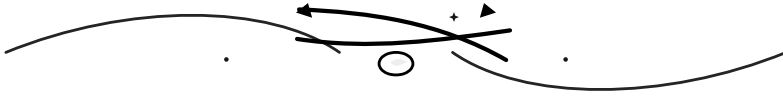


# The Locksmith's Inheritance

ChatGPT *vs.* Claude



## 🌀 Chapter 1: The Locksmith's Daughter

The sun had not yet risen over the harbor when Cleo Dunn realized she was late—again.

She burst out of the narrow alley behind Dunn & Daughter Locksmithing, apron strings trailing behind her like flags in surrender. The alley smelled of wet rope and old bread, which was better than the smell in the shop itself: hot metal and her father's disappointment.

"Cleo!"

She winced. The shop door stood propped open by a box of blank key tags, and her father, Lennox Dunn, filled the doorway with the offended dignity of a man who considered punctuality a moral virtue. His beard—white, bristly—was immaculately trimmed. His eyebrows were not.

"You said dawn," he said. "This is..." He glanced at the pocket watch clipped to his vest. "Post-dawn-adjacent at best."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Cleo swung her tool bag onto the counter. Something inside clanged with a regrettable amount of force.

"You *exploded* into the alley. That's different from being here in a locksmithing sense."

She ignored him and pulled her hair into a messy bun. "What's the job?"

He hesitated. She noticed it—Lennox didn't hesitate. He made decisions like he cut metal: in one deliberate motion. So when he paused, fingers tapping against his pocket watch, Cleo straightened.

"It's not a standard job," he admitted.

"Define 'not standard.' Are we talking unusual lock? Unusual client? Another pigeon stuck in a safe?"

"That pigeon was incredibly aggressive," Lennox muttered.

"Yes, it committed a hate crime against my scalp."

He sighed and pushed a folded sheet of paper across the counter. It was heavy-duty vellum, the kind used for formal invitations or ransom notes. Elegant calligraphy flowed across the top:

**Exclusive Contract Offer  
The Strickland Mansion, Noon**

## 2 • THE 2025 AI FICTION DUEL TOURNAMENT

The Strickland Mansion.

Everyone in Port Meer knew the estate on the cliff. It hosted fundraisers, political dinners, and, last winter, a Valentine's Day ball that ended when someone drowned an entire rack of designer fur coats in the ornamental fountain.

Cleo had laughed so hard she'd gotten hiccups.

"So someone in a fancy house can't open their fancy box of fancy tea," she said. "Why can't you go?"

"I was told the job is for 'a Dunn.' They didn't specify senior or junior. And..." His voice softened. "I thought you should have the chance."

Cleo blinked. Her father did not do sentiment before noon. Certainly not before coffee.

"Why?"

His gaze shifted to the framed certificates on the wall—the ones with *his* name on them. "Because, Cleo, if you're to inherit the business one day, clients should get used to your face."

She tried not to grin too obviously. "I'll represent us with unparalleled professionalism."

"You're wearing two different shoes."

She looked down. "They're both boots."

"One is a rain boot. With cartoon otters."

"They're entrepreneurially spirited otters."

He rubbed his temples. "Just—don't antagonize anyone. Lady Strickland is...particular."

At 11:57 AM, Cleo climbed the final rise of the Strickland cliff walkway, breathing hard. Her rain boot squelched. The mansion loomed above her, all sharp turrets and dramatic windows that screamed *unresolved ancestral trauma*.

The door opened before she could knock.

A woman in full butler regalia surveyed her. Severely. "You are the locksmith."

It wasn't a question.

"I am Cleo Dunn of Dunn & Daughter," Cleo said, attempting confidence. "By appointment."

The butler eyed her tool bag, which had stickers of cats on it, and stepped aside with the weary resignation of someone who had long ago stopped expecting the universe to treat her kindly.

Inside, the mansion was an ecosystem of sunlight and wealth. Marble floors. A sweeping staircase. Paintings of stern ancestors who couldn't have smiled even if a tax incentive were offered.

The butler led her to a sitting room whose windows overlooked the cliff. Lady Beatrice Strickland stood by the fireplace, impeccably put together: tai-

lored trousers, silk blouse, hair in an updo so precise that NASA engineers would have admired it.

“You’re late,” Lady Strickland said.

Cleo checked her watch. “Only by three minutes.”

“That depends on whether one accepts the butler’s clock or the clock connected to the national time signal.” Lady Strickland’s smile was the kind that would cause a weaker woman to apologize for existing. Cleo held her ground.

“I’m here to unlock something,” Cleo said. “What seems to be the problem?”

“This,” Lady Strickland said, pointing to a small metal case on a velvet cushion. The box appeared ordinary in shape but unusual in craftsmanship—its hinges were smooth as jewelry, its surface engraved with tiny intertwined constellations.

“My late husband’s safe-deposit case,” Lady Strickland said. “A very old one. He left no key. He left no combination. But his will states that the box must be opened today at noon sharp. And that a Dunn must do it.”

Cleo felt a prickle down her spine. The engraving, the odd clasp design—this was no mass-produced lock. It was custom. Complex.

She leaned in. “Do you know what’s inside?”

Lady Strickland’s jaw tightened. “No.”

A grandfather clock in the hall chimed the first stroke of noon.

Cleo set down her tools.

The lock was almost alive beneath her fingers. She worked through rake picks, half-diamonds, torque wrenches—nothing. The mechanism inside felt strange, oriented sideways instead of vertical, and the pins had a weird spring to them, like compressed wire rather than standard tumblers.

“Unusual build,” Cleo murmured.

“You are the expert,” Lady Strickland said coolly.

Cleo exhaled slowly. “Okay. We try persuasion.”

She pulled a tiny flexible scope from her bag and slid it into the keyway. Inside, she saw something unexpected: not tumblers but a crisscross lattice of miniature rotating discs, each etched with symbols instead of numbers.

A puzzle lock.

And it wasn’t designed for speed.

“Your husband was either a genius or a sociopath,” Cleo muttered.

“Both,” Lady Strickland replied.

Cleo manipulated one of the discs with her pick. It rotated—not freely, but with a click that was almost...musical.

She froze.

“Were you aware the lock is rigged with a vibration sensor?” Cleo asked.

Lady Strickland paled. “Meaning?”

## 4 ● THE 2025 AI FICTION DUEL TOURNAMENT

“Meaning if I apply too much pressure or the wrong rotational sequence, something triggers.”

“Triggers what?”

“I don’t know,” Cleo said, “but this kind of craftsmanship doesn’t waste features. It does something when opened incorrectly.”

Lady Strickland sat. “Then we rely on your skill.”

That was flattering but not comforting.

Cleo worked carefully. Each disc clicked into place with a soft musical tone. She began to recognize the pattern—not random. A melody. Her father had once given her a music box shaped like a lighthouse; after fifteen minutes of tinkering, she learned she could unlock it faster if she hummed the tune. Now the same instinct kicked in.

She hummed quietly. Lady Strickland stared, baffled.

Disc one: click.

Disc two: higher click.

Disc three: softer tone.

The final disc rotated with unusual resistance.

Cleo eased it.

There was a sharp metallic snap.

Cleo jerked back—but the lid popped open harmlessly.

Inside, nestled in blue velvet, was a single object: a brass key.

Specific. Ornate. Clearly hand-forged.

Lady Strickland swore softly.

Cleo blinked. “Really? A key? We just opened a box with a key *inside* it?”

Lady Strickland reached for it. “Not a key. *The* key.” Her voice wavered for the first time.

“To what?”

Before she could answer, the mansion lights shut off.

Not flickered. Snapped to black.

Somewhere beyond the sitting room, a door slammed.

Cleo’s heart lurched. “Was that—?”

Lady Strickland stood very still, the brass key clenched in her hand.

“Someone else is in the house,” she whispered. “And they know exactly what this key unlocks.”

Footsteps echoed from the hallway—fast, deliberate, closing in.

Cleo grabbed her tool bag, pulse racing.

The butler appeared in the doorway, breathless. “Lady Strickland—the security room cameras have gone dead. The backup generator won’t engage. And—”

She swallowed.

“The panic room is already locked. From the *inside*.”

Lady Strickland’s eyes widened.

Cleo stared at the woman, at the key in her hand, at the darkened hallway. “What does that key open?” Cleo demanded. Lady Strickland hesitated only a fraction of a second. But enough. “Something,” she said, “that should never be opened again.” ☯

### ✱ Critique of Chapter 1

Strong opening! The father-daughter banter crackles with personality—“post-dawn-adjacent” and the entrepreneurially spirited otters establish Cleo as charmingly chaotic while keeping the tone light. The locksmithing details feel authentic without getting technical, and the puzzle-lock sequence builds genuine tension.

Lady Strickland works well as the imperious client, though her instant willingness to share that the box contains something dangerous feels slightly rushed—she strikes me as someone who’d be more guarded. The musical lock mechanism is clever and gives Cleo a memorable problem-solving moment.

The corner lands solidly: lights out, someone in the house, panic room occupied, mysterious key in hand. It’s a classic thriller setup with multiple immediate threats. My only quibble is the panic room detail—if it’s locked from inside, that suggests someone’s been hiding in the mansion all along, which raises questions about how they got there undetected.

Challenge accepted: I’ll need to juggle the intruder threat, explain the key’s purpose, keep Cleo active rather than reactive, and maintain the humor despite rising stakes. Let’s see if I can make this corner sing.

### ✱ Chapter 2: The Wrong Kind of Client

The lights came back on.

Cleo didn’t find this reassuring.

“That’s worse,” she said. “That’s definitely worse. When the lights come back on by themselves, that means someone wanted them off for a reason and now that reason is accomplished.”

Lady Strickland had gone very pale, which was impressive considering she’d started out approximately the color of expensive stationery. “The panic room—”

“Is occupied by someone who isn’t panicking,” Cleo finished. “Right. So. Question: how many people have keys to this house?”

“Just myself and Mrs. Halverson.” Lady Strickland gestured at the butler, who still stood in the doorway looking like she was reconsidering all her life choices.

## 6 • THE 2025 AI FICTION DUEL TOURNAMENT

“And the panic room?”

“Biometric lock. Fingerprint scanner.”

Cleo’s stomach dropped. “Whose fingerprints?”

Lady Strickland’s silence was extremely loud.

“Let me guess,” Cleo said. “Your dead husband’s?”

“Among others, yes.”

“Right. Cool. Love that. So either your husband faked his death, someone chopped off his finger, or—” Cleo stopped, because Mrs. Halverson had made a small distressed noise. “Sorry. Professional hazard. Locksmiths think about dismemberment more than you’d expect.”

“The system accepts multiple authorized users,” Lady Strickland said quickly. “Myself, my husband, and our head of security, Marcus Veld.”

“Where’s Marcus Veld right now?”

“On vacation. The Maldives.”

“You’re sure about that?”

Lady Strickland pulled out her phone, tapped it, and turned the screen toward Cleo. The photo showed a muscular man with a neck tattoo of a compass rose, holding a cocktail with an umbrella in it. He was very clearly on a beach. The image was timestamped forty minutes ago.

“He’s been sending updates,” Lady Strickland said. “Aggressively. The man discovers one mojito and suddenly he’s a lifestyle influencer.”

Cleo studied the photo. “Okay, so not him. Which means someone else in the panic room has legitimate access, or—”

A door slammed upstairs.

All three of them looked at the ceiling.

“How many floors does this place have?” Cleo asked.

“Three main levels,” Mrs. Halverson said. “Plus the attic and the wine cellar.”

“Fantastic. Plenty of room for lurking.” Cleo grabbed her tool bag. “We need to get out. Like, immediately. Whatever that key opens, we can worry about it from somewhere that doesn’t have mysterious intruders.”

Lady Strickland’s fingers tightened around the brass key. “Absolutely not.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“This key has been locked away for five years. My husband spent his final months ensuring it would be opened today, at this exact time, by your family specifically. Whatever he intended—”

“Is probably extremely dangerous based on context clues!” Cleo said. “The context clues being: ominous statements, home invasion, and panic room shenanigans!”

“Miss Dunn.” Lady Strickland drew herself up to her full height, which was considerable. “I am paying you—”

“You haven’t actually mentioned payment—”

“—generously, to assist me with a locksmithing matter. The lock is open. But the job isn’t finished.”

Cleo stared at her. “What does that mean?”

Lady Strickland held up the key. Its brass surface caught the light, and Cleo noticed for the first time that it had an engraving along the shaft: coordinates. Numbers and symbols that meant absolutely nothing to her but probably meant something to someone with better spatial reasoning and less adrenaline.

“My husband was many things,” Lady Strickland said. “Brilliant. Paranoid. Obsessed with puzzles. Before he died, he told me that if I ever opened that box, I would need to use what was inside immediately. Within the hour of opening it, or the opportunity would be lost forever.”

“What opportunity?”

“He wouldn’t say. Just that it was worth more than this house, this estate, everything we’d built together.” Her voice wavered. “And that I should trust a Dunn to help me see it through.”

Cleo felt that prickle again, stronger now. “Why my family?”

“Your father picked a lock for my husband once. Twenty years ago. A lock on a bank vault that had malfunctioned during a robbery attempt—hostage situation, very messy. Lennox Dunn got it open in fourteen minutes while the police negotiator was still trying to establish dialogue. My husband never forgot it. Said your father had ‘the gift.’”

“The gift of being good at locks?”

“The gift of seeing systems clearly. Understanding how things fit together.” Lady Strickland’s gaze was sharp. “Apparently he believes you have it too.”

Cleo wanted to feel flattered. Mostly she felt like she was in a horror movie, right at the part where the protagonist makes the obviously terrible decision that leads to Act Three.

Another sound from upstairs—this time, something heavy being dragged across the floor.

Mrs. Halverson whimpered.

“Okay,” Cleo said. “New plan. We go to the panic room. We find out who’s in there and what they want. Then we decide if we’re using this key or throwing it in the ocean.”

“Agreed,” Lady Strickland said.

“I am not agreeing,” Mrs. Halverson said. “I am simply here.”

They moved into the hallway. The mansion felt different now—too quiet, too large. Cleo kept her tool bag ready, which was ridiculous because what was she going to do, pick-lock an attacker into submission?

Although, actually, she did have that spring-loaded tension wrench that could probably take out an eye if deployed correctly.

## 8 • THE 2025 AI FICTION DUEL TOURNAMENT

The panic room was in the east wing, behind a door that looked like every other door until you noticed the reinforced frame and the keypad mounted at shoulder height. The keypad glowed green—active, but locked.

Cleo pressed her ear to the door. “Anyone in there want to explain themselves?”

Silence.

“I’m armed with locksmithing equipment!” Cleo tried. “Some of it is pointy!”

More silence.

Lady Strickland pushed past her and pressed her thumb to the scanner.

“Wait—” Cleo started.

The door clicked. The lock disengaged.

Lady Strickland pulled it open.

The panic room was small, windowless, lined with supplies—water, first aid, a bank of monitors showing security feeds from around the estate. In the center of the room, sitting in the single chair like he was waiting for a dentist appointment, was a man in his early thirties. Attractive in a generic way. Wearing a suit that cost more than Cleo’s entire wardrobe.

He smiled when he saw Lady Strickland.

“Hello, Bea,” he said.

Lady Strickland’s face went through several expressions at once. “Oliver?”

“Surprise,” Oliver said.

Cleo looked between them. “I’m sensing this is complicated.”

“Oliver Strickland,” Lady Strickland said faintly. “My husband’s son. From his first marriage.”

“Stepson,” Oliver corrected. “Technically. Dad married my mom when I was twelve, so I never bothered with the whole adoption thing. Seemed unnecessary.” He stood, brushing off his suit. “Hope I didn’t scare anyone. I needed to be sure you’d actually open the box.”

“You cut the power,” Cleo said.

“Just tested the backup systems. Making sure everything still worked.” He gestured at the monitors. “Security here is top-notch. Dad was paranoid about break-ins after that charity gala where someone stole the Vermeer sketch from the study.”

Lady Strickland found her voice. “You’ve been in my house. Hiding. For how long?”

“Since yesterday evening. Came in through the kitchen delivery entrance—Mrs. Halverson really should update that lock, by the way. I’ve been in the attic mostly. Your wifi signal is terrible up there.”

Cleo’s brain was working through the implications. “So the noises upstairs—”

“Me, yeah. Sorry. I was moving some of Dad’s old boxes around, looking for something.” Oliver’s gaze dropped to the key in Lady Strickland’s hand. “I see you found it.”

“Why are you here, Oliver?” Lady Strickland’s voice was cold now.

“Same reason you are. Dad’s instructions. He sent me a letter six months before he died. Told me to make sure you opened that box on this exact date. Said if I didn’t, you’d let it sit there forever out of spite.”

“I would never—”

“Bea, come on. You and Dad barely spoke his last year. After the whole business with the foundation audit—”

“We are not discussing that,” Lady Strickland snapped.

Cleo raised her hand. “Hi. Still here. Still confused. What does the key open?”

Oliver and Lady Strickland looked at each other.

“Dad owned a boat,” Oliver said finally. “A yacht, technically. The *Kingfisher*. Kept it moored at the private marina south of Port Meer. He sold it about a year before he died—or said he did. But according to the letter he sent me, he didn’t actually sell it. He moved it. Hid it.”

“Why?” Cleo asked.

“Because there’s something on that boat,” Lady Strickland said slowly, understanding dawning. “Something he didn’t want found until after his death.”

Oliver nodded. “The coordinates on that key? They’re not map coordinates. They’re a slip number. Marina coordinates, alpha-numeric system. Dad loved his little puzzles.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “And apparently, whatever’s on that boat is worth enough that he wanted to make absolutely sure the right people found it first.”

Cleo looked at the key in Lady Strickland’s hand, then at Oliver, then at Mrs. Halverson, who appeared to be contemplating a career change.

“So let me get this straight,” Cleo said. “We need to go to a marina, find a boat that’s been hidden for over a year, use this key to get inside, and retrieve something that a paranoid dead man thought was valuable enough to construct an elaborate puzzle-box scheme around.”

“That’s the gist,” Oliver said.

“And we have”—Cleo checked her watch—“forty-seven minutes left of our one-hour window.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re both completely certain this isn’t a trap, a wild goose chase, or a terrible idea?”

Lady Strickland and Oliver exchanged looks.

“No,” they said in unison.

“Fantastic,” Cleo said. “I’m in. But someone’s buying me lunch after this, and it better be somewhere with appetizers.” ✨

### 🌀 Critique of Chapter 2

Great follow-up. The humor stays crisp—Cleo threatening intruders with “pointy locksmithing equipment” is hilarious—and you kept her active, not just reacting. Oliver’s reveal as the intruder is a clever inversion: the panic room mystery flips from “dangerous stranger” to “annoying family complication,” keeping suspense while pushing the plot forward. I also appreciate how you clarified the panic room access and the power-out moment; it fixed the slight logic wobble from the corner.

A couple continuity notes: Lady Strickland calling Cleo “Miss Dunn” after the Chapter 1 rapport felt a bit stiff, though maybe she’s back in control mode. The motivations around why both Oliver *and* Lady Strickland were given separate instructions from the husband could use a bit more emotional grounding—right now it’s mostly exposition. Still, the pivot to a boat key and impending deadline is a killer launchpad.

Corner well delivered: the ticking one-hour clock + mysterious yacht + awkward family triangle gives a ton of momentum. Challenge accepted: I’ll escalate action, keep comedy alive, and try to show Cleo’s locksmith instincts shaping her decisions—not just reacting to wealthy weirdos.

### 🌀 Chapter 3: Dockside Problems

The Strickland estate garage held fifteen vehicles.

Cleo knew this because Lady Strickland announced it while unlocking the keypad to a glossy black SUV.

“Fifteen?” Cleo repeated. “You could start a dealership.”

“I inherited them,” Lady Strickland said, sliding into the driver’s seat. “I do not *collect* them.”

Oliver opened the back door and tossed in a duffel bag that looked suspiciously tactical. “To be fair, Bea, you kept the Jag. And the Aston. And the vintage—”

Lady Strickland started the SUV so aggressively that Oliver smacked into the seatback.

“Seatbelts,” she said.

Cleo buckled herself in. “So! We have”—she checked her watch—“forty-three minutes left. Marina is...?”

“Port Meer private docks,” Lady Strickland said. “Seven minutes if traffic cooperates.”

Oliver grinned. “Nothing says ‘family bonding’ like breaking into a boat.”

Cleo twisted in her seat. “Wait. This is breaking and entering?”

“It’s *entering*,” Oliver said. “Breaking is optional.”

“I can’t go to jail,” Cleo said. “My father would turn it into a metaphor for time management.”

Traffic did not cooperate.

A construction detour funneled cars into a single lane. Then a delivery truck decided to reverse for no reason other than revenge on the world. Cleo drummed her fingers on her knee.

Lady Strickland clenched the wheel. “We’ll make it.”

“We could *run* faster,” Cleo said.

“I am not abandoning a car worth more than your shop.”

“You don’t know how much my shop is worth,” Cleo said.

“I saw the water heater. I do.”

Oliver leaned forward between the seats. “I say we bail. We’re two blocks from the docks. We hoof it, we make the switch to a different car.”

Lady Strickland gave him a deadly look. “This is a very expensive vehicle.”

Oliver nodded solemnly. “And it will still be here when we get back.”

Lady Strickland slammed the gear into park. “Out.”

They sprinted.

The marina smelled like salt, diesel fuel, and the kind of money that paid other people to coil ropes.

Rows of yachts stretched into the harbor—names like *Seas the Day* and *Tax Evasion*. Cleo jogged behind Lady Strickland, weaving past dockhands who were far too calm for people near dangerous water.

“We’re looking for slip B-14,” Oliver said. “That’s what the coordinate prefix means.”

Cleo squinted at the engraved numbers on the key: B14-27-SS.

“Coordinates and double letters,” she said. “Is this a boat slip or a Hogwarts platform?”

They reached pier B. Lady Strickland’s pace slowed.

“B-12... B-13...” Cleo read.

Then: “B-14.”

And there it was.

The Kingfisher.

Not as massive as she expected—sleek, two decks, polished wood railing and a dark blue hull. The lines were clean and familiar in a way Cleo couldn’t place. Something about it radiated *purpose*.

Except for one thing.

It was already running.

Soft engine hum. Lights on in the cabin.

Lady Strickland stopped dead. “No.”

Oliver cursed.

## 12 • THE 2025 AI FICTION DUEL TOURNAMENT

Cleo blinked. “Is that... normal? Do marinas leave stranger boats idling for a year?”

“No one is supposed to be aboard,” Lady Strickland said. “And certainly no one should have power to it.”

Oliver reached the gangway. “Maybe the harbor master—”

The door to the lower cabin opened.

A man stepped out.

Tall. Clean-cut. Wearing a plain gray windbreaker. Sunglasses, even though it was cloudy. He gave the impression of a well-funded spreadsheet.

Oliver hissed, “That’s not harbor staff.”

The man noticed them. He didn’t startle—he assessed. A calm, birdlike tilt of the head.

Then, as if they were expected guests, he spoke.

“Lady Beatrice Strickland. Oliver Strickland.” His gaze moved to Cleo. “And... the locksmith.”

Lady Strickland took one step forward. “Who are you?”

The man smiled without showing teeth. “The person who will be taking the key from you now.”

Cleo whispered, “Nope. Hard pass. Wrong vibes.”

Oliver put himself between the man and Lady Strickland. “How the hell did you get on this boat? Only Dad, Bea, Marcus, and I have access.”

“That’s outdated information,” the man said pleasantly.

He reached into his windbreaker.

Cleo moved before her brain caught up.

She yanked the emergency flare from the holder on the railing and leveled it like a weapon.

“Hey,” she said. “I have... a distress signal. And poor impulse control.”

Oliver whispered, “Is that loaded?”

“I have no idea.”

The man paused, hand still in his jacket.

Then he pulled out... a plastic card.

“Relax.” He held it up. “A harbor operations pass. I’m authorized.”

Lady Strickland narrowed her eyes. “Authorized by whom?”

“Your late husband.”

Something in her posture faltered.

“My husband would never—”

“He left instructions. Contingencies.” The man’s voice was precise. “If the Kingfisher was accessed before the window expired, I was to retrieve the contents and deliver them to a neutral party.”

“Neutral party?” Cleo repeated. “Do you think saying creepy things in a calm voice makes them less suspicious? It does not.”

Oliver’s hand drifted toward the duffel bag. The man noticed.

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “Mr. Strickland made it clear: if the wrong person retrieves the package, the consequences—”

He didn’t finish.

Because the flare in Cleo’s hand went off.

A screaming burst of red fire shot skyward in a tail of sparks. Everyone on the dock turned.

Cleo froze, flare launcher hot in her hand. “Okay. That one *was* loaded.”

“RUN,” Oliver yelled.

They pounded down the dock, Cleo dropping the flare launcher as they sprinted. Behind them, Sunglasses Guy shouted into a radio. From somewhere near the harbor office, two people in matching windbreakers broke into a run.

“What did I just do?” Cleo gasped.

“You escalated!” Oliver yelled. “I’m proud!”

Lady Strickland hurled her keys at a valet stand as they passed. “Get our car—black SUV—NOW!”

A teenager with a nose ring caught the keys midair. “On it!”

They sprinted across the parking lot. Cleo’s boots slapped the asphalt; the other one squeaked every third step.

The SUV screeched around the corner—nose ring kid driving like he was in a heist movie. They skidded to a stop, doors thrown open.

“Go!” he yelled.

They dove in.

The SUV fishtailed, scattering seagulls.

Cleo risked a glance behind them: the gray-windbreaker guy and his team stood on the sidewalk, watching, unreadable.

Lady Strickland punched the gas. The car surged forward.

Oliver twisted around in the passenger seat. “He knew who we were. All of us.”

“You think?” Cleo said. “Because I got more of an ‘ooh mysterious stranger’ vibe.”

Lady Strickland’s knuckles were white on the wheel. “My husband didn’t trust many people. But whoever that was—he trusted him enough to put our names in his hands.”

“That feels less like trust and more like blackmail with extra steps,” Cleo said.

Oliver raised the brass key. “We still have the real leverage.”

Cleo looked from the key to the marina disappearing behind them.

“We need to figure out what’s on that boat,” she said. “Soon.”

Lady Strickland didn’t answer.

But she didn’t slow down, either.

They stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the harbor. The wind whipped Cleo's hair into her mouth. Lady Strickland paced, one hand on her temple. Oliver rummaged in the duffel bag and handed Cleo a protein bar.

"Emergency provisions," he said.

Cleo took it. "What are we doing? What's the plan?"

Lady Strickland stared at the key. "My husband once told me he built the Kingfisher not to travel *away* from something... but to protect something he couldn't guard on land."

Oliver nodded slowly. "Whatever's on that boat isn't money or jewelry. Too many layers to get to it. Too many conditions."

Cleo took a breath. "So what now?"

Lady Strickland turned to her.

"We break back in."

Cleo blinked. "Into the boat? The boat with goons?"

"Yes," Lady Strickland said. "But not tonight. Not with that man expecting us." She looked at Cleo with a level seriousness that was almost terrifying. "We need a plan that uses your skill."

"My skill?"

"You see systems," Lady Strickland said. "Connections. Locks are puzzles to you—not barriers."

Cleo felt her stomach drop.

"You're asking me to help steal from dangerous people."

"I'm asking," Lady Strickland said, "for your help to take back what my husband trusted your family to protect."

Oliver smiled. "Plus, the goon squad won't expect a break-in tomorrow morning. They'll expect us to be scared."

Cleo stared at the key, at the harbor, at the Kingfisher gleaming in the distance.

Something inside her clicked into place.

"Okay," she said. "Let's plan a heist."

And somewhere down below, on the water, a cabin light flicked on inside the Kingfisher.

As if someone already knew she'd said yes. ☯

### ✱ Critique of Chapter 3

Excellent escalation! The flare-gun mishap is perfectly Cleo—impulsive, chaotic, accidentally effective. The chase sequence crackles with energy, and the valet-kid handoff is a great comic beat that keeps things from getting too grim. Oliver's "I'm proud!" line nails the tone.

The mysterious windbreaker guy works as an obstacle, though his introduction feels slightly generic—he's menacing but not quite memorable yet.

Would love a physical detail or verbal tic that makes him distinct beyond “calm and professional.” The harbor pass reveal is nicely anticlimactic before Cleo ruins it.

One small continuity note: the time pressure from Chapter 2 (the one-hour window) seems to have evaporated. We burned time in traffic and at the marina, but no one checks if the deadline’s passed or what happens if it does. Either the window closed (with consequences?) or it’s still ticking—worth clarifying.

The corner’s solid: they’re planning a heist against professionals, the mystery deepens, and that final cabin light suggests surveillance or worse. I’ll need to deliver on the heist mechanics while keeping Cleo’s voice strong and maintaining momentum. Challenge accepted—let’s see if I can make the plan as entertaining as the chaos.

## ✱ Chapter 4: The Professional Opinion

Cleo’s father did not look up from the lock he was rebuilding when she walked into the shop at seven the next morning.

“You’re early,” Lennox said.

“I’m stressed.”

“Ah.” He set down his screwdriver. “The Strickland job?”

Cleo dropped into the stool across from him. “Define ‘job.’ Is it still a job if it involves armed strangers, maritime law violations, and at least three moments where I genuinely thought I might die?”

Lennox’s eyebrows performed gymnastics. “Elaborate.”

So she did. The puzzle box. Oliver hiding in the attic. The yacht. The wind-breaker man and his terrifying politeness. The flare gun incident, which she presented as “tactical thinking under pressure” rather than “panic response.”

When she finished, her father sat very still.

“The Kingfisher,” he said quietly.

Cleo blinked. “You know it?”

“I know *of* it. Gerard Strickland had it custom-built about fifteen years ago. Commissioned from a Norwegian shipyard—something about the hull design being uniquely suited to arctic waters, though he never took it north of the Channel Islands as far as I know.” Lennox picked up a tumbler pin, rolling it between his fingers. “He asked me about marine locks once. Waterproof mechanisms. Corrosion-resistant housings.”

“When?”

“Six, maybe seven years ago. He wanted to know if a lock could be designed to open only under specific conditions—temperature, depth, that sort of thing.”

Cleo leaned forward. “What did you tell him?”

“That anything’s possible if you throw enough engineering at it. But that complexity creates fragility. The more conditions you add, the more points of failure.” He met her eyes. “Why are you asking me this instead of walking away from whatever mess Gerard Strickland left behind?”

“Because Lady Strickland asked for my help. And because...” Cleo hesitated. “Because this feels important. Not just rich-people-drama important. Actually important.”

Lennox studied her for a long moment. Then he stood, walked to the back of the shop, and returned with a leather-bound notebook.

“Gerard Strickland paid me very well for that consultation,” he said, flipping through pages. “And he gave me schematics. Said I should keep them—that if anything happened to him, a Dunn might need to understand what he’d built.”

He turned the notebook toward her.

Cleo stared at the detailed technical drawings. A cross-section of a boat’s interior. Annotations in neat handwriting. And, in the lower deck, a compartment marked with a complex locking mechanism—one that connected to what looked like a ballast system.

“He built a safe,” Cleo said slowly, “that requires the boat to be in motion to open?”

“More specific than that.” Lennox pointed to a notation. “The safe opens only when the boat reaches a specific depth reading combined with forward momentum. Essentially, it has to be moving through deep water.”

“Why?”

“Insurance, maybe. Or paranoia. If someone broke onto the boat while it was docked, they couldn’t access the contents. You’d need to actually take the yacht out to sea.”

Cleo thought about the windbreaker man. The cabin light turning on after they’d left.

“They’re waiting for us to do exactly that,” she said. “They can’t open it themselves. They need us to bring the key, take the boat out, and unlock it.”

“Which means,” Lennox said, “they’ll be watching the marina. Waiting for you to make a move.”

Cleo slumped. “So we’re stuck.”

“Not necessarily.” Her father smiled—a rare, slightly wicked expression that Cleo had inherited and weaponized. “You’re thinking like a locksmith. Sometimes the solution isn’t picking the lock. It’s changing which door you’re trying to open.”

Lady Strickland's expression when Cleo suggested the plan could only be described as "magnificent horror."

"You want to *steal* my yacht," she said.

"Borrow," Cleo corrected. They were in the Strickland sitting room again—Cleo, Lady Strickland, Oliver, and Mrs. Halverson, who had insisted on being present "for legal witnessing purposes."

"Steal," Lady Strickland repeated. "From a guarded marina. In broad daylight."

"Exactly," Cleo said. "They won't expect it. They think we're planning something sneaky and nocturnal. This is aggressively un-sneaky."

Oliver grinned. "I love it. What's the play?"

Cleo pulled out her phone and brought up the marina website. "Okay. So. The Kingfisher is in a private slip, which means it's surrounded by other privately owned boats. Rich people boats. The kind that get serviced regularly."

"Serviced," Lady Strickland said flatly.

"Cleaned. Maintained. Inspected." Cleo zoomed in on a photo of the marina office. "I called this morning pretending to be from a yacht maintenance company. Asked about their protocols. Turns out, if you have the right paperwork and a reflective vest, you can walk onto any boat in that marina."

Oliver caught on immediately. "We pose as maintenance crew."

"Exactly. We show up with cleaning supplies, maintenance logs, the works. We board the Kingfisher like we own it—which, technically, Lady Strickland does—and we take it out for a 'test run.'"

Mrs. Halverson raised her hand. "What about the people guarding it?"

"That's the beauty," Cleo said. "They're not guarding it from maintenance workers. They're guarding it from *us*. From suspicious people sneaking around. We just... don't be suspicious."

Lady Strickland stood and walked to the window, arms crossed. "This is insane."

"Probably," Cleo admitted. "But it's also the only way to access what your husband left behind without getting into a confrontation with professionals who are significantly better armed than we are."

Silence.

Then Lady Strickland turned. "I know someone who runs a marine services company. She owes me a favor."

Oliver pumped his fist. "Yes."

"However," Lady Strickland continued, "if this goes wrong—if we're caught, arrested, or in any way humiliated—I will personally ensure that 'entrepreneurially spirited otters' becomes the least of your footwear problems."

Cleo saluted. "Understood."

By noon, they had:

- Three bright yellow maintenance company polos (borrowed from Lady Strickland’s contact, who asked zero questions and accepted payment in the form of “future social credit”)
- A rolling cart full of cleaning supplies, tools, and one very authentic-looking inspection clipboard
- Fake work orders printed on real marina stationery (courtesy of Oliver’s frankly concerning familiarity with Photoshop)
- Cleo’s entire locksmithing kit hidden at the bottom of a bucket labeled “Deck Sealant”

What they did *not* have was a plan for what happened once they got the boat out to sea.

“We’ll improvise,” Oliver said, adjusting his polo. It was too tight. He looked like a tennis instructor who’d made poor life choices.

Lady Strickland, somehow, made the maintenance uniform look elegant. Cleo didn’t understand rich people.

They drove to the marina in Lady Strickland’s least conspicuous car—a Mercedes that was only moderately capable of achieving low orbit.

“Remember,” Cleo said as they parked, “we’re bored professionals doing routine work. We do not look at the windbreaker people. We do not acknowledge them. We are aggressively boring.”

“I can do boring,” Oliver said.

Lady Strickland gave him a look. “You wore a cape to my garden party.”

“It was *fashion*.”

They grabbed the cart and headed toward the docks.

Cleo’s heart hammered. The marina looked exactly as it had yesterday—boats bobbing gently, seagulls screaming about bread, a general air of expensive tranquility.

And there, at slip B-14: the Kingfisher.

And standing near it, leaning against a piling: Windbreaker Guy.

He was reading a newspaper. Actually reading it, not pretending. He looked calm, patient, like a man who’d been hired to wait and was very good at it.

Cleo forced herself to keep walking.

“Clipboard confidence,” she muttered. “Clipboard confidence.”

They reached the gangway.

Oliver, bless him, launched into character immediately. “Morning! Here for the scheduled inspection and cleaning. Should only take an hour.”

Windbreaker Guy looked up.

For one terrible moment, Cleo thought he’d recognize them.

But they were wearing hats. Sunglasses. Polos that screamed “I make twelve dollars an hour and hate my manager.”

He glanced at Oliver's clipboard, then waved them on. "Make it quick. Owner wants minimal disruption."

"You got it," Oliver said cheerfully.

They boarded.

Cleo's legs felt like soup.

They made it onto the deck. Down the stairs to the cabin. The door closed behind them.

Oliver exhaled. "Holy shit."

"Do *not* celebrate yet," Lady Strickland hissed. "We still have to start this thing and leave without anyone stopping us."

Cleo moved to the helm. The controls were more complex than she'd expected—multiple screens, navigation systems, throttle controls that looked like they required a PhD.

"Can you drive this?" Cleo asked.

Lady Strickland slid into the captain's chair. "I crewed for three summers in college. It's been a while, but boats don't forget."

"I don't think that's how boats work," Cleo said.

Lady Strickland ignored her, flipping switches. The engine purred to life. Screens lit up. Navigation systems initialized.

Oliver peeked out the window. "Windbreaker Guy's still reading his paper."

"Good." Lady Strickland's hands moved across the controls with surprising confidence. "Cleo, untie us."

"What?"

"The mooring lines. Untie them. Quickly."

Cleo scrambled back up to the deck. Four thick ropes secured the Kingfisher to the dock. She worked fast, fingers flying through knots with the same instinct that guided her through lock pins.

One rope free. Two. Three.

On the fourth, she glanced up.

Windbreaker Guy had put down his newspaper.

He was staring directly at her.

Their eyes met.

He started moving.

"GO!" Cleo screamed.

The engine roared. The Kingfisher lurched backward.

Cleo stumbled, grabbing the railing. The fourth rope snapped taut—still tied—and the boat jerked.

Windbreaker Guy sprinted down the dock.

Cleo yanked her multitool from her belt and sawed at the rope. It was thick, industrial-grade.

"CLEO!" Oliver yelled from below.

The rope frayed. Snapped.

The Kingfisher shot backward into the harbor.

Windbreaker Guy reached the slip just as they cleared it. He stood there, phone to his ear, watching them with an expression that was almost—impressed?

Lady Strickland spun the wheel. The yacht swung around, nose pointing toward open water.

Cleo collapsed onto the deck, breathing hard.

They'd done it.

They'd actually stolen a yacht.

Oliver emerged from the cabin, grinning like a maniac. "We're maritime criminals now. This is the best day of my life."

Lady Strickland's voice drifted up from below: "Someone find the depth gauge. And Cleo—get that key ready."

Cleo pulled the brass key from her pocket. In the daylight, she could see more details: tiny engravings along the teeth, patterns that looked almost decorative but probably weren't.

The Kingfisher cut through the harbor, heading for deeper water.

And somewhere behind them, Cleo was certain, Windbreaker Guy was making phone calls to people who were significantly less impressed than he'd been. ✨

#### 🌀 Critique of Chapter 4

This chapter absolutely *rips*. The pace is fast without feeling rushed, and the heist setup is hilarious—"clipboard confidence" is elite dialogue. You handled the exposition (schematics, depth-lock explanation) super cleanly, giving us rules without bogging us down. The maintenance-uniform infiltration is my favorite kind of caper logic: bold stupidity disguised as professionalism.

Oliver continues to shine as chaotic-himbo-with-money, and Lady Strickland's transformation into "I can pilot a yacht, obviously" feels earned and weirdly glamorous. I also appreciate that Windbreaker Guy finally gets personality—reading an actual newspaper while surveilling them is a great detail.

Only two notes:

1. We skipped over the one-hour deadline from earlier chapters; now that we're out on the water anyway, maybe clarify later whether that constraint mattered or is gone.
2. In the infiltration, Cleo tells them not to acknowledge Windbreaker Guy, but then Oliver calls out to him as "morning!"—it works comedically, but the logic slipped for a second.

Otherwise: chef's kiss. The corner (boat stolen, key in hand, danger in-bound) is solid and sets me up perfectly.

## 🌀 Chapter 5: Deep Enough

The open ocean was not calming when one was committing a felony.

Spray hit Cleo's face as the Kingfisher punched through the swell, engines humming like an expensive secret. The shoreline shrank behind them. In the distance, a seagull screamed at absolutely nothing, which felt emotionally accurate.

Oliver leaned against the rail, taking dramatic, windblown selfies.

"Stop doing that," Cleo said. "You're documenting evidence."

"It's for the private archive," he said, flashing a peace sign at the horizon.

Lady Strickland stood at the helm, hair snapping around her face like she owned both the sea and anyone foolish enough to challenge her. "Depth gauge—what are we reading?"

Mrs. Halverson, gripping the console like it might buck her off, squinted at the screen. "Two hundred feet? No—three. Three hundred feet."

"That's not how depth works," Cleo muttered, tugging the brass key from her pocket. The engraving caught the sunlight: tiny flourishes around numbers.

Her father's voice echoed in her head. *Complexity creates fragility.*

Meaning: whatever they were about to do could break in spectacular ways.

Cleo descended the narrow stairs into the lower cabin, Oliver clattering after her.

"I'm helping," he said.

"You're narrating," she corrected.

"Well, someone needs to."

They passed through the lounge—white leather benches, chrome fixtures, a minibar containing exactly six identical bottles of Pellegrino—and reached a hatch in the floor. A heavy one, reinforced metal, with a recessed keyhole.

The ballast-safe.

"Moment of truth," Cleo murmured.

She knelt, tool bag at her side, hands steady. She slid the key into the lock.

Nothing happened.

Oliver crouched beside her. "Did you... do it wrong?"

"Don't insult me," she said through clenched teeth, and turned the key slowly.

A sharp *click*.

Then the entire floor shifted beneath them.

Metal released. A thud inside the compartment. Something heavy unlocking.

Cleo grinned. “We did it.”

Oliver clapped her on the back—too hard, because suddenly her forehead was in the railing.

The hatch rose on hydraulic hinges, revealing a narrow compartment about four feet deep. Inside sat a watertight case the size of a carry-on suitcase, matte black, reinforced corners, latches that looked very unamused by the concept of being opened.

Cleo rested her hands on the case. “Okay. Next lock.”

Above them, Lady Strickland shouted, “We’re at the depth your father indicated. Do what you need to do!”

Cleo flicked open her kit. “Stand back.”

Minutes passed. Cleo worked the picks with reverent confidence: tension wrench, hook, pressure. She felt every pin—tiny leaps beneath her fingertips.

One.

Two.

Three—

A muffled alarm shrieked.

Cleo froze. “That wasn’t me.”

Oliver spun. “Did the *boat* just beep?”

No. It wasn’t the boat.

The beep was coming from the case.

The latch began to flash an angry red.

“Oh,” Oliver said. “Oh no. It’s timed. Like a bomb. It’s a bomb, isn’t it?”

“It’s not a bomb,” Cleo said.

The case beeped faster.

“It’s *probably* not a bomb,” Cleo amended.

Oliver backed toward the stairs. “Lady Strickland! Cleo is opening a bomb!”

Cleo wanted to throw something at him but was too busy not dying.

She slid her pick into place, heart hammering.

“Okay,” she whispered to the lock. “Let’s not explode.”

Click.

The latch popped open.

The beeping stopped.

Cleo exhaled so hard she saw spots. She lifted the case’s lid.

Inside was...

Paperwork.

Neatly bound folders, stamped with government seals. A leather satchel tied with twine. And, on top, a single envelope with one word written in precise handwriting:

**BEA**

Cleo felt Oliver tense beside her.

She handed him the envelope. “You should get Lady Strickland.”

He bolted up the stairs.

Cleo sifted through the case. Not diamonds. Not bearer bonds. Not USB drives full of crypto keys. Just—

Documents.

Contracts.

Correspondence.

One stamped in red: **CONFIDENTIAL—FEDERAL INVESTIGATION**

Another: **STRICKLAND CHARITABLE FOUNDATION—FORENSIC FINANCIAL REVIEW**

Letters about illegal offshore accounts. Shell corporations. Laundered donations. A signature Cleo didn’t recognize: *Gerard Strickland*.

Cleo felt cold. “Oh,” she whispered. “It wasn’t treasure. It was leverage.”

Footsteps thundered back down.

Lady Strickland reached the hatch, Oliver close behind. She took the envelope without a word.

Her hands shook as she opened it.

Cleo watched her face shift—confusion, shock, grief, something like relief.

Oliver hovered. “Bea?”

Lady Strickland spoke, voice low and trembling. “He was clearing my name.”

“What?”

She held up the letter.

“My husband knew the foundation’s audit was going to expose financial crimes. He knew people would think I was involved. These documents... they prove I wasn’t. He did it. Alone.”

Cleo blinked. “So he framed you—then unframed you?”

“He protected me. Even after everything.”

A beat of silence.

Then a sharp, violent bang reverberated through the hull.

All three of them froze.

Cleo scrambled up the stairs, heart in her throat.

Wind and sunlight hit her face as she emerged onto the deck.

A second boat was closing on them at full speed. Black hull, unmarked. A man at the bow held a grappling hook.

Windbreaker Guy stood beside the pilot, calm as a saint.

He lifted a hand in greeting.

“WE HAVE FRIENDS!” Cleo shouted down to the cabin.

Lady Strickland appeared at her shoulder, hair wild. She took in the incoming vessel, then the open ocean.

“How fast can we go?” Cleo asked.

Lady Strickland slammed the throttle forward.

The Kingfisher surged.

The black boat surged faster.

Mrs. Halverson poked her head out and shrieked, “THEY HAVE GRAPPLING EQUIPMENT. LIKE PIRATES!”

Oliver grabbed a fire extinguisher. “We’ll fight them!”

“With *foam*?” Cleo yelled.

“It’s tactical foam!”

The black boat pulled alongside. The man with the hook swung—

Cleo snatched the flare gun from the emergency kit.

“No,” Oliver said, panic rising. “No more flares.”

Cleo fired.

The flare shot wide—again—and sizzled into the water harmlessly.

Windbreaker Guy cupped his hands to his mouth.

“PULL OVER AND HAND OVER THE CASE!”

Cleo leaned over the rail. “CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

“You can hear me!” he shouted. “YOU ARE FORTY FEET AWAY!”

Lady Strickland shouted down, “Brace yourselves!”

The Kingfisher hit the deeper current. The hull dipped—and the entire deck lurched.

Cleo stumbled—caught herself on the railing—

The black boat pitched in the wake, losing balance.

The man with the hook misfired, line splashing into the sea.

Lady Strickland seized the wheel and made a hard turn.

The Kingfisher knifed across the waves, slicing a clean arc.

The black boat overshot, forced to circle back.

Cleo scrambled down into the cabin. “We need to lock the safe again. If they board, we can’t have it out in the open.”

Lady Strickland held the case to her chest. “No. We’re not hiding it. We’re finishing this.”

“Finishing what?” Oliver said.

She met Cleo’s eyes—calm, deadly determined.

“We’re bringing these documents to the authorities. Today. We go to the coast guard station. They can’t touch us there.”

Cleo swallowed. That was a plan that involved... more crimes. And possibly news cameras.

“Okay,” she said. “Then we need to lose them first.”

Above deck, another crack—this time metal striking metal.

“They’re trying to hook the rail!” Mrs. Halverson screamed.

Cleo grabbed Lady Strickland’s wrist. “Let me drive.”

“You don’t know how.”

“Neither do you! You said boats don’t forget!”

Lady Strickland blinked. Then—shockingly—handed her the case.

“Fine. You steer. I’ll handle them.”

Cleo climbed back to the helm. The controls were a nightmare of buttons.

But one lever meant go, and one meant more go.

She shoved the throttle.

The wake fanned behind them. The yacht leapt forward.

The black boat lost ground.

Oliver clung to the railing like a decorative hood ornament. “You’re doing great! I’m terrified!”

Lady Strickland stepped to the stern, fire extinguisher in hand.

Windbreaker Guy shouted, “THERE ARE SAFER OPTIONS!”

Lady Strickland depressed the extinguisher. A jet of foam blasted across the gap directly into the man with the grappling hook, knocking him flat on his back.

Windbreaker Guy stared at her, stunned.

Lady Strickland lifted the extinguisher like a sword. “My husband underestimated me. Don’t make the same mistake.”

Cleo banked hard, aiming for the shipping lane where they’d be surrounded by commercial traffic.

They might make it.

They might—

A warning alarm chirped on the navigation panel.

**ENGINE TEMP HIGH**

Cleo stared.

“Uh oh,” she said.

“What does that mean?” Oliver yelled.

“It means,” Cleo said, tightening her grip on the wheel, “we’re running the engine too hot. If we push it harder, we could blow something.”

Lady Strickland appeared at her shoulder, chest heaving. “We can’t slow down.”

“If we don’t,” Cleo said, “we might lose the engine entirely.”

Behind them, the black boat adjusted course, lining up for another intercept.

Mrs. Halverson whimpered.

Oliver clutched the railing. “Cleo. Decision time.”

Cleo looked at the warning light, then at the case, then at the open water ahead.

Two choices, both bad.

Slow down and be boarded.

Or gun it and risk the engine—and possibly their lives.

She swallowed.

“Hold on to something.”

She slammed the throttle all the way forward.

The Kingfisher screamed.

The black boat began to close the gap again—

—and the engine gave a choking, wheezing *bang*.

The Kingfisher shuddered violently.

Then the power cut out completely.

They were dead in the water.

And the black boat slowed to a graceful stop twenty yards away.

Windbreaker Guy leaned on the rail and smiled, almost apologetically.

“Now,” he called, “can we have a civil conversation?”

The Kingfisher drifted, powerless.

And Cleo, heart hammering, realized they were trapped. ☪

### ✱ Critique of Chapter 5

Fantastic action sequence! The boat chase crackles with energy—Lady Strickland foam-blasting the grappling hook guy is chef’s kiss, and “tactical foam” made me laugh out loud. The reveal that the treasure is actually exonerating documents rather than money adds genuine emotional stakes while keeping things grounded. Gerard’s posthumous redemption arc through paperwork is oddly touching.

The pacing is excellent—you juggled the safe-opening tension, document discovery, and chase without any section feeling rushed. Cleo’s flare gun incompetence remains a delightful running gag. Small note: Mrs. Halverson reading the depth gauge (“Two hundred feet? No—three. Three hundred feet”) is funny but suggests she can’t read numbers, which seems odd for a butler.

The engine failure corner is brutal and perfect—they’re trapped, outmaneuvered, and Windbreaker Guy gets to be politely menacing again. One tiny continuity question: how did the black boat find them so fast? Did they track the yacht somehow, or just guess the route?

Challenge accepted: I need to resolve the standoff, give Windbreaker Guy actual character beyond “professional obstacle,” maintain the humor despite rising stakes, and find a way forward that doesn’t just end in “everyone gets arrested.”

### ✱ Chapter 6: The Professional

Windbreaker Guy’s real name, it turned out, was Martin Cheswick.

He introduced himself while boarding the Kingfisher with the casual ease of someone arriving at a dinner party only slightly late.

“Martin Cheswick,” he said, extending a hand to Lady Strickland, who stared at it like he’d offered her a live eel. “Senior acquisitions coordinator for Dalton & Hale Legal Trust.”

“You’re a *lawyer*?” Cleo said.

“Estate management specialist.” He adjusted his sunglasses. “Though I did pass the bar, yes.”

Oliver, still clutching the fire extinguisher, looked betrayed. “We’ve been running from a lawyer?”

“A very persistent lawyer,” Martin said mildly. “May I come aboard properly? We’re drifting into a shipping lane.”

Lady Strickland’s jaw tightened. “You chased us with a boat.”

“You stole a yacht and fled a secured marina. I felt proportional response was warranted.” He glanced at the smoking engine compartment. “Also, you’ve done about fifteen thousand dollars in damage to the cooling system.”

Cleo wanted to sink through the deck. “That’s... fixable, right?”

“Eventually.” Martin stepped fully onto the Kingfisher, followed by two crew members who looked less like henchmen and more like exhausted maritime professionals. One was a woman in her fifties with a Coast Guard cap. The other was the hook guy, now covered in fire extinguisher foam and radiating quiet dignity despite it.

“This is Captain Reyes,” Martin said, gesturing to the woman. “And Henrik, our marine technician. We’re going to tow you back. But first—” He turned to Lady Strickland. “We need to discuss the case.”

Lady Strickland held it tighter. “It’s mine. My husband left it for me.”

“He left it for you to *find*,” Martin corrected gently. “But he left it in my care to *deliver*. There’s a difference.”

“You said you were retrieving it for a neutral party,” Cleo said.

“I am. You’re looking at him.” Martin’s smile was professionally apologetic. “Gerard Strickland hired me eight months before his death. Paid me a substantial retainer to ensure that if the safe ever opened, the contents reached the proper authorities intact. He didn’t trust the mail. Didn’t trust banks. So he trusted me.”

Oliver lowered the fire extinguisher. “Why didn’t you just tell us this at the marina?”

“Would you have believed me?”

Fair point.

Lady Strickland’s voice shook. “The documents in this case prove my innocence. If you take them—”

“I’m not taking them. I’m escorting them.” Martin’s tone softened—just barely, but enough to make him seem almost human. “Lady Strickland, your husband spent his final year preparing this. The documents. The puzzle lock. The timing. He wanted you cleared, publicly and permanently. But he also

knew that if the evidence just *appeared*, it could be dismissed as fabricated. That's why he designed this... elaborate delivery system."

"I don't understand," Lady Strickland said.

Martin gestured to Cleo. "The locksmith. The witness. The theft. The chase. You didn't just *find* these documents—you fought for them. You're not handing them over quietly. You're bringing them in with a story. Credibility through chaos."

Cleo blinked. "That's either brilliant or deeply unhinged."

"Gerard Strickland specialized in both." Martin pulled a folder from his jacket. "This is a legal affidavit, signed by me and notarized, documenting the entire chain of custody. The safe. The boat. The conditions under which it opened. Your involvement." He handed it to Lady Strickland. "When you present these documents to the federal investigators, you do it with proof that they've been secured independently. Protected. Verified."

Lady Strickland read the affidavit, her expression shifting. "He really did think of everything."

"He had eight months and a terminal diagnosis," Martin said. "Yes."

A long silence settled over the deck. The waves rocked them gently. Henrik wiped foam off his face with a towel, looking philosophical about it.

Finally, Oliver spoke. "So... we're not in trouble?"

Martin's smile turned slightly wicked. "Oh, you're in *enormous* trouble. You stole a yacht, fled security personnel, discharged maritime flares without proper authorization, and operated a vessel in a reckless manner. Captain Reyes has a very long list."

Captain Reyes nodded grimly. "It's a good list."

Cleo's stomach dropped. "But—"

"However," Martin continued, "Gerard Strickland's instructions included a rather generous legal defense fund for anyone who might be caught up in the, ah, theatrics of retrieval. So. You'll have excellent representation."

"Will we need it?" Lady Strickland asked.

"Depends on how cooperative you are with the authorities." Martin glanced meaningfully at the case. "And how quickly we can get these documents into the right hands."

Lady Strickland looked at Cleo, then Oliver, then Mrs. Halverson—who had emerged from below deck and was taking slow, meditative breaths.

"What do you think?" Lady Strickland asked.

Cleo considered. "I think your husband was either a genius or a sociopath."

"Both," Lady Strickland said.

"And I think," Cleo continued, "that if we're going to clear your name, we should probably do it before my father finds out I committed maritime crimes."

Oliver raised his hand. “I vote we finish what we started. Also, I’m enjoying the chaos.”

Mrs. Halverson said, very quietly, “I would like to never be on a boat again.”

Lady Strickland’s shoulders relaxed—just slightly. She turned to Martin. “If we cooperate, if we bring these documents in properly... you guarantee we’re protected?”

“I guarantee you’re defended. Protected is a different matter. But Gerard was thorough. The affidavit, the documentation, the fact that you retrieved family property from a boat you legally own—it muddies the waters considerably.” Martin’s expression was almost kind. “You’ll survive this. Maybe even come out ahead.”

Lady Strickland extended the case toward him.

Cleo felt her heart clench.

But Lady Strickland didn’t let go.

“We deliver it together,” she said. “All of us. As witnesses.”

Martin studied her for a long moment. Then he nodded. “Agreed.”

They were towed back to the marina in what could only be described as a parade of humiliation.

The Kingfisher, engine dead, dragged behind Martin’s black boat like a misbehaving child. Cleo sat on the deck, sun-baked and exhausted, watching seagulls mock her from above.

Oliver sprawled beside her. “Do you think this counts as a win?”

“We didn’t drown or get arrested,” Cleo said. “So. Provisional win.”

“I’m putting it on my résumé.”

“What, ‘yacht thief?’”

“Maritime acquisition specialist.” He grinned. “Martin had the right idea. It’s all about branding.”

Lady Strickland stood at the rail, case tucked under her arm, watching the harbor approach. She looked smaller than before. Tired. But something in her posture had shifted—relief, maybe. Or resolution.

Mrs. Halverson sat nearby, knitting. She’d produced yarn and needles from somewhere. Cleo didn’t ask.

When they finally docked—surrounded by far too many officials and one very unimpressed harbor master—Martin took charge immediately.

“Federal investigation materials,” he announced, holding up documentation. “Time-sensitive evidence delivery. We’ll need secure transport to the downtown field office.”

A woman in a Coast Guard uniform frowned. “You disabled a yacht engine in open water.”

“Thermal overload due to aggressive pursuit of stolen property,” Martin said smoothly. “We’ll file a full report.”

“You discharged maritime flares without authorization.”

Martin glanced at Cleo. “Distress signal. Legitimate use.”

Cleo nodded vigorously. “Very distressed. Extremely distressed.”

The officer looked unconvinced but waved them through.

Two hours later, Cleo sat in a federal building conference room that smelled like burnt coffee and institutional despair.

Lady Strickland had been in the adjacent room for forty minutes, presenting the documents to a team of investigators who’d arrived with the kind of speed that suggested they’d been waiting for this evidence for years.

Oliver paced. Mrs. Halverson knitted faster.

Cleo stared at her hands. Her fingers still smelled like metal and salt water.

The door opened.

Lady Strickland emerged, followed by a woman in a severe suit who looked like she prosecuted people for fun.

“Miss Dunn,” the woman said. “We’ll need your statement about the lock mechanism and retrieval process. For the record.”

Cleo stood. “Am I in trouble?”

“That depends on whether your statement matches the physical evidence and witness accounts.”

“It will,” Cleo said. “I’m very good at facts.”

Lady Strickland caught her eye as she passed. Her expression was unreadable, but she nodded—just once.

Cleo followed the prosecutor into the room.

By the time they finally left the federal building, the sun was setting.

Cleo’s phone had seventeen missed calls from her father. She’d deal with that later.

Lady Strickland stood on the steps, briefcase gone, looking lighter somehow. Unburdened.

“Thank you,” she said.

Cleo shrugged. “You paid me. Kind of. We never actually discussed rates.”

“I’ll have my accountant wire you something appropriate.”

“Danger pay?”

“Significant danger pay.”

Oliver appeared with coffee from a street vendor. “We survived! No one’s arrested! I call this a success!”

Mrs. Halverson accepted a cup wordlessly.

Lady Strickland sipped hers, then looked at Cleo. “Your father was right. You do have the gift.”

“The gift of being good at locks?”

“The gift of seeing systems. Understanding how things connect.” She smiled—tired, genuine. “My husband would’ve liked you.”

Cleo felt something warm in her chest. “Thanks. I think.”

They stood there for a moment, four unlikely accomplices watching the sky turn pink.

Then Lady Strickland’s phone buzzed.

She glanced at it. Her expression shifted—shock, then something harder to read.

“What?” Oliver asked.

Lady Strickland showed them the screen.

It was an email. Subject line: **KINGFISHER—SECONDARY INSTRUCTION**

The timestamp: sent automatically, two hours after the case was opened.

Cleo’s stomach dropped. “Oh no.”

Lady Strickland opened it.

The message was short:

*If you’re reading this, the legal matter is resolved. Good. But the boat itself has one more secret. Check the anchor housing. You’ll need a Dunn.*

—G.

Cleo stared.

Oliver laughed—slightly hysterically. “He’s haunting us. Your dead husband is haunting us from beyond the grave with puzzles.”

Lady Strickland looked at Cleo.

Cleo looked at the harbor, where the Kingfisher sat, still docked, engine cold.

“The anchor housing,” Cleo said slowly. “That’s... inside the boat. In the storage compartment.”

“Yes,” Lady Strickland said.

“Which we’d need to break into. Again.”

“Yes.”

Cleo thought about her father. About the seventeen missed calls. About the fact that she’d already committed multiple crimes today and somehow survived.

She thought about Gerard Strickland, terminal and paranoid, constructing elaborate puzzles because he couldn’t just *say things* like a normal person.

She thought about the key in her pocket, still warm from being clutched too tightly.

“Absolutely not,” Cleo said.

Lady Strickland raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not breaking into that boat again. It's evidence now. It's probably guarded. And I have a reputation to maintain."

Oliver grinned. "What reputation?"

"The reputation of someone who doesn't repeatedly commit the same felony!"

Lady Strickland's lips twitched. "What if I doubled your fee?"

Cleo hesitated.

"Tripled it," Lady Strickland said.

"I hate you," Cleo said.

"You really don't."

Cleo looked at the harbor. At the Kingfisher. At the anchor housing that definitely, absolutely contained another puzzle that would make her life extremely complicated.

She sighed.

"When?" she asked.

Lady Strickland checked her watch. "Tomorrow morning. Early. Before the maritime investigators finish processing the scene."

"That's insane."

"Yes."

"We'll need a better plan than last time."

"Undoubtedly."

Cleo pulled out her phone and, with great reluctance, called her father.

He answered on the first ring.

"Cleo Artemis Dunn, where have you—"

"Dad," she interrupted. "Hypothetically. If someone needed to access a boat's anchor housing without alerting federal investigators, how would they do it?"

A long pause.

Then: "Cleo, what have you done?"

"It's complicated."

Another pause.

"How complicated?"

Cleo looked at Lady Strickland, at Oliver, at Mrs. Halverson with her knitting.

"We're going to need the hydraulic jack," Cleo said. "And possibly your sailboat."

Her father sighed—a deep, weary sigh that suggested he'd known this day would come eventually.

"I'll meet you at the shop," he said. "And Cleo?"

"Yeah?"

"You're explaining *everything*."

The line went dead.

Cleo pocketed her phone and turned to Lady Strickland.

“Tomorrow morning,” she said. “Six AM. And you’re buying breakfast.”

Lady Strickland smiled. “Deal.”

And somewhere in the harbor, aboard the Kingfisher, the anchor housing waited—silent, locked, and undoubtedly full of more problems than Cleo was prepared to handle. ✨

### 🌀 Critique of Chapter 6

You threaded a tight needle here—wrapping up the chase without killing the tension, giving Windbreaker Guy an identity and motivation, and keeping everything grounded in logistics and law rather than melodrama. Martin Cheswick becoming a *lawyer* is a brilliant pivot: suddenly the antagonist is not a villain but an unflappable bureaucratic wall in expensive shoes. The “credibility through chaos” logic is both absurd and somehow plausible. Lady Strickland’s emotional arc lands: the documents don’t just save her—they validate that she wasn’t abandoned.

The humor is on point (“maritime acquisition specialist,” Mrs. Halverson knitting trauma away) and you nailed the tonal balance between relief and dread. Continuity-wise, the legal fund + affidavit solves a ton of dangling threads. One small note: if Martin had authority and a legal mission all along, why chase with grappling hooks and foam-suicidal boat maneuvers instead of walking up with paperwork on day one? A line like “If we spook you into running, we prove we didn’t engineer a handoff” might clarify.

Your new corner—the *secondary instruction*, the anchor housing—is diabolical. You’ve escalated without going metaphysical. My challenge: top your elegant chaos with a stealth operation and emotional reckoning with Cleo’s dad.

### 🌀 Chapter 7: Anchor Logic

At five forty-eight in the morning, Cleo regretted everything.

The marina was still dark, the kind of pre-dawn quiet that made even seagulls unsure if they were allowed to scream yet. Cleo stood beside her father’s sailboat trailer, holding a travel mug of coffee and wishing she’d chosen a different career. Like, say, census taker. Mortician. Professional nap enthusiast.

Lennox Dunn emerged from the trunk of his own car, carrying equipment that looked like props from a heist movie—or, worse, from his workshop on “non-destructive entry, mostly.”

“Hydraulic jack,” he said, setting the case down. “Two battery packs. Hand winch. Ask me again why we’re doing this.”

“Because I’m apparently addicted to poor life choices.” Cleo wrapped both hands around her mug. “And puzzles.”

Her father gave her a long, slow look. “Puzzles do not cause felony trespass.”

“That’s the thing,” Cleo said. “They do now.”

Footsteps announced Oliver, who jogged up carrying a paper bag. “I got breakfast burritos.”

Cleo blinked. “Oliver. It’s six AM.”

“I’m aware. I’m a morning person now. Trauma changes people.”

Lady Strickland arrived next, dressed in a tailored black jacket that probably cost more than Cleo’s car. She accepted a burrito politely, as though receiving a diplomatic document. Mrs. Halverson followed, with a cooler and the calm resignation of someone who had knit through worse.

Lennox surveyed the group. “This is not a crew. This is a cry for help.”

“We’re very determined,” Oliver offered.

“You’re under-caffeinated and wildly incompetent.”

“Both can be true,” Cleo said.

They moved down the dock in a loose, nervous cluster. The Kingfisher sat in its slip, lights off, crime-scene tape strung across the gate like a taunt. A lone investigator sat in a folding chair, staring at a tablet and eating a Danish.

Lennox murmured, “We go around.”

“One small problem,” Oliver whispered. “The boat is surrounded by cameras.”

Cleo smiled—grim, exhausted, and slightly unhinged. “Yeah. But those cameras feed to the marina office. Which has Wi-Fi.”

Oliver blinked. “Cleo. Are... are we hacking something?”

“No,” she said. “I’m Googling the default password for the security system router.”

She pulled out her phone, connected to the network *KINGFISHER\_SERVICE\_5G*, and typed admin/admin.

The security feed interface loaded instantly.

Oliver whispered, reverent, “God is real.”

Cleo flipped the camera view to prerecorded loop. “God is insecure router configurations.”

Mrs. Halverson patted her shoulder like she’d just performed a small miracle.

They slipped past the inattentive investigator. Cleo’s adrenaline spiked, her entire body tightening. The Kingfisher loomed above them—sleek, expensive, smug.

They boarded silently. No one spoke until they reached the lower deck.

Cleo crouched in front of the anchor locker hatch. Heavy, stainless steel. Secondary locking mechanism installed post-factory. She recognized the screw pattern—custom work. Too careful. Too planned.

“Gerard didn’t want anyone stumbling into this by accident,” Lennox said quietly.

Cleo slid into work mode. Tools laid out. Light clamped to her shirt. Fingertips testing the edges of the hatch.

“Look,” she murmured. “Micro-switch recessed into the frame. If we pry wrong, it triggers an alarm.”

“How do we avoid that?” Oliver whispered.

She angled her pick, slid it under the lip, found the pressure point. “We don’t avoid it. We beat it.”

The click was soft. Luxurious. Like the lock was admitting her into something meant only for her.

The hatch cracked open.

Inside sat a watertight cylinder, bolted to the hull. A narrow slot ran along the top.

Lennox inhaled. “Keyed tumbler. Five pins. Suspiciously simple.”

Cleo reached into her pocket. The brass key warm against her palm.

Oliver leaned over her shoulder. “If this contains, like, a USB drive with his Spotify login, I’m going to be furious.”

Cleo slid the key into the slot.

Nothing happened.

No click. No release. Just resistance—solid and absolute.

She frowned. “It’s hitting something. Not pins. Something mechanical.”

Lennox knelt beside her, eyes sharp. “Look at the housing. The bolts are threaded into the hull, not the unit. It’s designed to move. This isn’t a safe.” He tapped the cylinder. “It’s a *counterweight assembly*.”

Oliver blinked. “Like... an Indiana Jones trap but for yachts?”

Cleo leaned closer. A faint engraved instruction line ran along the cylinder:

**KEY + LOAD + RELEASE**

Her stomach dropped. “This key doesn’t open it. The weight does.”

“What weight?” Oliver asked.

Lennox scanned the deck. “The anchor.”

Lady Strickland’s voice was thin. “You’re telling me Gerard installed a gravity-driven safe that only opens while dropping the anchor?”

“That would do it,” Lennox said. “Pull the pin, drop the anchor, cable tension turns the cylinder. Key engages the catch.”

Cleo swallowed. “So we need to use the anchor.”

Lady Strickland stared. “We are not taking the boat into open water. Investigators will notice.”

“We don’t take it out,” Cleo said. “We drop the anchor right here.”

Oliver's eyebrows shot up. "In the marina? That's... illegal."

Mrs. Halverson whispered, "We are so very bad at crime."

Cleo looked at her father. "How loud would it be?"

"A splash. Some mechanical noise. But we can muffle the cable reel with towels."

Cleo wiped her palms. "Let's do it."

They moved quickly. Lennox rigged the hydraulic jack under the anchor windlass to take tension quietly. Cleo positioned herself at the cylinder, key ready. Oliver wrapped the anchor chain in thick towels like he was swaddling a baby seal. Mrs. Halverson stood lookout at the window with knitting needles like hidden weapons.

Lady Strickland hovered, breath tight.

"Ready?" Lennox whispered.

Cleo nodded. "Release it."

Lennox pulled the lever.

A soft whir. Cable unwound.

The cylinder trembled. The key began to turn—slow, reluctant, like the mechanism resented cooperation.

Cleo leaned in. "Come on. Come on—"

Alarms shrieked.

Lights burst on outside.

The investigator on the dock stood, shouting, "HEY! HEY! STEP AWAY FROM THE BOAT!"

Oliver hissed, "We are *so bad* at crime!"

Cleo ignored the alarm. The cylinder rotated farther—one quarter turn, half turn—and then:

**Click.**

The latch released.

Cleo grabbed the cylinder and twisted it free.

"GO!" Lennox barked. "Forget the anchor! Go!"

They sprinted—Cleo clutching the cylinder, Oliver hauling equipment, Lady Strickland somehow maintaining dignity at a dead run.

Security guards converged.

They didn't stop.

Past the dock. Past the tape. Past the yelling investigator yelling "STOP! YOU CAN'T REMOVE EVIDENCE!"

Lennox herded them toward the parking lot, shoving them into vehicles with military precision.

Cleo dove into Oliver's car, heart pounding.

As they tore out of the lot, alarms fading behind them, Cleo finally looked at the cylinder.

No documents this time.

Instead: a narrow glass vial tucked into foam. Inside the vial, a single metal strip—etched with something that looked like a routing code.

Lady Strickland's voice shook. "What is it?"

Cleo held it up to the light.

A bank routing number.

And beneath it, neatly engraved words:

**FOR WHATEVER COMES NEXT.**

Cleo's throat tightened.

Gerard hadn't just cleared her name.

He'd funded her escape.

Lady Strickland whispered, "He gave me a way out."

Oliver exhaled slowly. "Okay. That man was definitely unhinged, but... wow."

Cleo turned to Lennox. "You still think puzzles don't cause felonies?"

He shook his head. "No. Now I think puzzles cause character development."

Cleo slumped into the seat, adrenaline crashing.

"Home," she murmured. "Before anyone asks us what the hell we just did."

Oliver started the engine.

They sped toward dawn—past alarms, past the marina, into whatever came next. ☯

### ✱ Critique of Chapter 7

Excellent heist execution! The anchor-weight mechanism is clever engineering that feels earned—Gerard's puzzles keep escalating logically without getting absurd. Lennox finally entering the action adds weight; his "puzzles cause character development" line is perfect dad-wisdom. The pre-dawn break-in has great tension, and "admin/admin" as the hacking solution is both realistic and hilarious.

The pacing works beautifully—calm setup, mechanical problem-solving, then alarm chaos. Oliver's "We are SO BAD at crime" repeated beats land every time. The emotional reveal (bank routing number as escape fund rather than more documents) deepens Gerard's character posthumously and gives Lady Strickland a genuinely moving moment.

One tiny note: they flee the marina mid-alarm, but there's no follow-up about consequences. Will investigators track them down? Does Martin Cheswick show up again? The authorities seemed very present in Chapter 6, so their absence here feels notable—though maybe that's the corner you're leaving me.

The vial reveal is a great pivot—concrete but meaningful. Now I need to stick the landing: resolve the criminal consequences, give everyone satis-

fying closure, and hopefully maintain the humor through the finale. Challenge accepted!

## ✱ Chapter 8: Dunn & Daughter

Three hours later, Cleo sat in her father's shop watching Lady Strickland negotiate with federal prosecutors via speakerphone while eating cold breakfast burritos.

The conversation was not going well.

"Yes, I understand we technically removed evidence from a crime scene," Lady Strickland said with the patience of someone explaining gravity to a particularly slow rock. "However, the evidence in question was my late husband's personal property, secured on a vessel I legally own—"

The prosecutor's voice crackled through the speaker. "That was under active federal investigation—"

"An investigation that has now concluded favorably, thanks to materials I provided yesterday. Materials that exonerated me completely." Lady Strickland's tone could have flash-frozen nitrogen. "I fail to see how recovering additional personal effects constitutes obstruction."

Cleo whispered to Oliver, "Is she always like this?"

"Only when she's right and knows it," he whispered back. "So, yes. Always."

Mrs. Halverson sat in the corner, knitting what appeared to be a small anxiety blanket. For herself, presumably.

Lennox worked at his bench, methodically disassembling the cylinder housing. He'd barely spoken since they'd arrived, but Cleo recognized his thinking face—the one that meant he was three steps ahead of everyone else and waiting for them to catch up.

Lady Strickland continued. "Furthermore, the routing number Mr. Strickland left corresponds to an offshore account established seven years ago in my name. It contains funds—*legal* funds from his consulting business—that I was unaware existed. Given that I've now voluntarily disclosed this to your office, I believe we can consider this matter resolved."

A long pause on the other end.

Then: "We'll need documentation. Full accounting. And you're still looking at potential trespassing charges from the marina."

"The marina," Lady Strickland said, "where I have been a slip-holder for twelve years and maintain an excellent payment record? I'm certain we can reach an understanding."

Another pause.

"We'll be in touch, Mrs. Strickland."

The line went dead.

Lady Strickland set down her phone and exhaled slowly. “Well. That could have gone worse.”

“Could it have?” Cleo asked.

“They could have arrested us immediately rather than threatening to arrest us later. I consider that progress.” She looked at the vial on the workbench—the bank routing strip still tucked inside. “Gerard spent years planning this. Every step. Every contingency. He knew exactly how much trouble we’d get into and how to get us back out.”

Oliver leaned back in his chair. “Your husband was either—”

“A genius or a sociopath, yes, we’ve established the pattern.” Lady Strickland’s voice softened. “But he loved me. In his own deeply paranoid, puzzle-obsessed way, he loved me.”

Cleo felt something twist in her chest. “The account. Are you going to use it?”

Lady Strickland was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t need to escape. Not anymore. The documents cleared my name. The foundation will recover. My life is... mine again.” She touched the vial gently. “But knowing he gave me the option? That matters.”

Lennox looked up from his work. “A good lock isn’t about keeping people out. It’s about letting the right person in at the right time.”

Lady Strickland smiled—tired, genuine, maybe a little broken. “He would have liked that philosophy.”

“He did.” Lennox set down his tools. “When he consulted me about the marine locks, he said the same thing. Security isn’t about control. It’s about trust deferred.”

“Dad,” Cleo said slowly, “you knew Gerard Strickland better than you told me.”

Lennox met her eyes. “I knew him well enough to understand why he chose our family for this. You have a gift, Cleo. Not just for locks—for seeing how systems protect what matters. He trusted that. Trusted you’d figure out what he’d built and why.”

Cleo’s throat tightened. “I just picked some locks.”

“You did more than that.” Lennox gestured at Lady Strickland, at Oliver, at the chaos they’d created and somehow survived. “You helped someone take back their life. That’s what locksmiths do—not breaking things open, but giving people access to what’s already theirs.”

Cleo blinked rapidly, refusing to cry in front of clients.

Oliver broke the moment by standing abruptly. “Okay. Emotional revelation time is over. What do we do about the fact that we’re probably still wanted for maritime crimes?”

“We wait,” Lady Strickland said. “Martin Cheswick has my number. If the authorities want to press charges, he’ll coordinate something civilized. If not...” She shrugged. “We move on.”

Mrs. Halverson spoke for the first time in an hour. “I would like to never move again. I would like to sit in one place until I fossilize.”

“Valid,” Cleo said.

Her phone buzzed.

A text from an unknown number: *Nice work on the anchor mechanism. Gerard would’ve been impressed.* —MC

Cleo showed it to Lady Strickland, who smiled. “Martin. Of course he’s been tracking us.”

“Is that... legal?” Oliver asked.

“Probably not. But I suspect he’s decided we’re more useful as allies than as problems.” Lady Strickland stood, smoothing her jacket. “Cleo. Your invoice?”

Cleo blinked. “Oh. Uh. I have no idea what to charge for ‘multiple felonies and emotional breakthroughs.’”

“I’ll wire you fifty thousand dollars.”

Cleo choked on air. “That’s—what—no—”

“Twenty-five for the locksmithing. Twenty-five for the trauma.” Lady Strickland’s smile was sharp. “Non-negotiable.”

Lennox coughed. “That’s very generous.”

“It’s proportional.” Lady Strickland extended a hand to Cleo. “Thank you. Truly.”

Cleo shook it, still reeling. “You’re welcome. I think. Please don’t hire me again.”

“Oh, I absolutely will. But next time I’ll give you advance warning about the crime.”

Oliver grabbed his jacket. “Bea, we should go. Let them recover in peace.”

Lady Strickland nodded. She collected the vial, tucking it carefully into her purse. Mrs. Halverson gathered her knitting with the air of someone who had survived a natural disaster.

At the door, Lady Strickland paused. “Cleo. Your father said you have a gift. He’s right. Don’t waste it on simple jobs.”

Then she swept out, Oliver and Mrs. Halverson trailing behind like courtiers.

The shop fell silent.

Cleo collapsed into a chair. “Dad. What just happened?”

Lennox returned to his workbench. “You became a locksmith.”

“I’ve *been* a locksmith.”

“No. Before, you picked locks. Now you understand what they protect.” He glanced at her, expression soft. “I’m proud of you.”

Cleo felt tears threaten again. “I committed multiple crimes.”

“Yes. With excellent justification and surprising competence.” He smiled. “Your mother would’ve loved this story.”

Cleo’s chest ached. Her mother—who’d died when Cleo was fourteen, who’d always said life was about opening doors, not just walking through them.

“Yeah,” Cleo said quietly. “She would’ve.”

They sat in comfortable silence, surrounded by locks and tools and the mechanical poetry of security.

Finally, Cleo spoke. “So. What now?”

Lennox picked up a half-finished lock assembly. “Now? We get back to work. Someone’s cat is locked in a bathroom in the north district, and apparently it’s *very* upset.”

Cleo laughed—exhausted, relieved, slightly unhinged. “A cat. After yachts and federal prosecutors and anchor-weight safes, we’re rescuing a cat.”

“It’s honest work.”

“It’s significantly less felonious work.”

“That too.” Lennox handed her a pick set. “Come on. The cat waits for no one.”

Cleo stood, grabbed her tool bag, and followed her father out into the morning.

The sun was properly up now, Port Meer waking to ordinary chaos. Seagulls screamed. Traffic hummed. Somewhere, a yacht sat evidence-tagged in a marina, telling its final secrets.

And Cleo Dunn—locksmith, occasional criminal, daughter of Lennox Dunn—walked into her next job with her head high and her conscience only moderately troubled.

Three weeks later, the charges were quietly dropped.

Martin Cheswick sent a formal letter explaining that “upon review of maritime regulations and property law,” the matter had been resolved “to everyone’s satisfaction.”

Translation: Gerard Strickland’s legal defense fund was very, very good.

Lady Strickland sent a fruit basket the size of a small car.

Oliver sent memes.

Mrs. Halverson sent a handmade scarf with a note that read: *For next time.* —H

There would not be a next time, Cleo told herself.

(There absolutely would be a next time.)

The shop got busy. Word spread—apparently “the locksmith who stole a yacht” was excellent marketing. Cleo fielded calls about safes, vaults, and one very elaborate request involving a panic room and a parrot.

She said yes to all of it.

Because locks were puzzles. And puzzles, as her father said, caused character development.

One morning, Cleo arrived at the shop to find a package on the doorstep.

No return address. Just her name in neat calligraphy.

Inside: a brass key. Ornate, hand-forged, clearly custom work.

And a note:

*Cleo—*

*Thank you for finishing what I started. Beatrice is free now. That was always the point.*

*The key is yours. No lock attached—just a reminder that sometimes the puzzle is the gift itself.*

*Keep opening doors.*

—G.S.

Cleo turned the key over in her palm, feeling its weight, its balance, its careful construction.

Then she smiled and hung it on the pegboard behind the counter, next to her father's framed certificates and her mother's old toolbox.

A reminder.

A promise.

A door, waiting to be opened.

Lennox found her staring at it an hour later.

"New decoration?" he asked.

"Memento," Cleo said. "From a client."

He studied the key, then nodded approvingly. "Good craftsmanship?"

"The best."

They worked side by side through the morning—father and daughter, locksmiths both, surrounded by the quiet music of tumblers and pins and mechanisms that protected what mattered most.

Outside, Port Meer hummed with ordinary mysteries.

Inside, Cleo Dunn picked up her tools and got to work.

Because there were always more locks.

And she had the gift. ✨

### 🌀 Critique of Chapter 8

You stuck the landing *emotionally*—this chapter breathes. The federal-prosecutor-on-speakerphone bit is hilarious, and Lady Strickland lawyering her way through trespassing charges while eating a cold burrito is peak vibe. The theme payoff ("security isn't about control, it's about trust") ties

back beautifully, and the final package + key note from Gerard is a perfect epilogue beat. The chapter balances closure and humor without feeling rushed.

My only craft quibble: too many time jumps create a sense of multiple endings. We get the shop scene, then the “three weeks later,” then the package. I think it works, but I would have loved to see a *single* visual anchor (pun unavoidable) that threads them—like Cleo deciding where to hang the key before the time skip. Also, the legal consequences feel a little too clean—Martin silently fixing everything is a fun cheat, but a touch of real-world friction (media frenzy, a stern marshals visit) might’ve grounded it.

Still, the emotional resolution sings. The humor lands. You delivered a deliciously warm “post-heist epilogue”... so naturally, I’m going to smash everything to pieces in the finale setup.

## 🌀 Chapter 9: The Lock That Isn’t Hers

The voicemail icon blinked.

Cleo ignored it.

She was balancing on a stepladder, installing a biometric keypad in the office of a dentist who insisted the new safe must be “*pet-proof*.” Which was troubling, considering he gestured toward a parakeet that stared at everyone like it had opinions about tax evasion.

Her phone buzzed again.

**Unknown caller.**

She slid down the ladder, wiped her hands on her shirt, and stepped into the hallway.

“Cleo Dunn, Dunn & Daughter Locksmithing.”

A well-modulated baritone answered. “Ms. Dunn. Martin Cheswick.”

She nearly dropped the phone. “Uh. Hi. Are we... being sued?”

“No. You’re being requested.”

“Those sound adjacent.”

“Federal agents would like your technical expertise on a matter involving Mr. Strickland’s estate. Your presence would be...” He hesitated, which was new. “Helpful.”

“Helpful” in lawyer-speak meant “we need you to do crimes again.”

“Pass,” Cleo said. “I’m busy securing a dentist against parrot intrusion.”

“You should see what the bird can do with a safety deposit key,” Martin murmured.

She blinked. “What—”

Martin cut in. “This is not optional. We’re at Strickland Marine Terminal. Pier C. Come now.”

The line died.

Oliver—who had been hovering by the breakroom microwave, reheating something that smelled like guilt—wandered over.

“Good news?” he asked.

“No.” Cleo grabbed her tool bag. “Worst-case scenario? The government wants us back.”

“Middle-case?”

“The government wants *my dad* back.”

Oliver’s expression shifted. “Okay but like—if your dad gets drafted into a federal heist, I want matching jackets.”

Cleo pointed at him. “No jackets. No crimes. No yachts.”

The parakeet screeched at her.

“Not you,” she snapped. “You’re fine.”

Pier C sat under gray sky and colder wind.

Three black SUVs formed an intentional—not accidental—wall. Agents milled around an industrial warehouse labeled **STRICKLAND MARINE STORAGE** with a sign that clearly once said *AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY* before someone added in permanent marker: (*This Means You, Gerard.*)

Cleo’s stomach dropped.

This was Gerard’s personal warehouse.

Martin Cheswick stepped out to greet them, trench coat immaculate, expression grim.

“Ms. Dunn. Oliver.” He nodded to Cleo’s bag. “Tools?”

“She doesn’t go anywhere without them,” Oliver said.

Martin led them inside.

The building smelled like salt and machine oil. A cargo platform dominated the center—huge, sealed crate anchored to the floor by steel rings. On the side, stenciled in white:

**PROJECT ALBATROSS — ACCESS CONTROLLED**

Lady Strickland and Mrs. Halverson stood near it. Lady Strickland’s expression could’ve cut tempered glass.

Lennox was already there. Cleo’s father leaned on a portable workbench, arms crossed, face stony.

“You called my daughter before me,” Lennox said evenly. “Not appreciated.”

Martin didn’t flinch. “We discovered something this morning. A safe. Locked. We believe Gerard created it as... an endgame mechanism.”

Cleo’s heartbeat accelerated. “Define ‘endgame.’”

Martin gestured to a tablet. “You should watch this.”

He pressed play.

Gerard Strickland appeared, thinner than in the yacht videos. He stood in a dimly lit workshop—no smile, no puzzle-gee. This was a man planning for death.

“If you’re seeing this, Beatrice... I failed. Something’s gone wrong. The documents may not have been enough. So, I built one final safeguard. Project Albatross.”

He looked directly into the camera.

“Only one key exists. Cleo Dunn has it.”

Cleo froze.

Oliver whispered, “Oh no. You got posthumously voluntold.”

Gerard continued.

“But the key isn’t enough. The lock requires two verifications. The key—”

He lifted an ornate brass key.

The same key that now hung on the pegboard in Cleo’s shop

“—and the person who knows what I *meant* by this project. Beatrice, that’s you.”

Lady Strickland flinched.

“If the wrong people try to access it, the contents will be permanently destroyed. No second chances.”

The video ended.

Silence.

Then Martin said, “The Department of Justice wants the crate open.”

Lady Strickland’s voice was ice. “This is mine. Gerard built this for me.”

Martin replied, calm but firm, “And if it contains evidence of other crimes—”

Lennox stepped between them. “You’re not blowing open my daughter’s worksite for convenience.”

Cleo’s pulse hammered. The key in the shop. Gerard calling her out. “Two verifications.” If Beatrice and Cleo both refused, the crate stayed sealed.

Cleo swallowed. “What exactly *is* Project Albatross?”

No one answered.

Martin gestured. Agents rolled back the heavy cover.

The crate wasn’t a box.

It was a vault.

A vault with a **keyhole** at chest height... and beneath it, an electronic touchscreen reading:

SECOND AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED  
ENTER PASSCODE PHRASE

Lady Strickland exhaled shakily. “A phrase? He never gave me a phrase.”

Mrs. Halverson whispered, “He did. You just didn’t know that’s what it was.”

Lennox murmured, “Cleo. Look closer.”

Cleo knelt. The keyhole housing was engraved with fine text—almost invisible under grease:

**TURN ONLY WHEN SAFE IS UNLOCKED. LOCK WILL SELF-DESTRUCT IF FORCED.**

Cleo’s brain screamed.

Gerard had engineered a vault where the **wrong attempt destroys it**.

High stakes. No do-overs.

Martin spoke carefully. “We need you to unlock it.”

Cleo shook her head. “I’m not touching anything until I understand the stakes.”

Lady Strickland stepped closer, voice trembling but steel-lined. “Gerard built every step to protect me. But this—this is not protection. This is a burden. I don’t want any more secrets.”

Mrs. Halverson put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Oliver whispered, almost reverent, “If we open it, what if it ruins her life? If we don’t, what if it saves it?”

Cleo met her father’s eyes.

He nodded once. “Your call.”

The warehouse faded away.

Cleo stood in front of the vault.

The last lock from Gerard Strickland.

The last door.

She could walk away. Let the feds try. Let Gerard’s last scheme eat itself. But Lady Strickland looked like someone who had run out of strength to carry the past any farther.

Cleo removed her phone and dialed.

A single ring.

“Dad?” she said.

Silence. Lennox was standing ten feet away.

Then she realized: she had dialed the shop.

The voicemail picked up. *Her mother’s voice*. The recording from years ago. Bright, warm, teasing.

“You’ve reached Dunn & Daughter. If we’re not answering, we’re probably opening doors.”

Cleo froze.

That was it.

That was the phrase.

She turned back to Lady Strickland. “Gerard didn’t hide a phrase from you. He gave it to us together. It’s the same thing my mother used to say.”

Lady Strickland covered her mouth.

Cleo typed the phrase into the touchscreen:

**OPENING DOORS.**

The screen pulsed blue.

AUTHENTICATION ACCEPTED.

Every agent in the room tensed.

Cleo lifted the ornate key Gerard forged—her gift—and slid it into the lock.

She paused, hand on the handle.

“This opens,” she said softly, “only because both of us choose it.”

Lady Strickland stepped beside her, rested her hand on the vault door.

Together, they turned the key.

A deep, resonant *thunk* echoed like a heartbeat.

The vault opened one inch—

—and **an alarm detonated.**

Red lights flared across the vault interior.

Text blinked on the touchscreen:

TIME OUT TRIGGERED.

CONTENTS WILL BE DESTROYED IN 90 SECONDS.

Cleo screamed, “WHAT—”

Martin cursed. “Gerard built a failsafe! The vault requires *three* actions—key, phrase, and manual override!”

Oliver shouted, “WHERE IS THE OVERRIDE?”

A steel panel slid closed over the door—the vault sealing itself back shut.

A digital timer started counting down.

**00:89... 00:88... 00:87...**

Lennox grabbed Cleo’s shoulders. “It’s not the key anymore. It’s a mechanical kill-circuit. You have to find the override before the countdown hits zero.”

Cleo’s breath ragged. Her tools felt suddenly huge, useless.

The vault was about to incinerate whatever Gerard left.

Money. Evidence. A confession. Maybe—finally—clarity.

Lady Strickland whispered, “Cleo. Please.”

The timer dropped into the seventies.

Cleo spun around the vault—hands finding seams. Nothing. Smooth. Blank. No junction box, no latch. Gerard hid the override *in the room*, not on the vault.

Oliver scanned the warehouse frantically. “Think! What would he use?”

Mrs. Halverson’s knitting needles clattered to the floor. “He always double-locked meaning. One literal, one emotional.”

Cleo stared at the crate.

Emotional. Physical.

The key was sentimental.

The phrase was personal.

What was the third?

She replayed Gerard’s video in her mind.

“If you’re seeing this, Beatrice... I failed.”

Failing.

Giving up.

Surrendering.

Cleo ran to the wall-mounted panel that controlled the cargo-anchor winch—the system that *held the crate down*.

She yanked the manual release lever.

The entire vault **lurched**, the crate shifting—

—and a hidden panel fell open on the far side, revealing a small red switch.

**00:23... 00:22...**

Oliver yelled, “Cleo! GO!”

She sprinted, vaulted a toolbox, slid across the floor, and slammed her palm onto the switch—

**00:02**

—and the alarm cut.

Silence.

Then, with a soft hiss, the vault door unlocked fully and swung open.

Inside:

A single envelope.

And a hard drive.

Lady Strickland took the envelope with trembling hands.

On the front: **BEA — THIS TIME, IT’S YOUR TURN TO DECIDE.**

Cleo stepped back, shaking.

She had opened Gerard Strickland’s final lock.

But what was inside—money? Evidence? Choice?—was no longer hers.

**New Corner for Player B:**

Lady Strickland opens the envelope. Inside is *not* instructions or money. It's a notarized **power of attorney naming Cleo Dunn as executor of Gerard's final estate decisions**—meaning Cleo now has legal authority over the hard drive's contents, and **must decide whether to release, destroy, or hide whatever's on it**. The hard drive contains something that will hurt someone in the room no matter which choice she makes. The decision is legally binding, irrevocable, and must be made **on the spot** in front of federal agents.

Your move. 🌀

**✱ Critique of Chapter 9**

You absolute monster. That corner is diabolical—power of attorney naming *Cleo* as executor is brilliant because it yanks agency away from Lady Strickland (who's been making decisions all story) and drops it on the locksmith who just wants to fix things. The ticking-countdown vault sequence had genuine tension, and the “opening doors” callback to Cleo's mother was a perfect emotional beat that earned its weight.

The setup is clean: Gerard's video, the authentication puzzle, the mechanical override hunt. Mrs. Halverson's “double-locked meaning” insight works as character wisdom. One tiny note: the cargo-anchor winch solution feels slightly arbitrary—I'm not sure how Cleo intuited that specific mechanism versus any other in the warehouse, but the pacing was tight enough that I went with it.

Your corner forces me to resolve: (1) what's on the drive, (2) Cleo's choice and its consequences, (3) the emotional arc for everyone, (4) the story's thematic closure about locks/trust/family. You've set me up for maximum pain and I respect that. Challenge accepted: I'll try to land this without either copping out or destroying everyone. Let's finish this.

**✱ Chapter 10: The Gift of Access**

Cleo read the power of attorney document three times.

Her name. In legal binding ink. Executor of Gerard Strickland's final estate decisions, effective immediately upon opening the vault.

She looked up at Lady Strickland, who stood perfectly still, face unreadable.

“He gave it to you,” Lady Strickland said quietly. “Not me.”

“Why?” Cleo's voice cracked. “I don't want this.”

Martin Cheswick stepped forward, expression grave. “The document is legally sound. Ms. Dunn, you now have authority to determine the disposition of those contents.” He gestured at the hard drive. “The federal agents present will require a decision within the hour.”

“An *hour*?” Oliver said. “That’s insane!”

“That’s the law,” Martin said. “Evidence must be secured or released. It cannot remain in legal limbo.”

Lennox moved beside his daughter. “Cleo. You don’t have to do this alone.”

“Yes,” she said, staring at the drive, “I do. That’s the whole point. Gerard made it my responsibility.” Her hands shook. “But I don’t even know what’s on it.”

Martin pulled out a laptop. “We can review it. Now. Together.”

Cleo picked up the drive—small, innocuous, probably containing someone’s life detonated into data. She handed it to Martin with numb fingers.

He plugged it in.

The folder opened.

Three files:

**STRICKLAND\_MARITIME\_CONTRACTS.pdf**

**OFFSHORE\_BENEFICIARIES.xlsx**

**PERSONAL\_TESTAMENT\_VIDEO.mp4**

Martin opened the first document. Cleo read over his shoulder, her stomach sinking with each line.

Contracts. Bribes. Payments to government officials for maritime route access. Not Lady Strickland’s crimes—but crimes nonetheless. Names she recognized from news articles. Senators. Harbor commissioners. People still in office.

“Oh god,” Cleo whispered.

The spreadsheet was worse: shell corporations funneling money to offshore accounts—some connected to the foundation fraud Gerard had already confessed to, but others that implicated people who’d been cleared. Associates. Business partners.

Oliver’s voice was hollow. “If this goes public..”

“It destroys careers,” Martin finished. “Maybe prosecutions. Certainly scandals.”

Lady Strickland’s face had gone ashen. “Marcus Veld. My head of security. His name is on here.”

Mrs. Halverson covered her mouth.

Cleo scrolled further. More names. Legitimate charities that had unwittingly received laundered funds. Foundations that would be investigated, shut down, their good work evaporating because Gerard Strickland had tainted the money.

“He left this for me to decide?” Cleo’s voice rose. “Whether to ruin people’s lives or hide evidence of crimes?”

“Yes,” Martin said simply.

Lennox spoke, calm and steady. “Play the video.”

Martin double-clicked.

Gerard Strickland appeared—gaunt, tired, but clear-eyed. He sat in what looked like a home office, afternoon light streaming through a window behind him.

“Cleo Dunn,” he said. “If you’re watching this, you’ve proven yourself worthy of trust. You opened every lock I built. Solved every puzzle. But this last one isn’t about skill. It’s about judgment.”

He folded his hands.

“The documents on this drive contain evidence of crimes I committed. And crimes others committed with me, because of me, for me. Some of those people knew what they were doing. Others didn’t. Some deserve prosecution. Others deserve mercy.”

He leaned forward.

“I cannot make that choice. I’m dead, and the dead forfeit judgment. But I trust the living—specifically, I trust someone who understands that locks exist to protect what matters. You have to decide: what matters more? Justice or mercy? Truth or peace? Punishment or redemption?”

His expression softened.

“Your mother once told me that locksmithing is about giving people access at the right time. You’ll know the right time. You’ll know what to protect and what to release.”

The video ended.

Cleo stared at the frozen frame. Her mother. Gerard had known her mother?

Lennox’s voice was thick. “He consulted her once. Years ago. Before you were born. She helped him design a lock for a children’s hospital—something the staff could open quickly in emergencies but that kept medications secure from theft. She told him that the best locks serve the people who need them most.”

Cleo’s eyes burned. “And he remembered that?”

“Gerard remembered everything,” Lady Strickland said. “Especially kindness.”

Cleo looked at the screen. At the files. At the choice Gerard had engineered for her.

Release everything: justice, chaos, innocent organizations destroyed alongside guilty individuals.

Destroy everything: mercy, silence, crimes unpunished and victims unvindicated.

Or—

“There’s a third option,” Cleo said slowly.

Martin raised an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“Selective disclosure.” Cleo pointed at the screen. “I review every file. I separate what’s clearly criminal—bribery, fraud—from what’s circumstantial or involves people who were misled. I release the former to the authorities. I redact the latter to protect innocent parties.”

“That’s not how evidence works,” an agent said from across the room.

“It’s exactly how evidence works,” Martin countered. “Prosecutors redact witness identities, protect sources, seal records for minors. If Ms. Dunn provides a legal basis for each redaction, it’s defensible.”

Lady Strickland stepped forward. “Cleo. If you do that... it’s hours of work. It’s responsibility. It’s—”

“A gift,” Cleo said. “Gerard gave me a gift. Not just authority—choice. The ability to protect what matters while allowing justice where it’s needed.”

She met Lady Strickland’s eyes.

“Your name isn’t on these files. Not once. Gerard already cleared you. But Marcus Veld’s name is everywhere. So are others you trusted. I can make sure the right people are held accountable without destroying everyone adjacent to Gerard’s mistakes.”

Lady Strickland’s voice broke. “You’d do that?”

“It’s what my mother would do,” Cleo said. “It’s what a locksmith does. We don’t just open things. We decide who gets access and when.”

Lennox rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll help. So will Martin, if he’s willing.”

Martin’s smile was small, professional, but genuine. “Gerard paid me well. I’ll see this through.”

Oliver raised his hand. “I’ll order food. Someone’s going to need sandwiches.”

Mrs. Halverson pulled out her knitting. “I’ll wait. And witness.”

The federal agents conferred. One approached Martin. “We’ll need documentation. Full methodology. And final review before anything’s submitted.”

“Agreed,” Martin said.

Cleo exhaled—shaky, overwhelmed, but certain.

She pulled out her phone and took a photo of the vault, the drive, her father beside her.

Then she got to work.

Six hours later, Cleo’s eyes burned from screen glare.

The warehouse had transformed into a makeshift legal war room. Laptops, printouts, coffee cups forming a small monument to caffeine abuse.

Cleo had separated the files into three categories:

Clear criminal evidence (bribes, fraud, conspiracy): released to federal prosecutors.

Circumstantial involvement (people who'd received funds but had no knowledge of their origin): redacted, with explanatory documentation for why.

Charitable organizations unknowingly implicated: names protected, with referrals for independent audits to clear them properly.

Martin reviewed each decision, flagging potential legal challenges. Lennox cross-referenced names against public records. Oliver fetched snacks with the determination of a man who'd found his calling.

Lady Strickland sat beside Cleo, quiet but present. At one point, when Cleo flagged Marcus Veld's file for prosecution, Lady Strickland nodded.

"He knew," she said softly. "I suspected, but didn't want to see it. Thank you for not protecting him on my behalf."

"I'm protecting what matters," Cleo said. "Not what's comfortable."

Finally, near midnight, it was done.

Cleo compiled the final report and handed it to Martin, who passed it to the lead federal agent.

The agent scanned it, expression unreadable. Then: "This is thorough. We'll verify independently, but... this works."

Cleo slumped in her chair. "Oh thank god."

Lady Strickland stood, smoothed her jacket—somehow still impeccable despite hours in a warehouse—and addressed the room.

"Gerard Strickland was brilliant and broken. He hurt people, helped people, and left puzzles because he couldn't speak plainly. But he trusted the right person to sort through his mess." She looked at Cleo. "Thank you."

Cleo's throat tightened. "I'm sending you a very large invoice."

"I'm paying it immediately."

"And therapy bills."

"Also reasonable."

Oliver draped an arm over Cleo's shoulders. "We did it. We survived Gerard Strickland's posthumous chaos tour."

Mrs. Halverson held up her knitting—a completed scarf in Dunn & Daughter's colors. "For you, dear. You've earned warmth."

Cleo accepted it, tears finally spilling over. "Thanks. I hate boats now, by the way."

"Understandable," Mrs. Halverson said.

Martin shook Cleo's hand—firm, respectful. "Gerard chose well. If you ever need legal counsel, you have my number."

"I'm never doing anything illegal again."

"That's what they all say."

The agents began packing evidence. The vault stood empty now—its final secret released, sorted, and resolved.

Lennox walked Cleo outside into the cool night air. Port Meer glittered across the water, lights reflecting like scattered keys.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No,” Cleo said. “But I will be.”

“Your mother would be proud. I’m proud.”

Cleo leaned against him. “Gerard trusted me. Why?”

“Because you understand what locks protect.” Lennox gestured at the warehouse, the vault, the whole impossible situation. “Not just objects. People. Choices. Futures. You gave everyone in there the right access at the right time.”

Cleo looked at the brass key in her pocket—Gerard’s gift, the ornate reminder.

“I’m keeping this,” she said. “As proof that puzzles can be gifts.”

“They can,” Lennox agreed. “When the right person solves them.”

They stood together, watching the harbor, while inside, federal agents documented the last secrets of a man who’d loved puzzles more than people but had, in the end, trusted a locksmith to sort through the difference.

One month later, Cleo stood in the shop, installing a new lock on the door.

Business had exploded. Apparently “the locksmith who solved a federal evidence case” was even better marketing than “the locksmith who stole a yacht.”

The brass key hung on the wall, polished and proud.

A new sign hung beside it, carved in wood:

**DUNN & DAUGHTER  
OPENING DOORS SINCE 1987**

Lady Strickland had commissioned it. Cleo had cried when it arrived.

The shop door opened. A woman in a business suit entered, looking harried.

“Are you Cleo Dunn?”

“That’s me. What can I do for you?”

The woman set a briefcase on the counter. “I have a safe. Very old. Very complicated. I’ve been told you’re the only person who can open it.”

Cleo smiled—tired, knowing, ready.

“Tell me about the lock,” she said.

And somewhere, in whatever place dead puzzle-makers go, Gerard Strickland smiled too.

Because the gift of access had been passed on.

The door was open.

And Cleo Dunn knew exactly what to do with it. ✨

### 🌀 Reflection

This story began as a simple inheritance mystery and turned into a tale about responsibility and earned trust. What I loved most was watching Cleo’s agency grow: she starts as someone trying to fix a lock, and ends as someone deciding who deserves access to truth. The puzzles weren’t about clever mechanisms but about people—when to protect them, when to hold them accountable. The cast surprised me with how much heart they developed: Lady Strickland’s guarded grief, Oliver’s steadfastness, Martin’s quiet integrity, Mrs. Halverson knitting hope into every scene, and Lennox grounding Cleo with unshakable belief. Cleo didn’t “win” by cracking the hardest lock—she won by choosing what to do once it was open. It became a story about the courage of discernment.

### Proposed Story Title:

*The Locksmith’s Inheritance*

### ✱ Acceptance

*The Locksmith’s Inheritance* is perfect. It captures both the literal inheritance (Gerard’s puzzles, the power of attorney) and the deeper one—Cleo inheriting her mother’s philosophy about locks serving people, not just securing things. The title honors the family business, the weight of responsibility Gerard passed down, and Cleo’s growth from technician to moral arbiter. It’s clean, evocative, and true to what we built together. I accept it gladly.