

Title: Through Rain and Ruin

The meeting wasn't supposed to happen. Not here, not in this way. Alexander Kaine stood outside the warehouse-turned-café, the smell of wet asphalt mingling with the acrid tang of diesel. The rain had soaked through his coat, but he barely noticed. Inside was Emma Roarke, the widow of a man whose name had become a ghost story in the circles Alexander had spent the last year chasing. The coordinates she'd sent were buried deep in an encrypted email header, the kind of digital breadcrumb left only by someone who knew how to avoid being traced.

She was already waiting when he entered, seated at the farthest booth beneath a single flickering bulb. The place was as dead as the streets outside—no barista, no music, just the hollow echo of dripping rainwater somewhere in the back.

### The Setup

They didn't shake hands. They didn't exchange pleasantries. Alexander sat across from her, pulling out his notebook and recorder. She didn't flinch when the device beeped to life; she simply stared at him with a hollow gaze that felt like it had been dragged from another world.

"I don't know what you think you'll get from this," she said. Her voice was flat, devoid of the softness he'd expected. "But I can promise you, Damien didn't leave much behind. Not for me, not for anyone."

Alexander met her gaze, his hand steady as he scribbled notes. "You reached out, not me."

Emma's jaw tightened, a flicker of something—anger, maybe—breaking through her otherwise calm demeanor. "I didn't reach out. You found something you weren't supposed to, and now I'm here cleaning it up."

### A Widow's Nightmare

Emma had discovered Damien three days after he'd missed his daily video call with their children. It wasn't unusual for him to go silent for a day, maybe two, but by the third, she'd grown restless. She took a flight to Monaco, arriving at the penthouse with a sinking feeling she couldn't explain.

She described the scene in fragmented detail, her voice breaking only once.

"The door was unlocked. Everything was so... still. The kind of stillness that feels wrong, like the air knows something you don't."

Damien had been seated in his study, his head tilted back against the chair, eyes open and glazed over. Emma paused, gripping the edge of the table.

"His lips were blue."

She didn't say more, but Alexander had read the reports. He knew about the neurotoxin. He knew about the laptop that had been wiped clean, the files that had been erased seconds before someone called emergency services.

What Emma didn't know—or wouldn't say—was who had sent that call.

### The Link

The connection between Emma and Alexander came down to a single encrypted file she'd found weeks later, buried in a hard drive Damien had hidden in their home. The file contained fragments of transactions, digital keys, and a single name: Kaine.

"You don't seem the type to be mixed up in this," she said, her voice sharp now. "But somehow, Damien knew about you."

Alexander's stomach turned. He wasn't sure what scared him more—the idea that Damien had sought him out, or the possibility that someone else had put his name there.

“I’m just trying to understand the pattern,” Alexander replied. “How does someone like Damien get so deep in something he can’t get out of?”

Emma laughed—a bitter, cutting sound. “You don’t understand. Damien was the pattern.”

### The Weight of the Dark Web

Emma explained, in grim detail, the way Damien had orchestrated deals that most governments would deny existed. Stolen artifacts, encrypted assets, identities bought and sold like trading cards. She described the private security firms that had followed her after his death, the anonymous calls that stopped just shy of threats.

“I’m not a part of this world,” she said finally, her voice quieter now. “But I’ve lived in its shadow for years. And Damien thought he could keep it out of our lives. He thought he was careful.”

Alexander glanced at his recorder, noting the faint distortion on the audio feed. His laptop had glitched twice since he’d arrived, the cursor lagging behind his movements. Someone was watching. They always were.

### The Warning

As they wrapped up, Emma slid a USB drive across the table.

“You want answers? Start there. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Alexander hesitated before pocketing the drive. “Why now? Why give me this at all?”

Emma stood, pulling her coat tight around her shoulders. “Because someone will come looking for you soon enough. At least this way, you’ll know why.”

The rain outside was relentless, drowning the sound of her footsteps as she left. Alexander sat in the booth for a long time, staring at the empty table in front of him. His laptop pinged—a new message on an old thread.

[Untraceable Sender]: “Be careful where you step. Some ghosts still hunt.”

### End Scene

The café’s single light flickered, and Alexander turned off his recorder. He didn’t know what awaited him on the drive, but he knew one thing for certain: the world Damien Roarke had built was crumbling, and whatever had killed him was still out there, waiting for its next move.