

Five Years, One Devastating Lie

novel by Gavin

Chapter 1

My husband was in the shower, the sound of water a familiar rhythm to our mornings. I was just placing a cup of coffee on his desk, a small ritual in our five years of what I thought was a perfect marriage.

Then, an email notification flashed on his laptop: "You're invited to the Christening of Leo Thomas." Our last name. The sender: Hayden Cleveland, a social media influencer.

An icy dread settled in. It was an invitation for his son, a son I didn't know existed. I went to the church, hidden in the shadows, and saw him holding a baby, a little boy with his dark hair and eyes. Hayden Cleveland, the mother, leaned on his shoulder, a picture of domestic bliss.

They looked like a family. A perfect, happy family. My world crumbled. I remembered him refusing to have a baby with me, citing work pressure. All his business trips, the late nights-were they spent with them?

The lie was so easy for him. How could I have been so blind?

I called the Zurich Architectural Fellowship, a prestigious program I had deferred for him. "I'd like to accept the fellowship," I said, my voice eerily calm. "I can leave immediately."

Chapter 1

The email notification slid onto Emilio's laptop screen, a sleek, minimalist pop-up from his calendar. My husband was in the shower, the sound of water drumming against glass a familiar rhythm to our mornings. I was just placing a cup of coffee on his desk, a small ritual in our five years of what I thought was a perfect marriage.

My eyes caught the words before I could look away.

"You're invited to the Christening of Leo Thomas."

The name froze me. Leo Thomas. Our last name.

Before I could process it, the notification vanished. A flicker, and it was gone. Retracted. As if it had never been there.

But it was too late. The image was burned into my mind. The sender: Hayden Cleveland. The name was vaguely familiar, a social media influencer whose perfectly curated life sometimes crossed my feed. A beautiful woman with a massive following.

An unease, cold and sharp, settled in my stomach. It wasn't just a random email. It was an invitation for his son. A son I didn't know existed.

The address was a church downtown, the time set for that afternoon.

A part of me wanted to slam the laptop shut and pretend I'd seen nothing. To go back to the perfect illusion I had so carefully built with Emilio, the brilliant, charismatic tech CEO who loved me.

But another part, a colder, more insistent part, knew I had to go. I had to see.

I left the coffee on his desk and walked out of our pristine, minimalist home, the home I had designed as a monument to our love.

The church was old stone, sunlight filtering through stained-glass windows. I stood in the back, hidden in the shadows, my heart a heavy, painful drum against my ribs.

And then I saw him.

Emilio. My Emilio. He was standing near the front, not in one of his sharp business suits, but in soft, casual clothes. He looked relaxed, happy. He was holding a baby, a beautiful little boy wrapped in white lace.

A little boy with Emilio's dark hair and expressive eyes.

The child, Leo, blew a bubble and giggled, reaching a tiny hand up to touch Emilio's face.

"I hope he grows up to be just like you, Daddy," a woman's voice said, soft and proprietary.

Hayden Cleveland stepped into view, her arm sliding around Emilio's waist. She leaned her head on his shoulder, a picture of domestic bliss. Her smile was radiant, her eyes fixed on the man I called my husband.

They looked like a family. A perfect, happy family.

My mind went completely blank. A wave of numbness washed over me, so profound it felt like I was floating outside my own body. I watched as Emilio kissed Hayden's forehead, then turned his attention back to the baby, murmuring something that made her laugh.

It was real. All of it. The woman, the baby. His secret life.

I saw a few familiar faces in the pews, business acquaintances of Emilio's, people who had been to our home for dinner parties. They smiled at the happy couple, oblivious to the wife standing in the shadows, her world crumbling around her.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't bring myself to walk up there, to scream, to shatter their perfect moment. The fight went out of me, replaced by a deep, hollowing despair.

I turned and walked away, slipping out of the heavy church doors and back into the noise of the city. The sounds were muffled, distant. The world felt cold, and I was colder.

I remembered a conversation from a few months ago, on our anniversary.

"Emilio," I had said, my voice soft. "I think I'm ready. Let's have a baby."

He had gone silent. He'd looked away, running a hand through his hair. A gesture I always thought was him thinking, processing.

"Not yet, Elana," he had said, finally. "The company is at a critical stage. Just give me another year. I want to be able to give our child everything."

I had believed him. I had trusted the man who pursued me relentlessly in college, the only one who could see past my ambition to the woman underneath.

He was a rival back then, both of us at the top of our architecture program. He was brilliant, driven, and cold to everyone but me.

I remembered him bringing me hot soup when I pulled all-nighters in the studio, his hand gently rubbing my back as I hunched over blueprints.

I remembered when I got pneumonia, so sick I could barely stand. He stayed by my hospital bed for three days straight, not sleeping, just watching over me.

He proposed to me in that hospital room, his voice cracking with a vulnerability I'd never seen before.

"I can't lose you, Elana," he'd whispered, his forehead pressed against mine. "I can't imagine my life without you."

I found out later his mother had died in a hospital just like that one. His fear felt real, his love absolute.

We got married right after graduation. His tech startup exploded, and he became the man everyone wanted to be. I built my own career, but I always put him first. I changed my own five-year plan for him, for us.

And all this time, he had another family.

That love, that devotion I believed was reserved only for me, was a lie. A performance.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was him. I stared at his name on the screen, my hand trembling. I finally answered.

"Hey, where are you?" His voice was warm, the same loving tone he always used with me.

In the background, I could hear the faint sound of a baby crying, then Hayden's voice soothing the child.

I stood across the street from the church, watching him through the open doors. He was holding his phone to his ear, smiling as he spoke to me.

"I'm just out for a walk," I managed to say, my own voice sounding foreign and brittle.

"I got held up at a last-minute meeting," he said smoothly. "I'll be home soon. I miss you."

The lie was so easy for him. It slid out, polished and perfect, just like everything else about him. A tear finally broke free and slid down my cheek, hot against my cold skin. All those business trips, the late nights at the office. How many of them were spent here, with them?

How could I have been so blind?

I swallowed the lump in my throat, forcing my voice to be steady. "Emilio, I need to see you."

He hesitated. I could see him shift his weight, his smile faltering for just a second. "I'm still in the meeting, baby. Can it wait until I get home?"

"No."

Just then, the little boy, Leo, toddled over and wrapped his arms around Emilio's leg.

"Daddy!" the child squealed.

Emilio's eyes widened in panic. He quickly bent down, trying to shush the boy while keeping his voice low and calm for me. "It's just... the kid of one of my colleagues."

The phone went dead. He had hung up on me.

I watched as he scooped the boy into his arms, kissing his cheek and whispering something that made the child giggle. He looked so natural, so at ease. Such a good father.

My heart felt like it had been scooped out, leaving nothing but a hollow, aching void. Years of my life, of my love, felt like a joke.

I pulled out my phone again, my fingers moving on their own. I didn't call Ayla, my best friend. I didn't call my lawyer.

I called the director of the Zurich Architectural Fellowship. A prestigious, six-month program I had been accepted to but deferred for Emilio. A program that required complete, uninterrupted focus. Total isolation.

"I'd like to accept the fellowship," I said, my voice eerily calm. "I can leave immediately."