

# Reckless Moment (1949)

## Max Ophüls (1902-1957)

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur:* Maximilian Oppenheimer, known as Max Ophüls, was a German-born film director. He was born in Saarbrücken, the son of Leopold Oppenheimer, a Jewish textile manufacturer, and his wife Helene Oppenheimer (née Bamberger). He took the pseudonym Ophüls during the early part of his theatrical career so that, should he fail, it wouldn't embarrass his father. Initially envisioning an acting career, he started as a stage actor in 1919. He became creative director of the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1926. He turned to film production in 1929. He worked in Germany (1931–1933), France (1933–1940 and 1950–1957), and the United States (1947–1950). He made nearly 30 films, with the most notable ones being: *La Ronde* (1950), *Le Plaisir* (1952), *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953), and *Lola Montès* (1955). Ophüls died from rheumatic heart disease on 26 March 1957 in Hamburg, while shooting interiors on *The Lovers of Montparnasse*, and was buried in Paris. The annual film festival *Max Ophüls Preis* in Saarbrücken is named after him.

*Film:* *The Reckless Moment* is a 1949 American film noir melodrama. The producer was Walter Wanger. The cinematographer was Burnett Guffey. *The Reckless Moment* stars James Mason and Joan Bennett. The film is based on *The Blank Wall* (1947), a novel by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding. The screenplay belongs to Henry Garson, Robert Soderberg, Mel Dinelli, and Robert E. Kent. The 2001 film *The Deep End* is a remake of the film based on the same novel. In modern times, the film has received very positive appraisal and is now generally considered one of the best films by Max Ophüls. It has been highly regarded by film critics, historians, and audiences, and entered the list of *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*.

*Historical background:* *The Reckless Moment* was the English actor James Mason's third US film. Before that, he also appeared in Ophüls' *Caught* (1949) and in Vincente Minnelli's *Madame Bovary* (1949). The film was shot in Balboa, Newport Beach, and Los Angeles, California. It was Ophüls' last film to be shot in the United States. Based on *The Blank Wall* (1947), a novel by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, it was also the last movie adaptation of any of her books while she was alive. Elisabeth Sanxay Holding (1889–1955) was an American novelist and short story writer. She primarily authored fiction in the hardboiled subgenre of detective novels. She wrote romantic novels during the 1920s. After the stock market crash in 1929, she turned to the more lucrative genre of the detective novel. From 1929 through 1954, she wrote eighteen detective novels, which sold well and earned her praise for her style and character development.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Martin Donnelly:</i>	The partner of Nagel, who shows up with Bea's letters to blackmail Lucia
<i>Lucia Harper:</i>	Bea's mother who doesn't want her daughter to be associated with Darby's murder
<i>Bea Harper:</i>	Lucia's daughter, a rebellious girl who goes to art school and has an affair with Darby
<i>Tom Harper:</i>	Lucia's husband who travels frequently because of his job and is not at home
<i>Ted Darby:</i>	An ex art-dealer who accidentally dies after fighting with Bea
<i>David Harper:</i>	Lucia's son who has an interest in cars and music
<i>Nagel:</i>	An LA criminal, a blackmailer, the partner of Donnelly, a man greedy for money
<i>Grandpa:</i>	Father-in-law of Lucia, Tom's father
<i>Sybil:</i>	Housekeeper of the Harper's family

## SYNOPSIS

Lucia Harper drives to Los Angeles to demand from Darby, a low-life LA criminal, that he stop seeing her daughter, Bea. He accepts but wants Lucia to pay him. When Lucia returns home, Bea confronts her because Darby had telephoned to tell her of her mother's visit. She doesn't believe Darby would want money to stop seeing her. The following evening, Bea goes to the boathouse to meet Darby. Darby says he is indeed in need of some money. Bea is repulsed by this. During a following struggle, she hits him on the head. Darby falls to his knees. As he tries to follow her, he accidentally falls into the water and dies. When Bea reveals what happened to her mother at home, Lucia goes to the boathouse. She doesn't notice anything amiss. The next morning, however, Lucia finds Darby lying dead by a jetty. Using a motorboat, she disposes of the body in a swamp. Nevertheless, the police soon find the body. A murder investigation begins.

A man named Donnelly, the partner of Nagel, a loan shark, shows up with letters Bea had written to Darby. Nagel had loaned Darby money and has been holding the writings as collateral. Lucia must now come up with \$5,000 to keep Bea's relationship with Darby a secret. As Lucia struggles to collect the money, Donnelly falls in love with her. After pawning much of her jewelry, Lucia has only \$800. When she meets Donnelly to hand the money over, he announces that a man has been arrested for Darby's murder. Lucia is stricken with guilt. She tries to convince Donnelly that she is the killer. He doesn't believe her. Later, Donnelly learns that the suspect has been released. When Lucia gets home, Nagel is waiting for her in the boathouse. He tells her as the suspect is released, she must pay him \$5,000 immediately. Donnelly arrives, attacks Nagel, and strangles him to death. Lucia wants to call the police and straighten everything out. Donnelly asks her for a drink. While she is gone, he drives away with Nagel. While driving, he reaches into Nagel's pocket to take Bea's letters; yet he loses control, smashes into a tree, and becomes trapped under the car. When Lucia finds him, he gives her the letters but refuses her help. After Lucia comes home, her son talks about seeing an accident. Bea tells her mother how before dying, the man trapped beneath the vehicle admitted to killing Darby.

## SCENES

**Lucia drives to Los Angeles to see Darby** The film begins with scenes from Balboa Island. A man narrates: 'This happened last year, about a week before Christmas. The Harper family lived in a charming community called Balboa, about fifty miles from Los Angeles. Early one morning, Mrs Harper took her car, and drove to Los Angeles...' We see Mrs. Lucia Harper driving to the city.



**Lucia goes to a hotel where Darby is staying** In Los Angeles, Lucia goes to a hotel and asks for Ted Darby. The receptionist tells her that Mr. Darby wants her to wait for him in the bar. Lucia goes to the bar.



**Lucia tells Darby to stop seeing her daughter Bea** Ted Darby briskly comes down the stairs. He proceeds to the bar. After greeting Lucia, Darby mentions how much Lucia resembles her daughter Bea. Lucia says that she doesn't want Darby to see her daughter again. Darby asks whether that isn't something for Bea to decide. Lucia says she is only seventeen and not old enough to know what's good for her. Darby talks about how Bea likes to meet interesting people and this is something he can do for her. Lucia makes it clear that he is not the kind of person she wants Bea to see. Darby asks how Bea feels about all this. Lucia says that she hasn't yet discussed it with her. Darby says he didn't know how strongly she felt about him seeing Bea. He asks her how important it is to her that he doesn't see Bea anymore as far as



*money* is concerned. Lucia thinks he's made everything much simpler for her. She goes out. Afterward, Darby makes a telephone call to Beatrice Harper.

### **Lucia returns home and is met with questions from her family**

Lucia returns home. When David sees her mother, he asks her about how she went up to Los Angeles that morning and didn't tell any of them. She says she had things to attend to. At home, Lucia's father also asks her why she didn't tell them she was going to LA that morning. She makes up some excuses and answers that she wanted to get to the store before the crowds. Lucia asks their housekeeper Sybil where Bea is. Sybil tells her that **she** hasn't talked to anyone all afternoon. She's now in Lucia's room, taking a shower.



### **Lucia doesn't want Bea to see Darby anymore**

When Lucia goes to her room, she tells Bea she'd like to talk to her. Bea says she knows: 'Mother, how could you humiliate me so terribly by going to see Ted?' Lucia says it was humiliating for her too as she is not used to dealing with people like him. Bea says that when Ted called, he told her that her mother would say about him that he's a low, vile character. Lucia asks her if Darby also told her he was perfectly willing not to see Bea again, on the condition that Lucia provides him financially. Bea doesn't believe what her mother says. She says to her that she is old-fashioned and couldn't possibly understand a man like Ted. Then she goes out of the room. Lucia and Bea continue their conversation in Bea's room. Lucia asks Bea to promise her that she won't see Darby again. Bea says she can't promise that. Lucia answers that then she will take her out of art school. Bea responds that that won't keep them apart and they'll see each other somehow. Lucia says that she's been stupid and indulgent by letting her go to art school. Her father wanted her to go to college and Lucia took Bea's side and persuaded him to let her go to art school, which he felt was wrong, because of the freedom and the people she'd be exposed to. Bea would never have met Darby if only they listened to Bea's father. Lucia says it is difficult for her to understand because she's still a child. Soon after, there is a call from Philadelphia.



### **A phone call from Tom Harper**

Grandpa and David talk to Tom Harper on the phone. Soon, Lucia comes downstairs. She starts to talk to Tom. Tom says that he won't be at home for Christmas, because he's been ordered to Berlin. Bea also comes downstairs and talks to her father about her art school. When Lucia takes up the phone once again, she says to her husband that he was away three years during the war and this is nothing. She says she'll write to him and says goodbye.



### **While Lucia writes a letter to Tom Harper, Bea sneaks out of the house**

Lucia writes a letter to her husband. David comes in to say goodnight to her mother. After he leaves, she keeps writing her letter. She writes: '...and Tom, I need you. Bea is shut in her room, rebellious, furious at me. If only I were one of those humorous, tolerant mothers in plays and books but I'm not. I hate that man.' Meanwhile, Bea secretly sneaks out of the house. She takes a flashlight and goes out to meet Darby. Lucia, not knowing what her daughter is up to, continues to write her letter: 'If only David were older—or Father younger—but there's no one—I have to handle it alone. If you were here, you'd get rid of that beast.' Discontent with what she's written, Lucia creases the paper and throws it away. She starts to write anew.



### **Bea and Darby fight when Bea learns the truth about Darby**

Bea goes to the boathouse where Darby is. She tells Darby what her mother said to her: 'I had to promise never to see you again. That... That you weren't interested in me at all. All you wanted was money. And if she paid you, you'd never see me again. That's not true, is it?' Darby explains that he is indeed desperate for money. Bea is shocked to hear that. Darby tries to explain that if her mother gives him the money, that doesn't mean that he won't see her again. A struggle between the two ensues. Bea slaps and hits him on the head and then runs away to her home. Darby tries to follow Bea. But he accidentally falls from the boathouse into the water.



**Bea explains to her mother that she hit Ted Darby** Lucia realizes that her daughter is not in her room. She goes to the garage and the kitchen to look for Bea. Soon, Bea comes home, crying. Lucia asks her what happened. She says she hit Ted: 'I was at the boat house, and I...All he wanted was the money. I hit him.' She tries to calm Bea down. She asks her where Ted is now. Bea says she doesn't know and she left him at the boathouse. Lucia tells her daughter to go upstairs and that she'll be back in a minute.

**Lucia searches the boathouse** Lucia looks at the flashlight that her daughter has brought with her. It is now broken. She goes to the kitchen to get another flashlight. Sybil asks Lucia if she can help her. Lucia doesn't want any help. She proceeds to the boathouse. But she doesn't find anything amiss and returns home. When Lucia comes back, Bea is still crying. She says she wishes she'd never gone to the boathouse. Lucia tells her not to talk about it anymore and that it is over. She proceeds to get her a hot water bottle for her to sleep. At that moment, the grandpa asks what is going on. Lucia says that Bea isn't feeling well. Then she goes to her room to prepare her a hot water bottle.



**Lucia sees the dead body of Darby and disposes of it** In the morning, Lucia wakes up earlier than anyone. Sybil asks her whether she wants breakfast. Lucia says no and goes for a walk. She goes near the boathouse. When she looks down to the coast, she sees Ted Darby lying lifeless near an anchor. She looks around to see if there is anyone looking at them. Then she drags the body on the sand and puts it into a boat. Later, she also puts the anchor into the boat. Then she sails with the motorboat. Lucia disposes of the anchor and the body. Then, she returns to the boathouse.



**Lucia pretends as if nothing is amiss** When Lucia comes back to the boathouse, her son David runs toward her. He looks worried about her: 'You might have got stuck out there.' Lucia says she didn't and tells him not to worry about her. She goes into her house. In the kitchen, the grandpa is having breakfast and asks Lucia what she was doing at the crack of the dawn. Then Sybil says she wants to add something to their shopping list. Lucia nervously searches for the shopping list in her pockets but can't find it. Next, David comes and asks Lucia whether the anchor was in the boat that morning and that somebody stole it. Lucia tells him that they'll get a new one.

**Lucia talks to Bea about last night** Bea comes downstairs. Lucia immediately goes to talk to her. She asks her whether she ever told anyone that she was going with Ted Darby. Bea says no. She is still angry about what happened last night: 'How I ever could have been fooled by that low, vile...?' Her mother says she knows how she feels. She then tells her that she mustn't talk against him or about him to anyone. She mustn't even mention his name. Lucia then asks Bea whether there's something she didn't tell her about last night. Bea says no. Lucia tells her to go down to breakfast and that she'll be right down.



**Darby's murder is headline news** Lucia is in the post office, waiting in line to send a letter to her husband in Berlin. Mrs. Feller is also waiting in the same line. She tells Lucia that they must make a point of seeing a lot of each other during the holidays: 'Owen will be home from school tomorrow, and I know he'll be dying to see Beatrice.' Lucia says they'll do that. One of the officers says to the other one that an ex art-dealer was found murdered in Balboa. Lucia asks if they say who did it. The officer replies no, but says that they've got some ideas: 'They know all about that Darby.' Lucia goes out of the post office without taking her change. She goes to her car and looks at the newspaper which talks about Ted Darby's murder.



**Martin Donnelly blackmails Lucia as he possesses letters Bea had written to Ted** Lucia is back at home. Sybil tells her there's a man named Donnelly waiting for her. Lucia goes to the main room. The man introduces himself as Martin Donnelly. He shows her some writings: 'These are letters which your daughter wrote to the late Ted Darby. The price is five thousand dollars. Cash.' Then Donnelly begins to read from Bea's letters: 'Ted, darling. I just wasn't alive until I met you. But you came like a fresh wind blowing through my stuffy room.'



Lucia wants Donnelly to leave or she will call the police. Soon, David comes into the room and talks about the murder incident. David also tells Bea that ex-art dealer Ted Darby was murdered. Bea wants to read the papers and struggles to take them from David's hands.

**Lucia and Donnelly's conversation** Lucia returns to the room where Donnelly is. She tells him that those letters don't mean a thing and that Bea is only a child. Donnelly disagrees: 'The man these letters were written to has been murdered. The police will be greatly interested.' Lucia asks Donnelly how he got the letters. He says that Darby wanted to borrow some money from them. So, they took the letters off him as collateral until he was ready to pay them back. Donnelly thinks Darby's getting murdered was lucky for them because now the letters will realize much more than they lent him. He further explains that Mr. Nagel is his partner, a good businessman.

**Grandpa and Mr. Donnelly meet** The grandpa arrives. Lucia introduces Donnelly as someone from Tom's office. Lucia says that Mr. Donnelly won't be staying for dinner. The grandpa asks him whether he is from Ireland. Later, he tells him that they might at least give him a drink. At that moment, Bea comes downstairs to talk to her mother.

**Lucia talks to Bea about Darby** Bea shows her mother the newspaper and tells her it says terrible things about Darby: 'He was a jailbird, and he was arrested.' Lucia says these things have nothing to do with her. Bea confesses that she wrote to Darby a lot and the police will find the letters. Lucia tells her that she promises her they won't find anything. She asks Bea to get ready for dinner. Lucia returns to the room where Donnelly and the grandpa are talking. Donnelly says he must be going. He says to Grandpa that he'll very likely be seeing him again: 'Mrs Harper's going to help me look for a house out here.' Lucia accompanies him as Donnelly goes out. She says to him that she can't see him tomorrow and she won't have him in her house. Donnelly says: 'I don't have to come back if you give me the money now.' He asks her if she could get in touch with her husband. Lucia says they haven't got five thousand dollars. Then she tells him that she'll meet him at the real estate agency the next day.



**Bea wants to go away from home for a while** Lucia wants Bea to get up for breakfast. Bea says she doesn't want to be at breakfast as everybody will ask questions. Her mother tells her to fix her face, take a shower, and come to breakfast like everybody else. Bea then asks if she could go away somewhere for a while. She wishes to go to Lake Tahoe, to Aunt Edna's. She wants her mother to talk to her and see if it is all right. Lucia hesitatingly accepts this.

**Donnelly comes to Lucia's house in the morning** Lucia goes downstairs to make a phone call to Lake Tahoe. However, soon Grandpa says that her coffee's getting cold. Then Donnelly knocks on the door. Lucia gets the door. She tells him she thought they were supposed to meet at the real estate office. Donnelly says it is past nine-thirty. Lucia says she'll be right back. Meanwhile, Donnelly goes near David where the horn of the car sounds constantly. Donnelly fixes the horn. At that moment, Lucia comes and tells David to go back in. She asks Donnelly why he came to their house as they were supposed to meet in the village. Donnelly says he'd like to get this business over as fast as he can. He offers his car to make the drive. Lucia asks him to drive her to the drugstore as she has to make a call.

**Lucia and Donnelly's drive** While they drive, Donnelly mentions that Lucia smokes too much and this is bad for her health. Lucia says it's going to be hard for her to go to Los Angeles and get the money as Father and David will ask questions: 'I have to have time to think. I can't just get the money like... like that.' As they drive they pass through a place where David worked the other year: 'My son worked here last summer. Worked very hard...Saved forty dollars. At least he *earned* it.' Donnelly gives her some change. Then he sees a filter holder. He decides to buy one of those for Lucia. Soon, Lucia comes back and they leave the shop.



**Lucia needs more time to raise the money** While driving back home, Donnelly asks Lucia if her telephone call was successful and whether she arranged anything. Lucia explains that she called an aunt in Tahoe to look after Bea. Donnelly thinks she might have changed her mind about getting in touch with her husband. Lucia says she can't do that. She adds she wouldn't even consider trying to raise the money if Bee weren't so prone to dramatizing things. At that point, they see the police's motorboat in front of them. Donnelly remarks: 'They'll be looking for the one who killed Darby.' Lucia wants Donnelly to give her time until Wednesday. She can't take the car to Los Angeles again as it would make the family wonder. Donnelly says his partner Nagel is not as patient as him. However, Lucia doesn't believe Donnelly has a partner.

**The police think the victim was murdered in Balboa** The police talk and give thanks to grandpa. Grandpa is sorry they couldn't help: 'But nobody up at our house ever heard of him.' Grandpa asks the Lieutenant if he thinks the victim was murdered right in Balboa. The lieutenant says: 'Maybe'. Then the police leave with their boat.



**Lucia is innerly shaken by the police's arrival** Lucia comes and asks about what is going on. Grandpa tells her that the police wanted to know if anyone in the house knew the victim. Lucia looks uncomfortable. She asks the kids to go back to their homes. Then she asks her father-in-law why the police were checking private homes. Grandpa says that they believe that he might have been involved with a family in the neighborhood because the victim was killed with an anchor and the body was taken into the swamp by a small boat. The small boat had to come from someplace around that region. Grandpa further tells her that somebody saw her out there that morning. The police are interested in anyone being on the water at that hour because it was about that time that Darby's body was moved into the swamp. Lucia is shaken by this news but tries to keep her calm.



**Donnelly says to Lucia that he doesn't want his share of money anymore** Sybil calls Lucia. There is a telephone for her from Donnelly. He tells her that Nagel wants the money no later than Monday. He says he already told Nagel he wouldn't be wanting his share. So, Lucia only has to get half of the money. Donnelly further adds: 'I'd like you to know, too, that if I had the money I'd pay him off and that would be the end of it...I wish



things could have been different in many ways. Only one good thing came of it. I met you.' Nagel makes his appearance for the first time. He asks Donnelly whether Lucia will have the money Monday. Donnelly says she'll try. Nagel tells him to stop fooling around: 'Maybe I'd better go down there and talk to her.' Donnelly angrily responds that Nagel is not going near her. Nagel understands that Donnelly has started to develop feelings for Lucia and tells him that she is not in his class: 'I often think you get mad at me because I remind you of what you are. You're not respectable, Martin.'

**Lucia finds it hard to manage the bills** Lucia calculates the bills she has to pay. Soon, Sybil comes in and brings her some food. She asks Sybil: 'How do people put aside money so they have it when they need it?' She says to Sybil that they've got to cut down on the lights. Sybil asks Lucia whether she bought the cigarette holder. Lucia says no and that she'll take it back.



**Lucia tries her chance at a loan company and a pawnbroker** Lucia goes to a bank and takes her jewelry. Then she takes her jewels to a loan company. Lucia says to an official that she wishes to borrow five thousand dollars. The official asks about the purpose of the loan. Lucia doesn't want to answer. She says she thought there'd be no red tape. The official responds that they must know the purpose of the loan, and the borrower's plans to repay it and that this isn't red tape. She then asks her how much she thinks she could repay every month. When Lucia says fifty dollars, the official asks whether she realizes how long it would take to pay back the sum at that rate. She also asks whether Lucia has any collateral. Lucia has her jewelry, but the company doesn't have a pawnbroker's license. Lucia leaves the room without any success. Next, Lucia goes to a pawnbroker. She says she'd like to borrow some money on some jewelry. After inspecting the jewels, the pawnbroker is impressed and offers her seven hundred dollars. Lucia says they are worth so much more. So, the pawnbroker increases the money to eight hundred. Lucia accepts the amount and leaves the shop in a hurry.



**A man is arrested for Darby's murder and Lucia is now safe** Lucia meets Donnelly at the terminal. She says to him she could only raise eight hundred dollars. Donnelly says that Nagel can't do anything to her now: 'The police know who killed Darby. They've taken him in.' The arrested man's name is Murray. Lucia gets very nervous and feels guilty. She doesn't want some innocent person to be punished for something he didn't do. Donnelly asks her whether she knows who killed Darby. Lucia says she killed him. Donnelly doesn't believe her explanation and tells her not to repeat that story to another soul. When Lucia insists that the arrested man is innocent, Donnelly says that even so, he's guilty of a hundred other things. Later, he promises to mail her Bea's letters.



**Donnelly learns that Murray has been released** After Lucia leaves, Donnelly looks for Nagel. He cannot find him anywhere. In the bar, card players tell Donnelly that Murray has been released and Nagel went for a drive to 'get salt air'. Donnelly understands that Nagel went to Lucia's house. When Lucia arrives home, Sybil tells her that a man called Nagel is waiting for her. He wants to see Lucia alone, so Sybil has him wait in the boathouse. Lucia tells Sybil to give him a drink and that she'll be down as soon as she can.

**Nagel threatens Lucia that he'll give the letters to a newspaper** Lucia goes to the boathouse where Nagel is waiting for her. Nagel asks Lucia where the money is. Lucia says she doesn't have to get it anymore because he can't do anything to her anymore: 'They've got the man who killed Darby. It has nothing to do with my daughter. The letters mean nothing. They've got him.' Nagel tells her that Murray



was released that afternoon. He then says that he'll get hold of a newspaper friend of his and give Bea's letters. He says this is a business proposition and he won't leave the place until he has the money in his hands. Meanwhile, Donnelly has arrived at Lucia's house and hears the sounds coming from the boathouse.

**Bea and David go to the movies with their friends** When Lucia goes into the house, Grandpa tells her that they've been worried sick. Lucia says to him that the traffic was heavy. Soon, David comes and asks for a dollar from his mother because Owen Feller asked him and Bea to go to the movies with him. However, Bea does not want to go out. But Lucia says the right thing to do for Bea is to go out and that she 'just can't stop living at [her] age'. She gives her a fur coat. While she is wearing the fur coat, Bea finds there is a shopping list in one of the pockets and gives it to Lucia. Lucia is relieved that she finally found the shopping list she thought she left while dealing with Darby's body.



**Donnelly kills Nagel** Donnelly enters the boathouse. He says to Nagel that he told him to stay away from Lucia and begins to attack him. A fight ensues. Nagel tries to injure Donnelly with a broken bottle but Donnelly manages to drown him. Nagel is dead.



**Lucia offers to help Donnelly** Donnelly is bleeding and Lucia says he needs help. Donnelly says they've got to get him out of the boathouse. Lucia, on the other hand, wants to call the police and tell them everything: 'I'll tell them it's my fault, not yours. That you did it for me.' Donnelly thinks the police know about their *kind*: 'I never did a decent thing in all my life. I never even wanted to until you came along.' Lucia still doesn't want Donnelly to be hunted for murder for the rest of his life. She says to him she'll tell the police about Bea and Darby. Donnelly then asks her for a drink. Lucia says she'll be right back.

**While Lucia goes to get bandages for Donnelly, Donnelly drives away with Nagel in the car** Lucia goes into the house and tells Sybil that Donnelly has been badly hurt and asks her for bandages. When Lucia gets back to the boathouse, she hears sounds coming from the car in the garage. She goes there and sees Donnelly driving away with Nagel in the car. She asks Sybil for her car keys and starts to follow them in her vehicle.

**While getting Bea's letters from Nagel's pocket, Donnelly has a car accident** While following Donnelly's car, Sybil tells Lucia that she would not have helped him with the police. Lucia says she'd lie and that she wouldn't tell them about the blackmail. While driving, Donnelly reaches into Nagel's pocket to get Bea's letters. But he loses control of the car and smashes into a tree. The car is overturned. Lucia and Sybil notice something happened. Lucia runs near Donnelly who is now trapped under the car.

**Donnelly gives the letters to Lucia and tells her to leave him** When Lucia comes near him, he tells her to not help him and to go back. He gives her the letters. He wants her to leave him just as he is: 'You mustn't be found here when help comes.' He says to her that everything's turned out all right and the police will never know what happened when find Nagel. Lucia cries constantly but she takes the letters and finally leaves Donnelly on his own.



**Lucia learns that Donnelly confessed to killing Darby** Sybil drives the car back home. Lucia is in her room, crying. Sybil says that there is a call from Berlin, from Mr. Harper. Lucia slowly goes downstairs. Meanwhile, her children arrive at home. David says they saw a terrible accident. Bea tells Lucia that the police said that the man who was in the accident confessed to killing Darby. And that





they got to him just before he died. Lucia keeps crying. Then she talks to Tom on the phone. She says to him that they'll have a blue Christmas tree and that everything's fine, except they miss him terribly.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Lucia Harper**

Lucia Harper is the protagonist of the film. She is the mother of Beatrice and David, and the wife of Tom Harper. She cares about her daughter's well-being and tries to make sure she is not hurt by Darby. She discovers Darby's dead body near their boathouse and is blackmailed by Donnelly and Nagel.

*Intelligent:* Lucia is an intelligent woman. After discovering Darby's dead body, she does not panic and makes sure that the body is not found near their boathouse. To that end, she uses a motorboat and disposes of the body in a swamp. Thereby, she guarantees that the police will not be suspicious of the Harper family.

*Cool-headed:* Cool-headedness refers to not being perturbed by unfortunate external events. Lucia is a cool-headed woman. She remains calm when she visits Darby to tell him not to see her daughter again. Most importantly, she maintains her calm when she encounters Darby's dead body and quickly thinks of a plan to make sure the police do not suspect anyone from her family.

*Responsible:* Because her husband is in a foreign land for work, Lucia assumes the whole responsibility of the house. She cares for her children and makes everything function smoothly in the house. Because she deeply cares about her daughter Beatrice, she drives to Los Angeles to talk to Darby. Moreover, after Darby's murder, she takes every necessary step to ensure Beatrice is not affected by the event.

### **Martin Donnelly**

Martin Donnelly is a criminal, a blackmailer who works together with Nagel. He first appears in the film after Darby is murdered. He comes to Lucia's house to blackmail her with the love letters Beatrice wrote to Darby. However, things change as the film progresses and Martin begins to develop feelings for Lucia.

*Intelligent:* Martin is an intelligent person. He knows that Lucia will be interested in retrieving Beatrice's letters. If the police knew about the letters, they might suspect that Beatrice committed the crime. Even though Lucia says that: 'letters don't mean anything', she is utterly worried that her daughter might soon become involved with this case. Donnelly is well aware of these fears of Lucia and plays on them to convince Lucia to gather the money for him and Nagel.

*Caring:* In the later part of the film, Martin develops romantic feelings for Lucia. He gives her more time so she can gather the money. He also doesn't want his share anymore. When nearing the end of the film Nagel visits Lucia in the boathouse and threatens her, he attacks Nagel and drowns him so he will not disturb the peace of the Harper family anymore. He does all these things because he cares deeply about Lucia's well-being.

*Courageous:* Donnelly shows courage when he attacks Nagel. He risks his own life to protect Lucia from being harmed by him. Not wanting to confront the police, he drives away with Nagel in the car. While driving he retrieves Beatrice's letters. He succeeds in giving the letters to Lucia before the police arrive. We learn in the very last scene of the film that he admitted to being Darby's murderer just before dying. His act shows his caring for Lucia and her family and his resolve to ensure the murder case is closed for good.

### **Beatrice Harper**

Beatrice Harper is Lucia's 17-year-old daughter who goes to an art school. She has an affair with Darby who is much older than her. Lucia does not approve of this relationship and this causes a conflict between Beatrice and her mother.

*Artistic:* Beatrice goes to an art school. Her room is filled with her paintings. We learn that his father did not initially approve of her going to art school but he accepted because Lucia took her daughter's side. However, Lucia seems to regret having supported her daughter because she does not approve of the kind of people she talks to, in particular, art dealer Darby.

*Impulsive:* Beatrice is an impulsive teenager. She engages in actions without always thinking of the consequences. For instance, she sneaks out at night to meet Darby but when he admits that he indeed is in need of money, she impulsively starts to fight with him and hits him in the head. This leads to Darby accidentally falling off from the boathouse.

*Moody:* Beatrice cannot control her emotions. Rather, her emotions and moods control her. When she finds out that Darby asked for money from her mother, she loses her temper and hits Darby. When she gets back home and sees her mother waiting for her, she cannot stop crying about how Darby turned out not to be the man she expected him to be.

### **Ted Darby**

Ted Darby is an art dealer. He lives in a hostel and does not have a regular job or a lifestyle. He has an affair with Beatrice, Lucia's daughter. When he comes to visit Beatrice in the boathouse, he accidentally falls and dies.

*Greedy:* Ted Darby is not truly interested in Beatrice. When Lucia visits him to tell him not to see his daughter anymore, he says he can promise not to see Beatrice on the condition that he is well-provided with money. Thus, he is more interested in money than Beatrice or her feelings.

*Unashamed:* Ted Darby is unashamed about what he stands for or wants from life. We can see his calm demeanor from the way he interacts with both Lucia and Beatrice. He is comfortable when he asks for money from Lucia. He is likewise very calm when he admits to Beatrice that he is in need of money and he would be glad to receive money from her mother. Beatrice is repulsed and disgusted by this unashamed attitude of his.

### **Nagel**

Nagel is a criminal and a blackmailer. He is Donnelly's partner. He is a greedy and unforgiving man demanding that Lucia pay him five thousand dollars. Nearing the end of the film, he is killed by his partner, Donnelly.

*Greedy:* Nagel is a greedy man. He values money above all else. He has no regrets or remorse about engaging in criminal activities. He does not care about people, he only cares about what he can get from them. His greed and unforgiveness are intricately intertwined.

*Unforgiving:* Nagel is a cold-blooded, ruthless criminal. When he sees that Donnelly won't get the money from Lucia, he visits her at her house. He waits for her in the boathouse and threatens her that he will give Beatrice's letters to the police unless she gives him his money. He shows no pity or compassion for Lucia.

### **Sybil**

Sybil is the housekeeper of the Harper family. She cleans the house, cooks, and manages that everything works smoothly within the family. She is always there for Lucia and others.

*Helpful:* Sybil is a responsible and helpful individual. She not only takes care of the house but also cares about the members of the Harper family. She notices small things. For instance, she notices when Lucia hardly touches her food and brings her something to eat later on. These small acts of kindness show us how helpful and considerate she is.

## THEMES

### CRIME

**Injustice** Injustice refers to a lack of fairness or justice. The web of unjust acts is complex in *Reckless Moment*. First of all, Darby dies not because of being murdered by Beatrice but because he has an accident. Therefore, what the police investigate as a murder case is, in reality, a simple yet fatal accident. However, other acts of injustice occur in the film. For instance, Donnelly and Nagel are LA criminals and blackmailers. When they blackmail Lucia and threaten her that they will give Beatrice's letters to the police, they engage in a criminal offense. The question that some of the viewers of the film might ponder is possibly whether Lucia also engages in a criminal act by withholding information from the police, namely the letters that Beatrice wrote to Darby. Lucia can be defended on the grounds that she only tries to protect her daughter and her family. However, she is not an altogether innocent character as she hides secrets from the authorities. At the end of the film, both Donnelly and Nagel die. Donnelly drowns and kills Nagel—which is another moral wrongdoing. Donnelly himself dies in a car accident soon after. Thus, the actual criminals pay for their wrongdoings with their lives. Whether *Reckless Moment* tries to teach us a lesson in morality is another question to be pondered. Because whatever the lesson is, it is not clear-cut. The film does not offer a black-and-white conception of morality. No character is completely represented as evil or good. They all have their moral virtues and shortcomings. Thus, the web of acts of morality is intricately complex and doesn't let the viewers come to definite conclusions.

**Punishment** In *Reckless Moment*, there is no official punishment that anyone gets by means of being judged in a court. However, both blackmailers, namely Donnelly and Nagel are dead at the end of the film. If they had not been involved with Darby and had not blackmailed Lucia, both of them could have been alive. Thus, we can maintain that their blackmailing Lucia starts a series of causal happenings or events that lead to their ultimate downfall. It is important to bear in mind that their act of blackmailing is not the first of their wrongdoings and that they have been involved in criminal activities all their lives. Therefore, Donnelly and Nagel's paying with their lives may be seen as a result of not one particular wrongdoing but a result of a series or a web of wrongdoings that they have committed during their lifetimes.

**Guilt** Nagel never feels remorse about the criminal activities he engages in. He explicitly tells Lucia when he meets her at the boathouse that he does not care about any of the members of the Harper family. All he wants is money and until his death, he is driven by nothing else but a desire for money. On the other hand, Donnelly is a different character. Despite being an LA criminal just like Nagel, he starts to question his behavior and acts. As he develops feelings for Lucia, he comes to see how much he has been hurting people with his morally wrong actions. Thus, he feels guilty about his blackmail and tells Lucia that he does not want his own share of the money anymore. Later on in the film, he also tries to protect Lucia from Nagel. He kills Nagel at the end of the film and thus commits another immoral act. However, we the viewers cannot blame him for this act of his as we know that he drowns Nagel only to protect Lucia and prevent her from becoming involved with Darby's murder case.

### RELATIONSHIP

**Marriage** Lucia's husband Tom Harper is absent throughout the entire film. We only perceive his existence when he calls home. However, we neither see his face nor hear his voice. The absence of a father or husband figure indicates the whole burden or responsibility of the Harper family lies on the shoulders of Lucia. Despite the absent husband figure, we can assert that the marriage of Lucia and Tom is a successful one, in particular when we look at the children they have raised together and the warmth and authenticity of their telephone conversations.

**Caring/Love** Lucia deeply cares for her family. She does whatever she can to ensure the members of the Harper family are not affected by Darby's murder case. Lucia faces the challenge of being blackmailed alone. She tries to collect the demanded money on her own. She bears all these hardships because she is determined to protect her family and, in particular, Beatrice. Donnelly is another character who shows us his caring side. As the film progresses, he develops feelings for Lucia and tries to give her as much time as possible so she can collect the necessary money. Donnelly even decides to let go of his own share of the money. Later on, he kills Nagel because he is aware that Nagel can give Beatrice's letters to the newspapers and ruin the lives of the Harper family. At the very end of the film, he makes a false confession that he killed Darby. All these sacrificial acts are a testament to the fact that he deeply cares for Lucia's well-being and happiness.

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Sadness** There are various scenes where the feelings of sadness come to the forefront. One of these scenes is when Beatrice finds out about Darby's true feelings. She learns that Darby is indeed willing to stop seeing her on the condition that Lucia provides him well with money. This discovery about Darby shocks and repulses Beatrice. She starts fighting Darby and hits him in the head because of her feelings of anger and sadness. Her reaction after finding out the truth about Darby conveys her disappointment and sadness. Another scene where we clearly witness sadness is when Donnelly has a car accident and Lucia cannot do anything to save him. Donnelly gives Beatrice's letters to Lucia. However, he is trapped under the overturned car and cannot get out. He asks Lucia to take the letters and go away before the police come. Lucia cannot do anything but accept what he says. When she returns home, we see her crying in her bedroom. We can understand how crucial this scene is when we compare her breaking down with her generally cool-headed attitude and behavior in the rest of the film. Even though Lucia is a resilient and strong woman, she cannot keep her stoic attitude any longer. Seeing how much Donnelly sacrificed for her, she cannot help but cry in a state of desperation. Thus, in this scene, we witness a state of deep desperation in addition to sadness.

**Regret** Two characters exhibit feelings of regret in *Reckless Moment*. The first of these characters is Beatrice. She regrets her affair with Darby. After finding out about his true colors, she regrets that she ever met him or became involved with him. Learning that Darby was not truly interested in her but money is a shocking thing that Beatrice has a hard time coming to terms with. Another character who regrets their actions is Donnelly. As the film progresses, he develops feelings for Lucia and wishes things were different. When he calls her on the telephone to tell her that Nagel wants the money no later than Monday, he says to her: 'I'd like you to know, too, that if I had the money I'd pay him off and that would be the end of it...I wish things could have been different in many ways. Only one good thing came of it. I met you.' Donnelly wishes that he could have met Lucia in a different setting or context. If he had not been a criminal and had a more respectable lifestyle, things could have been different between them in the sense that they could have been together as a couple.

**Anger** Regret and anger are, at times, intertwined feelings. When we examine the film, we realize that the two characters who are seen as exhibiting feelings of regret are also the ones who experience anger. These characters are Beatrice and Donnelly. Beatrice experiences anger when she hears Darby say to her that he is indeed in need of money and therefore asked Lucia to provide him with money. This repulses Beatrice as she realizes that Darby is ready to let go of her if he is given enough money. So, a fight ensues between them. Beatrice hits him on his head with the flashlight in her hand. Then she runs to her house. Her feelings are a mixture of anger, sadness, disappointment, and frustration. She cries and regrets her past relationship. Another character who exhibits anger is Donnelly. When he finds out that Nagel went to see Lucia, he directly enters the boathouse and starts to attack Nagel in anger. Because Donnelly knows that Nagel can give Beatrice's letters to the newspapers, he drowns Nagel so as to get rid of the problem altogether. We can say that this impulsive act of anger is not pre-planned and Donnelly does what he can given the complexities of the situation he is faced with. Yet, his anger results in him murdering a person.

**Fear** Lucia fears many things throughout the film despite not showing outward signs of fear or anxiousness. At the very beginning of the film, she is concerned about her daughter's well-being. She

fears the possibility of her daughter keeping on seeing Darby. Later on, when she finds the dead body of Darby, she fears that her daughter might be the one who caused Darby's death and disposes of the dead body in the swamp so as to get rid of any evidence that could be held against the members of the Harper family. Then Donnelly comes to blackmail her. Here, Lucia fears that the police might come to learn about Beatrice's relationship with Darby. She tells her daughter not to say to anyone that she has a relationship with him. Throughout the rest of the film, we see Lucia trying her best to collect the necessary money to pay the blackmailers. She experiences panic, anxiety, confusion, and other related feelings. Her psyche is disturbed, yet she maintains a calm outward demeanor to not make anyone in her family suspect.

**Loss** Three characters die in *Reckless Moment*. These characters are Darby, Donnelly, and Nagel. The physical deaths of these characters are losses that the people around them experience in different ways. We do not see Beatrice grieving the loss of Darby. She seems to be full of feelings of anger and disappointment toward Darby. Yet, she does not seem to be particularly saddened by his passing away. Nagel's death happens because Donnelly drowns him. However, since Nagel is perceived as a problematic character, his death does not constitute a significant loss for anyone. On the other hand, the loss of Donnelly is an event that saddens Lucia. Lucia knows that Donnelly killed Nagel because he wants to protect her. Furthermore, Donnelly does not want Lucia to be confronted with the police. Therefore, he drives away with Nagel. After the accident, he tells the police that he was the murderer of Darby, thereby closing the case of Darby's murder forever. His false confession is made to protect Lucia and her family. Seeing all Donnelly has done for her, Lucia experiences Donnelly's death as a great loss.

## FLAW

**Greed/Ambition** Greed for money is a flaw that Darby, Donnelly, and Angel exhibit. Given that all three characters die at the end of the film, the film's moral message can be interpreted as being that greed is never left unpunished. Darby is unashamed about his greed for money as he so comfortably expresses his wish to get money from Lucia. Moreover, he is also visibly calm and collected when he confesses to Beatrice that he indeed asked for money from Lucia. We can say that his greed for money is the initiator of a series of events that ultimately result in his downfall. The same statement can be made for Donnelly and Nagel too. Both these characters are LA criminals and blackmailers with a background of a web of wrongdoings. At the end of the film, Donnelly engages in another moral wrongdoing when he murders Nagel. Even though he does this for the sake of Lucia, his act of taking the life of another human being cannot be overlooked, ignored, or accepted. Nagel, as the antagonist of the film, is the embodiment of the moral flaw of greed for money. His ruthless, unforgiving, and greedy character results in his own downfall and death.

## QUEST

**Exploration** Lucia explores various surroundings and people throughout the film. At the very beginning of the film, we see her drive to Los Angeles to meet art dealer Darby. She meets Darby and talks to him about her daughter Beatrice. Later on in the film, she is confronted with a difficult situation as she finds Darby's dead body. She uses her intelligence and judgment to get rid of any evidence that might associate members of the Harper family with Darby's death. Afterward, she faces another challenging situation when she is blackmailed by Donnelly and Nagel. She goes to a loan company to collect the money demanded from her. At the end of the film, she witnesses a murder scene and has to cope with Donnelly's loss. Thus, she is subjected to a variety of challenging circumstances and has to overcome those. We can say that Lucia is successful in navigating these unfortunate situations and survives them. At the end of the film, after having had to experience and navigate the world of crime and criminals, Lucia achieves to protect her family and no member of the Harper family is hurt.

**Investigation** The police investigate Darby's murder case. However, we do not experience the series of events from the perspective of the police, but rather from the perspective of Lucia. The only scene where the police play a prominent role is when they visit the private homes in the Balboa community because they think the victim was murdered in Balboa. At the point of the investigation, the police believe that Darby might have been involved with a family in the neighborhood because he was killed with an anchor and the body was taken into the swamp by a small boat. Later on in the investigation, a man

named Murray is arrested as a suspect. However, he is soon released. The investigation closes when Donnelly admits to having killed Darby before he dies himself. All in all, we can say that even though there is an investigation being continued by the police, this investigation does not constitute the backbone of the film. Rather, the backbone of the film is the perspective of Lucia through which the series of events is presented to the viewers.

## **APPEARANCE**

**Secrets** Lucia keeps a secret from the police and authorities. She never tells them that her daughter Beatrice had an affair with Darby. Lucia ensures that the police never get to read Beatrice's letters to Darby. She agrees to pay the money that is being demanded of her by Donnelly and Nagel. She does these things because she does not want Beatrice to be associated with Darby's murder case in any way. Whether Lucia is morally justified to have hidden the existence of the letters from the police is a question for the film viewers to reflect upon.