in court. Richard's defense attorneys had managed many a delay but eventually there was a trial—a circus of a trial—and she appeared to be the trusting, good wife, head held high. Richard's mother and sis-

ter had not come to the trial and refused interviews. She'd always assumed they didn't think she was good enough for Richard, but after the trial she changed her opinion. They must have known all about him. He was dark and empty inside.

He never talked to her about it, at least not until the ugly, bitter end. When she asked about the investigation he just said they were out to get him, that business was tough but he was tougher, that they'd never prove anything. At the end there had been a few brief, nasty but revealing discourses. *How could you? How could I not? How could you justify the greed? My greed? How about their greed? Do they have to justify it? They wanted me to do anything to make them money! They wanted me to spin straw into gold even if I had to lie, cheat and steal! Each one of them just wanted their payday before it all broke!*

The feds proved everything with ease. Employees cut deals and testified against him. Truckloads of documentation proved securities fraud, theft, mail fraud, wire fraud, money laundering... The list was long. When the end was near, when he'd attempted a getaway and been unceremoniously returned by US Marshals, when his offshore accounts had been located and identified, when he faced a long jail sentence with no nest egg left hidden away, Richard shot himself.

Of course no one believed Emma had no idea. Apparently people thought he came home from the office and bared his soul over a drink. He had not.

The Richard she knew was obviously a con man, a chameleon. He could be so charming, so devoted. But he always had a plan and always wanted something more. *Why wouldn't I marry you? You were an outstanding invest-*

ment. Perfect for the role! It's a well-known fact—people trust married men more than single men. He was a narcissist, a manipulator, a liar and cheat. He was so damn good at it, a person could feel almost honored to be manipulated and lied to by him. He had the looks of Richard Gere, the brilliance of Steve Jobs, the ethics of Bernie Madoff. Thank God he wasn't as successful as Bernie. Richard had only managed to steal about a hundred million.

What *did* she know? She knew he was private; he didn't talk about work, which she thought was normal behavior for a powerful man. He was an amazing communicator socially and in business, but once he stopped courting her, he stopped telling her stories about his family, his youth, college, about his early years on Wall Street. She knew he didn't have many old friends, just a lot of business contacts. She never met college pals or colleagues from his early professional days. He did routinely ask her about her day, however. He'd ask her about her schedule, her projects, what she did, who she talked to, what was happening in her world. When he was home, that is—he was often working late or traveling. The thing that set Richard apart from other, mediocre con men—he knew how to *listen*. People, herself included, thought they'd learned something about him when he hadn't said a word about himself. But he listened to them. Raptly. They were thrilled by this attention.

One nine-year marriage, a few years of which had been weirdly adequate, five years of which had been a nightmare. Now she wondered when the nightmare would end.

Emma drove directly to Lyle's flower shop, Hello, Gorgeous, named for Barbra Streisand, of course. Lyle had been wonderful to her through this whole ordeal. He

hadn't been able to be in New York with her very often. Not only was it a great, costly distance but there was also the small complication that his partner, Ethan, had never been particularly fond of Emma, though he didn't really know her. Lyle had made a couple of trips, however, and called almost daily during the rough patches. She understood about Ethan. But Lyle and Emma had been friends long before Ethan came into his life. For reasons unknown, Ethan had never warmed to her. Emma suspected good old-fashioned jealousy, as if Emma might bring out Lyle's straight side or something. So Emma and Ethan had always had a rather cool regard for each other. But since Richard's debacle, Ethan's regard had gone from cool to frigid.

But—and this was an important but—if Ethan went on about his dislike and disapproval of Emma too much, he was going to lose Lyle, and he might be bitchy but he wasn't stupid.

Emma stood outside the shop and took a deep breath before walking through the door. And of course, who should be behind the counter but Ethan. "Well, Emma, I see you made it," he said as though it took effort to be kind.

"Yes, thank you," she answered carefully.

"Rough journey?" Ethan surprised her by asking.

"In every way," she said.

"Well, there you are," Lyle said as he came from the back and rushed over to embrace her. "Would you like a cup of coffee or something before we head over to Penny's house?"

She shook her head. "I parked down the block in the only available space. I'd like to get going—I have a lot to do."

“Sure,” he said. He turned to Ethan. “I’m going to give Em a hand, visit with Penny a little. I’ll probably grab something to eat with them. I won’t be late.”

Ethan lifted his chin and sniffed, but his reply was perfectly appropriate. “I think I’ll drop in on Nora and Ed. Sounds like a good night to get a little uncle time.”

“Excellent. Give them my love.”

Then, hand on her elbow, Lyle escorted her out of the shop. “I’m parked right here. I’ll drive you down to your car,” he said.

“Oh, please, no,” she said, laughing. “My butt hurts so bad, I hate to even get back in the car. I’m going to walk—it’s only a block. And I have a cooler with some drinks for us. Listen, I don’t want to...” She tilted her head toward the store. “I don’t want to cause any friction. If you’ll just get me to the house and introduce me to your friend, I can manage from there.”

“No worries, Emma. I explained to Ethan days ago that I was going to lend a hand when you got here.” He chuckled. “He was very adult about it. It’s time for him to pay his sister a visit anyway. They live a mile away and Ethan doesn’t visit as often as he should. I think I visit more than he does—we have a gorgeous niece. He can go over there and complain about me and my stubborn ways. Besides, I want to make sure you’re all right.”

She smiled at him with gratitude. “I might never be all right again,” she said. “All I want right now is a little quiet and anonymity.”

“Have you heard from Rosemary?” he asked.

“I did her the courtesy of emailing her that I’d be moving to a small bungalow in Sebastopol and told her I could be reached through you. I don’t even trust her enough to give her my new cell number—I bet she’d sell it to the press. I take it you haven’t heard from her?” He

shook his head and this came as no surprise. Rosemary had been in touch when she thought Richard was rich and powerful; after his fall from grace, she behaved as if she didn't know him. "We haven't made amends. She wasn't exactly supportive."

"Your sisters should be helping you now," he said.

They had never done anything to help her. "We've never been that kind of family," she said. Indeed, they weren't family at all.

"I can relate," Lyle said.

Emma knew Lyle had always had a hard time with his father, but at least his mother adored him. She gave his upper arm a squeeze. "Well, you've saved my life here. I'd be lost without this little place you found."

"It found me. Penny is elderly, but don't use that word around her. She's what we'd call spry. Almost eighty and still walking three miles a day, gardening and playing the occasional game of tennis. But the problem with living forever, the money thins out eventually."

"And she knows everything?" Emma asked.

He nodded. "As you wished. She said, 'We've all hooked up with the wrong person here and there, poor girl.' This little bungalow is a sort of guesthouse, a casita, though her house, the main house, isn't that much bigger. Prepare yourself, it's all quite small. She doesn't need a keeper. No care involved. But a little bit of rent will probably help you both." He shook his head. "I don't know that you've ever lived in anything this simple, Em. It's old, musty, small and tacky."

"You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to it."

The guesthouse was actually a remodeled freestanding garage with a wall and large picture window where

the doors once were. The window looked out onto a pleasant tree-lined street. It was a tiny, two-room bungalow with a small bathroom and galley kitchen. A patio separated the guesthouse from Penelope Pennington's two-bedroom house. "And of course you're welcome to use the patio at any time," Penny assured her. "And if you ever have any serious cooking to do, feel free to borrow my kitchen."

It was an attractive little arrangement. Penny had the driveway removed years before and now there was a carport and storage unit. In front of both little houses and on either side of the driveway and carport were two small patches of grass, shrubs, trees and flowers. From the patio one could reach Emma's little abode on the right or Penny's on the left. A tall, white fence with a gate bordered the property.

It took less than half an hour to unload Emma's small car. There wasn't much furniture in the bungalow—a bed and bureau, a small table and two chairs, a couple of lamps, a small sofa and two armchairs. She had her own bedding and kitchenware. She found the guesthouse quaint and cozy. Her boxes and suitcases had yet to be unpacked, but she didn't care. Lyle went off to a nearby market to get dinner, bringing Penny and Emma a huge Greek salad, some hummus, flatbread and a bottle of wine. They had their dinner at Penny's, sitting around her little dining table, and Emma loved her at once.

Then at last it was just Emma and Lyle, sitting in her cozy living room with a final glass of wine. She sat in a musty old overstuffed chair upholstered with a floral pattern, her feet up on an ottoman that didn't quite match. Lyle relaxed on the sofa, his feet up on the coffee table.

"This place really needs a fluff and buff," he said.

“I love it,” she said. “I think this will be my reading chair.”

“How can you read with the flowers in that gaudy print screaming at you?”

She laughed at him.

“Have you given any thought to what kind of job you’re going to get?” he asked.

“Well,” she said, taking a thoughtful sip. “I was considering being a life coach. What do you think?”

“You can certainly provide plenty of experience with what *not* to do,” he said.

“I can honestly say I haven’t felt this relaxed in years,” she said.

Lyle was quiet for a moment. “Emmie, I don’t know what it’s going to be like for you around here. It’s a quiet town, but not without its resident gossips and petty meanness. Know what I mean?”

“I grew up around here, remember?” she said. “No matter where I go, it’s going to follow me. But I was never indicted for any crime. And believe me, they looked hard and long.”

“I just want you to be ready. In case.”

“In case people are nasty to me or snigger when I walk by? That’s why I came here rather than trying to find some new place where I could be a stranger with a new identity—everyone figures it out eventually. Lies don’t last—Richard was proof of that. Let’s just get it over with. I was married to the late Richard Compton, the infamous broker and thief. There’s no way to undo it. And I didn’t have to think about it long—the stress of trying to keep it secret is something I’m just not up to. I could change my name, color my hair, even get a nose job if I had any money, but eventually everyone

is going to know it's me. It's hopeless, Lyle—Google me and see for yourself.”

“Under Emma Shay?”

“And Emma Shay Compton, Emma Compton, Emma Catherine Shay.”

“Dear God,” he groaned. “I hope it dwindles away quickly,” he said.

“It's all on the record. Anyone who's curious is welcome to read all about it. There are even a couple of books, though they're not very accurate.”

“How'd he do it, Em?”

She knew exactly what he was talking about. Richard's suicide. She took a breath. She was surprised he hadn't just looked it up—it was splattered, like Richard's brains, across all the papers and internet news sites.

“After he'd attempted to run via a colleague's private jet with a fake passport, he was returned to jail and held without bond. The lawyers managed to negotiate house arrest with an ankle bracelet. After the guilty verdict was returned he tried to negotiate sentencing by giving up offshore account numbers, hoping to reduce his sentence. But no matter what, he was going to jail for a long time. He opened the hidden safe behind the bookcase in his home office, pulled out his loaded Glock and shot himself. In the head.”

Lyle shook his head. “He didn't want to go to prison...”

“I'm sure it was more than that,” she said. “Oh, there was no doubt prison would be horrendous, but that's not why he did it. There was no material wealth left. There were no more offshore or Swiss accounts. It was really over. He was going to go to prison for fifty years and even if he was paroled early or could escape, there was nothing to allow him to retire quietly in Aruba, or

some other remote island. With his stash.” She sighed. “It was the most important thing to him. The wealth.”

“I’m surprised the police didn’t know about the safe or the gun,” he said. “Didn’t you say they searched the apartment?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know if they ever saw it—they weren’t looking for it. They confiscated his computers and lots of files from home and his office, all his electronics, but their warrant wasn’t for things like guns or drugs. I didn’t know about the gun.”

“Did he do anything at all to try to protect you?” Lyle asked.

She just shook her head.

“And after he was buried?”

“It was a couple of weeks yet until everything was gone and the paperwork on the auction and the sale of the apartment was final. I closed his office door and slept on a cot in the kitchen. It was the safest place for me. Marshals were watching the apartment and there was a doorman.” She made a face. “It was so horrible.”

“I’m only going to say this one more time, Emmie, then we’re moving on. I’m just so, so sorry.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Listen, you go home. And tell Ethan that I appreciate how decent he’s been and assure him I’m not going to be pestering the two of you. I found I do very well on my own. It’s lovely to be near you, but you don’t have to worry that this out-of-place girlfriend is going to be the needy type and make you feel invaded. I’m not going to be your third wheel.”

“We have some very nice friends, a lot of them gay men, and there are more than enough third wheels in our crowd. Don’t worry about it. Call us whenever you feel like it.”

“You’ve been wonderful. You’ve always been a better friend to me than I’ve been to you,” she said.

“Not true. There’ve been very kind gestures here and there...”

“Shhhh,” she warned. Before the trouble began, she had a household budget that was ridiculously large and she economized, leaving her a nice balance. It was her money and she used some to help fund the start-up of Hello, Gorgeous. Best if no one ever knew. Lyle had been interviewed about their relationship, possibly even investigated, but had never been any kind of suspect. In fact, they didn’t speak of it. Emma was fairly sure Ethan didn’t even know the details.

“Suffice it to say, I’m glad you’re here,” Lyle said. “I’ve missed you. And now there are a couple of things I should tell you. People have asked about you, which of course they would. But a couple of old friends have asked a few times recently. Asked what you would do now. Riley came into the shop and asked if you were all right. She knows we’ve always been in touch, just as you know I keep up with her, but where you two are concerned I made it a policy to never carry tales between you. She wanted to know if there was anything you needed.”

“Guilty conscience,” Emma said.

“Easy, Emma. She might be one of the few people who can actually understand what you’re going through,” he said. “I know you’re not sympathetic, but she had to rebuild her life after you left. And Jock called. Divorced and living in Santa Rosa. He wanted to know if there was any chance you’d be coming back this way when it was all over. He said to tell you that if you need anything...”

“Seriously?” she asked.

“Very sincerely. I’m not his biggest fan, but he did offer support.”

She said nothing. Of course she knew they were both here, Riley and Jock. Back when they were all so young, her best friend and her boyfriend. She’d returned for brief visits a few times after leaving so long ago and had not spoken to them, but she always knew they were still around. When she decided to come back here for good she knew it was possible she’d run into one or both of them eventually.

“Might be time to move on from that haunt, Emma,” Lyle said.

“I have moved on,” she answered. “I’ve moved on from a lot of things. And I’m not going back one step.”