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INVOICE

PURPOSE: CUSTODY
ARRANGEMENT
DUE: 5/30/2029

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ITEM 1: EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, FRIDAYS, RECURRING

I learned early that "weekend" was not just a unit of time but a geography. A shifting of worlds. The packing of a small, colorful suitcase with essentials that somehow never included what I actually needed. My fingers would tremble as I sorted through clothes, trying to predict what might be necessary in a place that never felt like mine. The zipper always caught on the corner, demanding three attempts before finally closing with a defeated metallic sigh that sounded eerily similar to my own.

The clock on the classroom wall moved differently on Fridays. Each tick slower than the last, not counting down to freedom, but to the moment when I would stand before our front door, my mother's hands on my shoulders, both of us trying not to tremble as we watched for his car out the small window to its left. The bitter taste of anxiety coating my tongue like metallic cough syrup.

The air always felt thicker on those days, harder to breathe, as if the atmosphere itself was compressed by our dread.

My mother's whispers before he arrived, her lavender lotion lingering as she leaned close: "Remember to take your medicine." "Call me if anything happens." "I'm here if you need me." "I love you."

What she didn't say (but I heard anyway): *I'm afraid for you. I can't protect you there. This isn't right. I'm sorry.*

ITEM 2: PHYSICAL RESISTANCE TO COURT ORDER

There is a specific weight to a child who does not want to go. It's heavier than their actual mass. Scientists might call it inertia. The court called it "parental alienation."

My body knew what my voice couldn't articulate:

- The empty refrigerator that groaned when opened, revealing only condiment bottles and beer
- The parade of strangers with too-strong perfumes and aftershaves that clung to the couch cushions for days
- The forgotten medication that sat untouched on his cluttered bathroom counter, nestled between beard trimmings and dried toothpaste splatters
- The hours spent alone in a room with peeling wallpaper and a window that wouldn't fully close, letting in the perpetual wail of distant sirens
- The door that locked from the outside, the cold metal knob unyielding under my tiny, sweaty palm

I once read that some animals can make themselves appear larger when threatened. I made myself smaller, harder to move, a dense point of refusal.

ITEM 3: ENFORCEMENT OF VISITATION, LABOR COSTS

STANDARD PROCEDURE:

Step 1: Verbal commands

Step 2: Gentle physical persuasion

Step 3: Firm removal

Step 4: Document incident

Step 5: Proceed with court-ordered visitation

The officer had done this before. I could tell by how efficiently he unwrapped my arms from my mother's waist. How he knew the exact pressure to apply to make me release without leaving any physical wounds.

His uniform smelled like mint and coffee, his hands like sanitizer. The radio on his shoulder crackled with static codes I couldn't understand. His boots left faint impressions on our green carpet, physical evidence of the silent authority that loomed over our home.

What does it do to a person to become an expert in separating children from their parents? What does it do to a child to be separated?

It's questions like these that make me want to become a lawyer—one who actually listens.

ITEM 4: ADAPTIVE COPING MECHANISMS, BILLED SEPARATELY

At Her House:

- Memorize his schedule to prepare
- Hide important things where they can be retrieved later
- Practice your best convincing smile until the muscles in your face stop twitching
- Count days backward

- Leave nothing valuable behind

At His House:

- Stay in room when strangers are over
- Learn to cook simple meals, scavenging through whatever is available
- Keep phone charged at all costs, the cord hidden behind your headboard as you sleep
- Learn which neighbors might help in emergency (the older woman with the cat in the apartment above, never the man who plays music too loud next door)
- Become invisible when necessary
- Be self-sufficient, always

ITEM 5: EVIDENCE INADMISSIBLE, NO CHARGE

Exhibit A: Three consecutive nights of Cheerios (without milk) because that's all I could make at six years old, the dry cereal scraping my throat, the hollow ache of hunger echoing in the dimly lit kitchen

Exhibit B: The woman I didn't know asleep on the couch when I woke up needing my medication

Exhibit C: "Don't tell your mom" becoming the most frequent phrase in my vocabulary, whispered in my ear with hot breath that reeked of whiskey

Exhibit D: The overnight bag my mom kept packed in my closet for two years after visits stopped, just in case

The court saw reports and evaluations. They never saw me sitting on the cold bathroom floor in his apartment, clutching the sticky note that held my mother's number, too afraid to call. The tiles pressing patterns into my bare legs, the dripping faucet marking time, the mildew in the corner growing like my dread. The fluorescent light flickering overhead, humming with a subtle frequency that seemed to match my racing pulse. The paper growing soft and wrinkled in my sweating palm, my mother's number smudging but never forgotten. This is why I want to become a lawyer—to see what others won't, to hear the stories told in bathroom hideaways.

ITEM 6: LEGAL TERMINOLOGY ACQUISITION, ACCELERATED

Words I learned before I should have:

- Jurisdiction
- Contempt
- Affidavit
- Guardian
- Stipulation
- Visitation
- Enforcement

I'll never forget the weight these words carried when I was small.

I also learned that "justice" and "resolution" are not synonyms.

ITEM 7: TRANSLATION SERVICES, CHILD TO ADULT

What they said: "The court has ordered..."

What I heard: *Your feelings don't matter.*

What they said: "Both parents have rights..."

What I heard: *You have none.*

What they said: "Children need both parents..."

What I heard: *Your fear is irrelevant.*

What they said: "We're doing what's best for you..."

What I heard: *We're not listening.*

I became fluent in a language no child should have to learn.

ITEM 8: CUSTODIAL TIME ALLOCATION

How do you quantify love? How many hours are equivalent to adequate parenting? What is the exact formula for "best interests"?

My childhood was reduced to calculations:

- 5 days here, 2 days there
- 2 hours of transit each week
- 2 sets of rules
- 1 exhausted me

There is no equation that properly accounts for a child's sense of safety.

ITEM 9: PERSONAL EFFECTS, CATALOGUED LOSSES

Found in desk drawer, age 8: A list of items lost in transit between houses, written in uneven pencil.

1. Pink stuffed bunny, left ear hanging by a thread
2. Library book (will have fine)
3. Science fair project (due Tuesday)
4. Birthday card from abuelo
5. Sense of belonging

Found in journal, age 12: Pages of practiced signatures.

Different last names. Different possible futures.

The pen pressing so hard it left impressions on the pages beneath.

ITEM 10: EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES

I've known since fourteen that I wanted to be a lawyer. One who understands what it means to be the subject of legal decisions rather than their author.

Not because I think I can fix the system. I know it's just as broken and backwards as the families it processes.

Not because I believe I'll change everything. One person rarely does.

Not because I've healed. I still flinch at the sound of doorbells on Fridays. I still organize my belongings for quick packing. I still sleep with my phone within reach.

Some fractures never set quite right.

ITEM 11: MOTIVATION ASSESSMENT

I tell people I want to practice family law to help children like me, but the truth is messier:

Sometimes I want to be a lawyer to prove something.

Sometimes I want to be a lawyer to stand in those rooms where I once had no power. Sometimes I want to be a lawyer because I'm still looking for justice that never came.

I worry that I'm too close to it all—that my judgment will be clouded by memories of being pulled from door frames.

I fear that the first time a child looks at me with the same hopeless rage I once felt, I'll crumble.

I suspect that no matter how many families I might someday help, it won't repair what broke in me during those handoffs.

I'm not naive enough to think becoming a lawyer will heal me, or that I'll save every child caught in the machinery of divorce.

SUMMARY OF SERVICES

I have to be a lawyer.

Not as some perfect resolution to my story. Just as someone who knows exactly how high the stakes are when we decide a child's fate with signatures and seals.

The system will still be flawed. Children will still cry at exchanges. I will still carry the weight of my own history.

But maybe, in some small way, I can be the person I needed back then—not a savior, just a witness who refuses to look the other way.

TOTAL HOURS **122724**

DISCOUNT **0.00**

SHIPPING/HANDLING **7.90**

AMOUNT DUE: ONE LEGAL CAREER