

BELIEVE ME

When memory lies, can you trust yourself?

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Stories Matter

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Dedication

For those who were told
Their memories were wrong.
Their feelings were too much.
and that their truth was never enough.

Jake had his arm wrapped around me, a glass of champagne balanced effortlessly in his other hand. He looked at me like I was his everything, those eyes holding me still, almost paralysing in the way they softened whenever they met mine. I leaned into him instinctively. He was gorgeous, and he knew it. That smile, those eyes, the way he carried himself at parties like these... It was pure charisma, distilled and dangerous.

These elite club nights were the ones we always looked forward to. The noise, the lights, and the familiar faces layered with new introductions. In the city, presence mattered: being seen, being known, being remembered. Jake and I understood that better than most.

People envied us. They whispered "*perfect match*" as we passed. Sometimes "*the glamorous couple*." They weren't wrong; we were polished, intentional, almost curated.

I carried myself carefully too. Modest, elegant dresses, soft smiles. A calm, composed grace I had perfected over time, practicing it in front of the mirror.

Jake and I were the perfect couple, high school sweethearts, though we were different people back then. He was a backbencher, always laughing too loudly at stupid jokes his friends cracked, and I was the quiet girl in the front row, listening almost obsessively to theories about art and literature.

I remember one afternoon, sitting alone in the corridor with my sketchbook. He walked up to me with that warm smile he's worn his whole life.

“Do you want to join us? Saw you sitting here alone, so I thought I’d ask.”

That was the first moment I realized people did notice me, even if I barely spoke.

I did join them eventually and somehow, over time, I became one of them: loud, laughing, and visible. When the whole group erupted in jokes and arguments, Jake and I kept stealing glances, a quiet, magnetic pull forming between us.

The group shrank slowly until it was just us, and something in me shifted. Being around Jake made me loosen, soften, and open. I talked more. I fit in. People began to notice our chemistry, our “fatal attraction”; they called it that. We became one of the most talked-about couples in school.

With him, it felt like the world pressed pause. We kissed in hallways, hands intertwined every chance we got. He made sure everyone knew I was his.

Not much has changed since then. Jake still takes every opportunity to show the world that I belong to him. At every social event, he shows me off like a trophy he polished himself.

I loved it; God, I loved it. The attention, the affection, and the fact that someone claimed me so openly, so proudly.

It made me feel chosen. Wanted. Certain. I thrived on that energy. I thought he did too.

As the night carried on, someone at the party dimmed the lights a little, just enough to make the chandeliers glow like captured stars. A slow song played, the kind people usually ignore at crowded events like these, but Jake turned to me with that soft half-smile he only ever showed when we were alone.

“Dance with me?” he whispered.

I almost laughed. Jake never danced at parties. He said it messed up the photos, the angles, and the image, but tonight he pulled me closer, the champagne flute abandoned somewhere far behind us.

His hand settled on my waist, warm and steady, and for a moment it felt like we were seventeen again, sneaking out of classrooms to dance in empty corridors. The room didn't disappear this time; people still watched us, but it didn't matter. He held me as if no one else existed.

"You look beautiful tonight," he murmured against my ear. Not loud, not performative, not for anyone else. Just for me and for that one fleeting moment, I believed this life was still ours. That we were still the couple everyone thought we were.

A friend shouted Jake's name from across the hall. He answered with a raised hand but didn't let go of me right away. Instead, he kissed my forehead, gentle, lingering, almost protective. Something in my chest tightened in the nicest way. A reminder. A promise or the memory of one.

We stayed a little longer, laughing, drinking, and drifting from group to group, before exhaustion finally tugged at me.

"Let's go home?" I asked.

Jake didn't hesitate. He slid an arm around my waist, guiding me through the crowd as if shielding me from everything that wasn't him.

Outside, the night air was cool against my skin. Jake opened the car door for me, pressed a kiss to my temple again, and whispered,

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get you home."

In that moment, I didn't know this would be the last night things felt this simple. This felt warm and right.

The city lights blurred past the car windows, streaks of gold and white sliding over my skin as I leaned back into the leather seat.

The night outside felt cool and distant, the soft hum of the engine almost lulling me.

“Steve and Rachel weren’t at the party today... I wonder why,” I said, watching Jake’s profile glow in the passing streetlights.

He exhaled slowly. “They split up. They’ve been having problems for a while.” His fingers tightened slightly on the steering wheel. “No one really knows. I didn’t expect it myself. When they stopped coming to the events, I checked in on Steve. That’s when he told me.”

“Oh.” The word slipped out softer than I intended. “I didn’t expect that either. They never seemed like they had problems.” A cluster of headlights washed over the dashboard. “I should probably check on Rachel. People look fine on the outside, but... who knows what’s happening inside their lives.”

A silence settled between us, warm and a little sad. I brushed my thumb along the edge of my clutch resting on my lap.

“It’s just... they were our closest friends,” I murmured. “Remember how they helped us when we shifted? All those house parties we hosted together? They always knew how to organize everything. Those late-night double dates...” I smiled faintly, feeling the gentle ache of nostalgia. “Fun times.”

Jake didn’t say anything at first. He just nodded once, eyes fixed on the road, the glow from the streetlamps flickering over his expression, here bright, there shadowed.

For a second, I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was. How easily things fall apart. How people change without warning. How even the closest couples can disappear from each other.

“We aren’t like that, right?” I smiled as I said it, watching the reflection of passing streetlights flicker across the windshield. “We’ve been together for so long. We’ve known each other in our

toughest times.” I let out a small laugh. “Staying together through thick and thin.”

Jake glanced at me, his expression softening. “Yes, my love,” he said warmly. “Through thick and thin. That’s us.”

The words settled into my chest like something solid, reassuring.

“What do you want to listen to?” he asked, one hand still steady on the wheel.

I smiled again. He always let me choose the music on the drive home; it was our unspoken rule.

“You’re still the one,” I said. “Shania Twain.”

The first notes filled the car, gentle and familiar. I leaned back into the seat, the leather cool against my shoulders, my body finally relaxing. Jake tapped his fingers lightly against the steering wheel, humming under his breath. He loved the song too, even if he never admitted it.

Our love felt like that song. People had told us we wouldn’t last: too young, too different, too intense, and yet, look how far we’d come.

Romance between us never dulled. It stayed alive, warm and constant, just like the moment we first met. Every moment together felt like that: easy, electric, and full.

People say butterflies only belong to the beginning of a relationship, but for me, they never left. The smallest things still set them off: his forehead kisses at red lights, the way he reached for my hand in public, fingers interlacing without thought, and as the song played on, wrapped in music and memory, I believed completely that this feeling was permanent.

The song faded slowly, the last note stretching out before dissolving into the quiet hum of the engine. Neither of us spoke right away. The city thinned as we drove, lights giving way to darker stretches of road, the night pressing closer around the car.

Jake turned into our street, the tires crunching softly against gravel. The house came into view, warm yellow light glowing faintly through the windows, familiar and comforting. He parked, cut the engine, and for a second everything went still.

Too still.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, the click sounding louder than it should have in the silence. Jake stepped out first, the cool night air slipping in as he opened my door. I shivered slightly, not from cold but from the sudden shift, the music gone, the moment suspended.

Inside, the house smelled faintly of the candle I'd lit before we left, vanilla and something floral, now softened and lingering. Jake loosened his tie, tossing it onto the console. I slipped off my heels near the door, my feet sinking into the familiar softness of the rug.

I went into the washroom to get ready for bed, the soft yellow light casting gentle shadows against the mirror. I washed my face slowly, letting the cool water calm me, listening to the quiet sounds of the house settling for the night.

Jake came up behind me without a word and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me back against his chest. The warmth of him seeped into me instantly. I smiled at my reflection before turning to face him.

For a moment, we just looked at each other, close enough to feel each other's breath, close enough to forget everything else. I leaned in first, and he met me halfway. The kiss was familiar, unhurried, filled with the kind of certainty only years together can create.

His hands settled at my waist, firm and steady, lifting me easily onto the edge of the counter. I let out a soft laugh that disappeared as he kissed me again, deeper this time, neither of us quite ready

to pull away. Time blurred, the world narrowing down to warmth, touch, and the quiet urgency between us.

He carried me to the bedroom, movements gentle despite the intensity, and laid me down as though I were something precious. The room was dim, lit only by the bedside lamp, shadows dancing softly across the walls. He hovered over me, familiar and close, and everything felt unspoken yet understood.

The night slowed then. Touches lingered. Moments stretched.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't loud. It was intimate, steady, and beautiful in the way only shared history allows.

Later, as the house fell completely silent and his breathing evened beside me, I lay awake for a while longer, wrapped in warmth, certain of one thing.

Whatever people said about love fading, ours never had.

Morning arrived quietly.

Soft sunlight slipped through the curtains, warm and pale, brushing against my face. I stirred slowly, still half-wrapped in sleep, aware first of the warmth beside me. Jake's arm was draped loosely over my waist, his breathing steady, familiar.

I shifted slightly, and he woke almost instantly.

"Hey," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep. His hand tightened gently at my side, as if grounding himself in the fact that I was still there.

"Morning," I whispered back, smiling before my eyes had even fully opened.

He brushed a strand of hair away from my face, fingers light and careful. "Did you sleep okay?"

I nodded, sinking back into the pillow. The sheets were warm, the room quiet except for distant birds and the faint hum of life beginning outside.

“Stay,” he said softly, already sliding out of bed. “I’ll be right back.”

I listened to his footsteps fade down the hallway, the house creaking gently as it always did in the mornings. A few minutes later, the smell of coffee drifted in, rich, comforting, and unmistakably Jake. It wrapped around me like another blanket.

He returned with a mug in his hand and a smile that made my chest feel full.

“Careful, it’s hot,” he said, settling beside me and holding the cup so I could sip. He watched me the way he always did in moments like this, quietly, attentively, like nothing else mattered.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice soft, almost reverent.

He leaned down and pressed a slow kiss to my forehead, lingering there a moment longer than necessary. “You don’t have to thank me.”

Later, he helped me out of bed, his hand steady in mine as we walked to the kitchen. He made breakfast while I sat at the counter, wrapped in his oversized shirt, watching him move around the space like it was second nature, like *we* were second nature.

“Eat,” he said gently, placing the plate in front of me. “You need to.”

I laughed. “You sound serious.”

“I am,” he replied with a grin. “Someone’s got to take care of you.”

In that moment, with sunlight filling the room and his presence surrounding me, I believed him completely.

I believed we were solid, that we were safe. I believed this love would always feel like this.

Jake dressed quickly after breakfast, the quiet rhythm of a weekday settling back into place. I watched him from the doorway as he buttoned his shirt, sunlight catching on the crisp fabric, making everything look clean and uncomplicated.

"I'll be late today," he said, slipping on his watch. "Meetings ran over yesterday too."

"That's okay," I replied easily. "I'm meeting the girls anyway."

He smiled, relieved. He kissed my cheek, lingering just long enough for it to feel intentional. "Don't wait up for me."

I walked him to the door. The air outside was already warm, carrying the faint sounds of traffic and morning voices. He turned once more before leaving, like he always did, and waved.

"Text me when you get there."

"I will."

And then he was gone.

I took my time getting ready. A shower, warm and unhurried. I chose a dress I hadn't worn in a while, light fabric, and a soft color. Something easy. Something *me*. As I looked at my reflection, I felt good. Grounded and loved.

The café was bright and familiar, sunlight pouring through wide windows and the smell of coffee and baked bread wrapping around the space. My friends were already there, laughter spilling over their table before I even reached it.

"Look at you," one of them said, pulling me into a hug. "Married life suits you."

I laughed, settling into my chair, the chair legs scraping softly against the floor. We talked about everything at first: work, plans, holidays, and mutual acquaintances. Cups clinked. Phones buzzed. The world felt normal.

Then, casually, almost as an afterthought, one of them said,

“By the way... Jake’s been coming into the city a lot more lately, hasn’t he?”

I blinked. “Yeah. Work’s been hectic.”

She nodded, stirring her drink slowly. “I thought so. I think I saw him last week, late evening. He looked busy.”

“Busy?” I smiled lightly. “That sounds like him.”

Another friend exchanged a quick glance before speaking. “I just assumed you knew. He’s been around quite often.”

The words weren’t sharp. They weren’t accusatory. They floated between us, light and careless.

“Oh,” I said again. That word seemed to follow me everywhere today.

Someone changed the subject almost immediately to new restaurants and upcoming plans, but something had shifted. The café felt louder. The air is warmer. I wrapped my fingers around my cup, grounding myself in the heat.

It was probably nothing; of course, it was nothing.

Still, as I laughed along and nodded at the right moments, I felt a faint pressure in my chest, not fear, not suspicion, just a quiet awareness that something had brushed past me without stopping and I didn’t know yet whether it mattered.

The drive home was quieter than the one earlier that morning. The afternoon sun hung low, casting long shadows across the road, the world outside moving at an unhurried pace. I turned the radio on but kept the volume low, more for company than sound.

By the time I reached the house, the light had softened into something golden and tired. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, greeted by the familiar hush. The air was still, faintly cool, carrying the lingering scent of morning coffee and clean linen.

I slipped off my shoes and set my bag down, walking through the living room slowly, letting the silence settle around me. It felt good to be home. Alone, but not lonely. I poured myself a glass of water, the clink of ice echoing gently through the kitchen.

That's when my phone buzzed.

The sudden vibration made me glance down instinctively.
Margaret.

Why aren't you coming to the town today?

I stared at the screen longer than necessary. The message was simple and polite. No punctuation that suggested irritation, and yet, something about it tightened my chest.

I hadn't told her I was coming.

I hadn't told her I wasn't.

I sat down at the kitchen counter, the cool surface pressing against my palms, and reread the message. Outside, a car passed, tires humming briefly before disappearing again.

Maybe she was just checking in.

Maybe she was being thoughtful.

That's what I told myself.

Still, I felt that familiar, quiet pull of the expectation that I should explain myself. That my absence needed a reason.

I typed, erased, then typed again.

I went out to meet some friends. I'm home now.

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately.

Oh. I thought you might come by. We were expecting you.

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry.

Expecting me.

I looked around the house, the soft light on the walls, the stillness, and the sense of space I'd only just reclaimed, and wondered when exactly I'd agreed to be expected.

I set the phone face down on the counter, the screen dimming, but the message lingered in my mind long after the vibration stopped.

For the first time that day, the house didn't feel quite as quiet as it had moments ago.

I leaned against the kitchen counter, arms folded loosely across my chest, staring at nothing in particular. The hum of the refrigerator felt louder than it should have, the air heavier somehow.

Honestly, meeting Margaret was the last thing I wanted to do.

She hadn't taken me into her family out of love, I knew that much. She accepted me because Jake wouldn't have agreed to another marriage, because there was no alternative version of his life that didn't include me. I was not chosen. I was *permitted*.

Margaret was possessive in a way that felt old and deeply rooted. Jake was her golden child. Her only child. The center of her carefully constructed world. She had shaped him to meet her expectations, polished him, and protected him, though he never fully became what she wanted him to be, and somehow, that failure was placed at my feet.

She believed loving me was what made him distant. What pulled him away? Sometimes I caught her watching us together, her smile stiff, her eyes calculating, like she was measuring the exact moment she lost him. I walked toward the living room window, resting my forehead briefly against the cool glass. Outside, the street was quiet, ordinary, and untouched by the tension tightening inside me.

Sometimes, I thought she did love me. Other times, it felt like an obligation, a duty performed carefully and resentfully, and the worst part was never knowing which version of her I would meet.

I picked up my phone again, Margaret's message still glowing faintly in my mind, and wondered why her presence could make a full house feel suddenly smaller.

Maybe I should meet Margaret, just to reassure her that her son is alright, that he's taken care of. Taken care of the way *she* wanted.

The thought made my jaw tighten.

Ugh.

Still, I packed my bag for a two-day stay at Margaret's place. Folding clothes felt mechanical, like muscle memory taking over while my mind resisted every step. The trip itself was long, the kind that leaves you tired before you even arrive.

She lived in the town. A very homely area, quiet and close-knit, where people knew each other's routines and noticed when something shifted. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, just unfamiliar. The kind of place that wrapped itself around you slowly, whether you wanted it to or not.

But it wasn't somewhere I could stay for more than a few days.

I belonged to the city. The noise, the anonymity, the constant movement—that was my home. The city never asked me to explain myself. It never watched too closely. It let me disappear when I needed to.

Even the thought of relocating made my stomach twist. That life, her life, was not mine.

I zipped the bag shut, the sound final and sharp in the quiet room, and reminded myself this was temporary. Just two days. Just reassurance. Just playing a role I already knew how to perform.

I texted Jake just as I was about to leave, my phone glowing softly in my palm.

Told him I'd be back in two days.

He replied almost instantly. He seemed pleased; I could tell even through a screen. The idea of me spending time with his mother visibly eased him. He knew how much I disliked her, but maybe he thought these two days would soften something in me, that I'd

come back changed. That I'd start loving the town, loving the visits, loving *her*.

Jake couldn't come with me. Work, of course. Back-to-back meetings, deadlines stacked like excuses. At least, that's what he claimed, and now that I had resigned from my job, it was easier for him to let me go alone. Easier to believe I had the time. Easier to believe I'd adjust.

Visit my mother sometimes, he'd say. At least on weekends. It would make her feel a lot better.

He said it gently, always gently, as if kindness would make the weight lighter, and I always nodded, always murmured agreement, while quietly preparing another excuse. There was always something: exhaustion, plans, the city pulling me back.

I avoided her the way one avoids a truth they're not ready to face.

Jake had always been like this. Loyal to her in ways he didn't even realize. Protective, accommodating, hopeful. A typical mother's boy.

I slipped my phone into my bag, the screen going dark, and stepped out, already bracing myself for the town that waited.

The road stretched ahead of me as I drove, the steady hum of the engine filling the silence. The city slowly began to thin, buildings giving way to open stretches of land, smaller houses, and quieter streets. I rolled the window down slightly, warm air brushing against my skin, carrying the faint scent of dust and something green.

Driving toward her always pulled me backward.

I remember the first day Jake introduced me to Margaret.

It was late afternoon then too. The sun had been low, casting long shadows across her perfectly trimmed lawn. I had smoothed down my dress at least three times before ringing the doorbell. Jake squeezed my hand, reassuring.

She opened the door with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Adelaide," she'd said, looking me over slowly, not rudely, just thoroughly. "Come in."

Her house smelled of polished wood and something floral, sharp, and expensive. Everything inside felt arranged, deliberate, like nothing existed there without permission.

She served tea in delicate cups and asked me polite questions: where I studied, what my parents did, and what my plans were. Her tone was light, almost warm, and then, casually, as if it were a passing thought...

"Oh, Glen and Vivian's daughter is back in town," she said, stirring her tea. "You remember her, Jake? You two were inseparable as children."

Jake laughed lightly. "Yeah, we were kids, Mom."

"She's done so well for herself," Margaret continued, eyes briefly flicking toward me. "Such a lovely girl. I Always thought you two would stay close."

There was nothing explicitly cruel in what she said. Nothing I could point at, but I felt it, the comparison. The suggestion. The alternative.

I smiled politely, fingers tightening around the teacup. The porcelain was hot against my skin, grounding me.

That was the moment I knew.

She hadn't chosen me, and perhaps she never would.

Ever since that day, she found small, elegant ways to remind me that I was not the version of Jake she had imagined. A comment about my career. A remark about how things were done "in their family." A passing memory of someone else.

Always gentle. Always deniable, but sharp enough.

A horn sounded behind me, pulling me back to the present. I blinked, realizing the traffic had slowed. The town sign appeared up ahead, familiar and unwelcome.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

Two days, I reminded myself. Just two days.

The town greeted me the way it always did: slow, sun-washed, pretending nothing ever changed. The roads felt narrower somehow, dust lifting softly behind my car as I turned into Margaret's lane. Her house stood at the very end, white walls glowing under the afternoon light, bougainvillea spilling over the gate in carefully disciplined pink cascades. I parked outside, and when I switched off the engine, the ticking sound as it cooled felt unusually loud. Then came the silence, thick, unmoving, pressing against the windows.

I stepped out, the dry heat settling on my skin immediately. Before I could reach into the backseat for my bag, I heard gravel crunch.

"Adelaide?"

I turned to see Mrs. Halston standing beside her mailbox across the street. Her silver hair was pinned back too tightly, and her pale blue cardigan was buttoned all the way to the top despite the afternoon warmth. She looked exactly as she always had: neat, composed, and quietly observant.

"Oh! Hello," I called with a smile.

She didn't smile back immediately. Instead, she simply looked at me.

Not rudely. Not curiously.

Just... intensely.

For a long moment, her eyes searched my face as though she had stumbled across a memory she couldn't quite place.

"You're back," she said softly.

"Just for a couple of days."

"I see."

Her voice trailed away. Then, almost absentmindedly, she glanced toward the old house behind me.

"I could've sworn..." she murmured. She stopped herself.

"I'm sorry?"

Mrs. Halston blinked, as though waking from a daydream.

"Oh."

She gave a small, embarrassed laugh.

"Getting old has its peculiar moments."

I smiled politely, unsure what to say.

She looked back at me again.

"You remind me of someone."

"Do I?"

She nodded slowly.

"For just a heartbeat..."

Her eyes drifted toward the upstairs window of the house.

"...I thought she was back."

The words settled strangely between us.

"Who?"

She remained quiet. The breeze stirred the curtains behind the upstairs window. Mrs. Halston followed them with her eyes. Then she smiled to herself.

"No."

She shook her head gently.

"That's impossible."

"I'm sorry, dear. Sometimes memories arrive before common sense does."

I let out a small laugh, though something about the conversation left me unexpectedly unsettled.

"Someone you knew?"

Mrs. Halston's smile softened.

"Many years ago."

There was a sadness in her eyes that hadn't been there a moment earlier. Before I could ask another question, she adjusted the strap of her gardening gloves and stepped back toward her gate.

"Enjoy your visit, Adelaide."

"I hope you find what you're looking for."

I frowned.

"I'm not looking for anything."

Mrs. Halston smiled.

"No. I suppose none of us ever are."

Then she disappeared into her garden, leaving me standing alone in the quiet afternoon, wondering why I suddenly couldn't stop looking at the upstairs window.

A pause stretched. The cicadas buzzed somewhere in the distance.

"Adelaide!" Margaret's voice carried through the warm air, bright and composed. "You're here!"

Relief washed over me too quickly.

I turned toward the house, the wooden steps creaking faintly as Margaret descended them, her perfume already drifting toward me, floral, sharp, and familiar in a way I didn't like.

When I glanced back across the street, Mrs. Halston was still watching me.

Not confused.

Certain, and for the first time since arriving, the house behind me didn't feel like a place I was visiting. It felt like somewhere that remembered me.

"Adelaide! My dear..."

Margaret's voice reached me before I had even stepped fully inside the house. She cupped my face lightly, her fingers cool and faintly scented with rosewater. "How are you? And how is my son? Is he eating properly? Sleeping enough? Are you taking good care of him?"

The questions poured out without pause, not quite giving me the space to respond.

"Yes, Mother," I said gently, forcing a small smile. "He's doing well. Busy, I must say. Otherwise he would have come with me."

Her eyes flickered at that, something quick and unreadable, before she smoothed her expression again.

"And how are you managing?" I asked. "Jake mentioned you weren't feeling well the other day. I can take you to the doctor tomorrow, if you'd like."

"Oh no, dear," she replied almost immediately, waving her hand as though the suggestion were unnecessary. "That won't be needed. I have everything under control."

Her tone was warm but firm.

"How many days are you staying?" she asked.

"Two days," I answered. "There's a party at Jake's office I need to attend."

The lie slipped out easily and for the briefest second, so subtle I might have imagined it, her shoulders seemed to relax.

Relief. Something about that unsettled me more than it should have.

Mrs. Halston's earlier words echoed faintly in my mind. "You remind me of someone..."

Was Margaret hiding something? And why had she refused the hospital so quickly?

The questions gathered quietly in the back of my thoughts.

"I'll just settle into my room," I said. "I'll come down in a bit."

"Of course," she replied sweetly. "I'll prepare tea and some snacks."

The house smelled exactly as I remembered, polished wood, lavender tucked into corners, and something faintly medicinal beneath it all. The hallway floor creaked softly under my steps, a sound that felt louder in the stillness.

My room looked untouched. Preserved.

The walls were lined with photographs: Jake at five, Jake at ten, Jake graduating, and Jake smiling in different stages of his life. Frame after frame of him alone. There was one picture from our wedding placed neatly near the dresser. Smaller than the others. Almost like an afterthought.

I stood there for a moment longer than necessary, tracing the arrangement with my eyes.

I unpacked slowly, the drawers carrying the faint scent of naphthalene. After that, I stepped into the shower, letting the warm water run over me, steady and grounding. The steam filled the small space, fogging the mirror, blurring my reflection until I could barely make myself out.

When I stepped out, I opened the curtains and pushed the windows wide. A cool breeze slipped in, carrying the scent of damp soil and distant trees. The town was quiet, not peaceful exactly, but watchful.

Maybe it wasn't so bad; for a few days, it was tolerable, but not longer.

Not with Margaret. I let out a small laugh at the thought, shaking my head.

Then I looked down.

Across the street, Mrs. Halston stood outside her house, looking directly at me.

Not casually.

Watching.

A cold shiver slid down my spine.

How long had she been standing there?

I thought about what she'd said.

You remind me of someone. For just a heartbeat... I thought she was back.

Who was she?

Why had the sight of me unsettled her so deeply?

Had she simply mistaken me for someone from her past? Or was there something Margaret hadn't told me?

I looked toward the upstairs window of the house. The curtains stirred gently in the afternoon breeze. Nothing more. Nothing less. Yet as I stood there, an uneasy feeling settled over me. Not because I believed the house was haunted but because it suddenly felt as though I had stepped into a story that had begun long before I arrived and somewhere inside its walls... Someone else's memories were waiting to be remembered.

By the time I went downstairs, the house smelled of cardamom and freshly brewed tea. The scent drifted through the hallway, warm and inviting, almost enough to soften the unease sitting in my chest.

Margaret was already seated at the dining table, porcelain cups laid out neatly on matching saucers. The late afternoon light filtered through the lace curtains, casting delicate patterns across the tablecloth. She looked up when she heard my footsteps and smiled, that composed, practiced smile.

“Sit, dear,” she said. “I’ve made your favorite. You always preferred less sugar.”

I paused for a second.

“I do?” I asked lightly, taking the seat across from her.

“Oh,” she laughed softly, a little too quickly. “I must be remembering wrong. I was thinking of”

She stopped.

The silence stretched for half a breath too long.

“Of what?” I asked, keeping my tone casual as I lifted the cup. The porcelain felt warm against my fingers.

“Of another guest who stayed with us some time ago,” she replied smoothly. “It gets confusing sometimes.”

Another guest.

The words settled strangely in the air between us.

I brought the cup to my lips. The tea was sweet. Too sweet.

Margaret watched me as I swallowed.

“You’ve opened the windows in your room,” she added after a moment.

“Yes,” I said. “It felt a little stuffy.”

She nodded slowly. “She used to do that too. Always said the room needed air.”

My hand froze around the cup.

“Who?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Margaret blinked, then gave a soft chuckle, shaking her head as if at her own foolishness. “Oh, listen to me. I mean you, of course. You’ve always been particular about fresh air.”

Always.

I had never stayed in that room long enough to form habits.

The tea suddenly tasted heavier on my tongue.

Margaret reached forward and adjusted the sugar bowl slightly, aligning it perfectly with the edge of the table.

“You must be tired from the drive,” she continued, her voice light. “Rest tonight. We have plenty of time.”

Plenty of time.

I couldn’t tell if it was reassurance... or something else.

Outside, a faint breeze rustled through the trees. The house creaked softly, as though settling into itself, and for the first time since arriving, I felt a quiet, creeping certainty.

Margaret had almost said a name.

I felt something inside me shift. The question would not leave me alone. Who had she been talking about? Who had lived here, in my room? The thought clung to me all through dinner.

“Dinner is ready,” Margaret called gently, her voice floating up the staircase. “You must be tired from the drive.”

The table was set far too elaborately for two people. Dishes crowded the surface: fragrant chicken glistening with oil, warm bread wrapped carefully in cloth, rice steaming in a large bowl, and even a dessert placed neatly at the center. The scent of spices hung thick in the air. It felt less like a simple meal and more like preparation for unseen guests.

I didn’t ask why she had cooked so much. I didn’t want answers that might lead to more questions. I ate quietly, nodding when she spoke, excusing myself as soon as it felt polite to do so. Upstairs,

the silence felt heavier, as though the house exhaled once I shut the bedroom door.

I called Jake. He was still at the office. It was late, later than I expected, and I found myself wondering when his workload had grown so demanding. Poor Jake, I thought. Margaret must not know how much he has been working. She would worry endlessly; she might even insist on moving to the city to be closer to him. The idea unsettled me more than I wanted to admit.

I missed him. I missed the rhythm of our life in the city: him coming home to freshly prepared food, our lazy movie nights, and the warmth of his body beside mine as we drifted to sleep. I videocalled him, and he picked up almost instantly. His face appeared on the screen under harsh office lighting, shadows cutting across his features. I told him how much I missed him. I turned the camera and showed him the wall of photographs. Margaret had preserved so carefully. He smiled faintly, distracted. We spoke for a few minutes before he glanced somewhere off-screen.

“I have to go,” he said. “Urgent work.”

The call ended, and the room felt colder in his absence.

I stood before the photographs again, my fingers brushing over the glass of an old college picture. He looked so young there, careless, laughing, alive in a way that felt distant now. I pressed my lips softly against the frame, feeling foolish and tender all at once. I placed the photos back exactly as they had been, except for that one, which I left resting on the bed.

When I walked toward the cupboard to change, I opened the wrong door without thinking.

Jake’s cupboard.

At first, I simply stared, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. A white gown hung neatly inside. Not crumpled. Not forgotten. Pressed carefully, as if waiting to be worn. The fabric

caught the soft light from the bedside lamp, thin and flowing, unmistakably feminine. It wasn't mine. I had never owned anything like that, and it certainly wasn't Margaret's.

The air in the room shifted. My fingers hovered near the sleeve but didn't touch it. A faint scent lingered there, something floral, unfamiliar.

Margaret's unfinished sentence replayed in my mind. Mrs. Halston's strange look from across the street. The windows that had been opened before.

A slow realization began forming, quiet but persistent. Someone else had been here. Not once. Not briefly.

The house no longer felt empty.

It felt like it was holding its breath.

My fingers hovered near the fabric before I could stop myself. For a moment I simply stood there, staring at it as though it might dissolve if I blinked too hard. The white gown hung neatly inside Jake's cupboard, pressed smooth, its length falling in a soft cascade toward the floor. It didn't look old or forgotten. It looked placed.

Carefully.

The room felt suddenly smaller.

I stepped closer. The wooden floor beneath my feet felt cold now, the air from the open window brushing faintly against my neck. The gown moved slightly in the breeze, a slow, delicate sway. My heartbeat began to thud in my ears, steady but heavy.

I reached out.

The fabric was soft beneath my fingers. Silk, or something close to it. Cool at first touch, then warming against my skin. I ran my hand down the sleeve slowly, feeling the fine stitching along the edge and the careful detail near the waist. It was not cheap. It was chosen.

A faint scent clung to it.

Floral. Subtle. Not overpowering, but intimate, the kind of perfume someone wears close to their skin. Not mine. I leaned in slightly, almost against my own will, and inhaled again.

The scent was unfamiliar.

My throat tightened.

Why was it in Jake's cupboard?

Not in a storage box and not folded away. Hanging among his shirts and his jackets, as though it belonged there.

I pulled it slightly forward, checking behind it, as if expecting something else to be hidden. Nothing. Just the clean wooden interior and the faint smell of cedar.

My mind scrambled for logic. Maybe a relative left it here, or maybe Margaret kept old clothes. Maybe I was overthinking.

But then why in his cupboard?

I stepped back slowly, my fingers still tingling from where I had touched the fabric. The breeze from the window continued to move it gently, almost rhythmically. For a strange second, it felt less like an object and more like a presence.

Who would leave something like this here?

Who would it fit?

The silence in the room pressed against my ears.

Margaret had almost said a name earlier.

Mrs. Halston had looked at me strangely.

"She used to open the windows."

The words replayed.

A slow, creeping unease settled deep in my stomach.

I hadn't imagined the gown. I could still feel the silk against my fingertips. I could still smell that faint floral trace in the air.

So then why did it feel like something I wasn't meant to see?

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, the college photograph still resting beside me. The house had gone quiet hours ago. Too quiet. The kind of silence that hums faintly in your ears if you listen long enough. Every small sound felt amplified: the distant ticking of a clock, the faint rustle of leaves brushing against the window, and the old wood settling somewhere deep within the walls.

I turned to my side and then to the other.

Sleep would not come.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the white gown swaying in the cupboard. I could still feel the silk beneath my fingertips. Still smell that faint floral scent clinging to it.

I sat up abruptly.

Maybe I was overthinking. Maybe this house was simply playing tricks on me.

I slipped out of bed and stepped into the hallway. The floor was colder now, the air heavier, as though the night had thickened it. The corridor was dim, lit only by a small lamp near the staircase, casting long, distorted shadows along the walls.

I walked quietly to Margaret's room. Her door was slightly ajar.

I pushed it gently, careful not to let it creak.

Margaret was asleep. Peacefully. Her breathing was slow and even, her hands folded neatly over the blanket. The bedside lamp was turned off; only pale moonlight filtered through her curtains, illuminating her face softly. She looked harmless. Almost fragile.

I stood there for a moment longer than necessary, watching the steady rise and fall of her chest.

She couldn't be hiding anything tonight.

Could she?

I stepped back into the hallway and walked toward the other rooms. One by one, I opened the doors slowly. The guest room was empty. The study was untouched. The storage room, still faintly smelling of old paper and dust.

No one.

No movement.

No evidence of another presence.

I exhaled, embarrassed at myself.

See? I thought. You're letting your mind run.

I walked back toward my room, the hallway seeming longer now than it had minutes ago. My pulse had begun to settle. I even let out a small, self-conscious laugh.

You're being dramatic.

I pushed my bedroom door open and froze.

She was standing by the window.

A woman in white.

The gown.

Her back was turned to me, the fabric falling exactly the way it had in the cupboard. The moonlight poured over her, making the silk glow faintly against the darkness of the room. One hand rested lightly against the curtain, as if she had just pulled it aside.

She was looking outside.

Watching the street.

The breeze from the open window moved her hair slightly, slow, deliberate strands shifting against her back. I could hear my heartbeat again, loud and violent in my ears. My mouth went dry.

For a second, I couldn't breathe.

She did not turn or move.

The room smelled faintly floral again.

I wanted to speak and ask who she was, to demand an explanation, but my voice would not come, and the most terrifying part: she looked exactly my height.

My breath caught somewhere between my chest and my throat. For a second, my body refused to move. The woman did not turn. She remained by the window, still as a figure carved from moonlight, the white fabric glowing faintly against the darkness of the room.

Something primal took over.

I stepped back abruptly, my heel hitting the hallway floor with a dull thud. My hand flew to the door, and I pulled it shut with more force than I intended. The wood met the frame with a sharp click that echoed down the corridor.

Silence.

My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. I pressed my back against the closed door, palms flat against the cool surface, trying to steady my breathing. The air felt thin, my lungs struggling to pull enough of it in. I could still see her in my mind, the way she stood, the way the fabric fell, the way she didn't turn.

This isn't real, I told myself.

You're tired. You're imagining things.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to move. My fingers trembled as they wrapped around the doorknob. For a brief second, I hesitated.

Then I opened the door again, and the room was empty. The curtains swayed gently in the night breeze. Moonlight pooled quietly on the floor. The bed was untouched. The college photograph still rested where I had left it.

No one stood by the window, and there was no white figure.

No movement.

Only silence.

A wave of dizziness washed over me. I stepped inside slowly, scanning every corner of the room as if she might be hiding in plain sight. My skin prickled.

I turned immediately toward the cupboard.

Jake's cupboard.

I walked to it on unsteady legs and pulled the door open.

The white gown was still there.

Hanging exactly as it had been before.

Perfectly pressed. Sleeves falling smoothly. The faint floral scent drifted toward me again, subtle but unmistakable.

I reached out and grabbed the fabric this time, almost roughly, grounding myself in its texture. It was real. Solid. Cool beneath my fingers.

If the gown were here...

Then who had been standing at the window?

My reflection stared back at me faintly from the dark glass of the pane across the room.

For a brief, horrifying second, I wondered if it had been me.

I don't remember falling asleep.

At some point, exhaustion must have overtaken fear, because when I opened my eyes, pale morning light was spilling across the room. For a brief second, everything felt normal. The bed beneath me was warm. The curtains moved gently in the early breeze. Birds chirped somewhere outside, distant and ordinary.

The night felt almost imagined.

I sat up slowly, my eyes moving toward the cupboard.

The gown was still there.

Exactly where it had been.

Folded light rested on the silk, making it look softer in daylight, less threatening, almost innocent.

Maybe it was innocent.

I stood and walked to the cupboard and this time took the gown down completely. The fabric slipped through my fingers like water. In the morning light, I could see the fine detailing near the neckline, delicate embroidery carefully stitched. It was beautiful, and it did not belong in that house.

I carried it downstairs.

Margaret was in the front yard, watering the plants. The sun had just risen high enough to warm the stone pathway, and droplets of water clung to the leaves, sparkling briefly before falling into the soil. She stood in her pale morning gown, calm and composed, as if nothing in the world had ever been out of place.

“Good morning, dear,” she said without turning. “You’re up early.”

I stepped closer, the gravel crunching faintly beneath my feet.

“Good morning,” I replied, my voice steadier than I felt.

She turned then, smiling, and her eyes dropped to the white fabric in my hands.

A pause.

Small and controlled.

“This was in Jake’s cupboard,” I said carefully. “I found it last night.”

Margaret looked at the gown, then back at me. Her expression did not change immediately. She reached out and touched the fabric lightly between her fingers, rubbing it as though testing its quality.

“Oh,” she said softly. “That.”

That.

My heartbeat quickened.

“Yes,” I continued. “Why is it there?”

She let out a faint, almost amused breath and took the gown fully from my hands. “You frightened yourself over this?” she asked gently. “It’s old, Adelaide. It belonged to a family friend. She stayed with us briefly some time ago. I must have kept it there by mistake.”

A family friend.

Stayed here.

Briefly.

Her tone was casual. Dismissive. As if I had overreacted.

“Who?” I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

Margaret adjusted the fabric over her arm and looked back toward the plants. “You don’t know her. She moved away.”

Moved away.

The answer was too neat.

“She used that room?” I asked.

Margaret smiled faintly. “You’re reading too much into small things, dear. It’s just a dress.”

The water from the hose continued to spill over the plants, steady and rhythmic. Birds fluttered from one branch to another. The town looked peaceful in the morning light, and yet something inside me felt quietly rearranged.

She hadn’t been surprised or confused.

She had been prepared.

Margaret folded the gown neatly over her arm, smoothing the fabric with slow, deliberate strokes. “There,” she said lightly. “Now you have nothing to worry about.”

Her tone was gentle, almost indulgent, as if soothing a child who had mistaken shadows for something real.

The morning sun warmed my skin, and for a brief moment, I felt foolish. Maybe I had let my imagination spiral. The gown was off me now, no longer hanging in Jake’s cupboard, no longer breathing in the corner of my mind. It was just fabric. Just a misplaced dress.

"Yes," I said quietly. "I suppose I did overthink."

Margaret smiled in a way that was difficult to read. "It happens," she replied. "You haven't been sleeping properly."

The words lingered longer than they should have.

We decided to step out for breakfast at the small café near the corner. The town was fully awake now, shop shutters open, bicycles passing by, the faint smell of freshly baked bread drifting through the air. The sky was clear, pale blue, and deceptively peaceful.

As we walked past the house opposite, Mrs. Halston was standing near her gate, carefully trimming a small lavender bush. She looked up the moment she saw us.

Her hands stopped moving.

For a long moment, she simply stared at me.

Then, slowly, her eyes drifted past me to the upstairs window of the house.

"You never did sleep much," she murmured.

I frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

She blinked, as though waking from a dream.

A faint crease formed between her brows.

"Oh..."

A small, embarrassed smile touched her lips.

"I beg your pardon."

Margaret chuckled softly beside me.

"Lost in your memories again?"

Mrs. Halston lowered her eyes for a moment.

"It happens more often than I'd like these days."

She looked back at me, studying my face.

"For just a second..."

Her voice grew quieter.

"I thought..."

She stopped herself.

Thought what?

The words hung between us.

Mrs. Halston shook her head gently.

"No."

"I'm being foolish. I'm sorry, dear. I mistook you for someone I knew a very long time ago."

There was something deeply sad about the way she said it.

Not frightened. Not confused. Just... sad.

Margaret slipped her arm through mine.

"Come along," she said lightly. "The past has a funny habit of visiting people when they least expect it."

Mrs. Halston gave a faint nod.

"It certainly does."

We continued walking. I couldn't help glancing back over my shoulder. Mrs. Halston hadn't moved. She was still standing by her gate and watching the upstairs window.

Not me.

The window.

As though, for the briefest moment, she'd forgotten where she was... and remembered somewhere else instead.

A strange uneasiness settled inside me. Who had she seen when she looked at me?

And why did it feel as though everyone in this town knew a story I hadn't been told?

Jake called just as we were finishing breakfast. The café was small and sunlit, the clinking of cutlery and low conversations filling the air. Margaret insisted I answer on speaker. “So he doesn’t think I’ve kidnapped you,” she joked lightly.

I forced a smile and picked up.

“Hey,” Jake’s voice came through, warm but distracted. “How’s everything?”

Before I could answer, Margaret leaned closer to the phone. “Your wife gave herself quite a fright last night,” she said, laughing softly. “Over an old gown in your cupboard.”

There it was. Out in the open.

I stiffened. “It wasn’t just,” I began, but she continued.

“She thought someone was in the house,” Margaret added, her tone amused, affectionate almost. “Poor thing. She barely slept.”

There was a pause on the line.

Jake exhaled faintly. “Adelaide...” he said, and I recognized that tone immediately. The careful one. The one he used when he thought I was being unreasonable. “It was just a dress.”

“I saw someone,” I said quietly, suddenly aware of how fragile my voice sounded in the bright café.

“You were tired,” he replied. “You’ve been overthinking a lot lately.”

My stomach tightened.

“I wasn’t dreaming,” I insisted, lowering my voice.

“Are you sleeping properly?” he asked. Not accusatory. Not angry. Just measured. “You’ve sounded... off the past few days.”

Off.

Margaret sipped her tea calmly beside me.

“I’m fine,” I said, but the confidence I wanted wasn’t there.

Jake sighed softly. “Maybe you’re just stressed. You did resign from your job recently. That’s a big change. Sometimes when you’re idle, your mind fills in gaps.”

Idle.

The word stung more than it should have.

“And this whole gown thing...” he continued gently. “It sounds like you built a story around it.”

I felt heat rise to my face. “I didn’t build a story.”

There was another pause.

“Do we need to talk to someone?” he asked, careful, almost clinical. “Maybe a shrink? Just to make sure you’re not overwhelmed. It’s nothing serious. Just... precaution.”

Precaution.

Margaret’s fingers tapped lightly against her cup, a small, rhythmic sound.

“You think I’m imagining things?” I asked.

“No,” he replied quickly. “I think you’re tired, and when you’re tired, the mind plays tricks. That’s all.”

That’s all.

The café suddenly felt too bright, too loud. Conversations blurred into a distant hum. I became acutely aware of Margaret watching me from the corner of her eye.

“I’m fine,” I repeated, but the words felt hollow now.

Jake’s voice softened again. “Just rest. Don’t overthink and please don’t scare yourself over nothing.”

Over nothing.

We ended the call shortly after.

Margaret reached across the table and squeezed my hand gently. “He worries about you,” she said sweetly. “We both do.”

I withdrew my hand slowly.

For the first time, the doubt didn’t feel like it was coming from outside.

It felt like it was growing inside me.

The whole day I spent with Margaret revolved around her son. I have always loved listening to stories about Jake as a child, the way he refused to eat vegetables unless they were cut into perfect squares, the way he cried the first time he lost a debate in school, and the way he insisted on sleeping with the lights on until he was twelve. I loved those details. They made him softer. More human.

What I didn’t love was the way she compared.

“I always made sure he never slept upset,” she said while slicing vegetables, not looking at me. “Men carry things silently. You have to notice before they speak.”

I nodded.

“I used to iron his shirts myself,” she added. “Even in college. He likes things done properly.”

Done properly.

There was always something in the way she said it. Not direct. Not accusatory. Just slightly tilted, like a painting that wasn’t hung straight. A suggestion that I was missing something, that I wasn’t attentive enough. That she had done it better.

By lunch, I was exhausted from smiling.

We ate quietly. The dining table was set for more than two people again: four plates, four glasses, and folded napkins placed carefully as though guests were expected. I had stopped asking why she always did that. The house smelled of cumin and fried onions, thick and warm.

After lunch, I lay down for a nap. The guest room felt heavier in the afternoon light. The curtains filtered the sun into a dull gold haze. I slept, but not deeply.

Tea was at five. Snacks arranged neatly on porcelain plates. We gossiped about the city, about my friends, and about parties we had hosted and ones we were planning. Margaret laughed easily at those stories, but sometimes she'd pause and say things like, "City life changes people," in a tone I couldn't quite read.

Dinner, again, was made for more than two. More food. I don't know why she cooked so much. It felt like she was feeding ghosts.

I helped her with the dishes. The water was warm against my hands. She smiled at me when I kissed her goodnight.

It was practiced. I must say, fake.

In my room, I called Jake. I told him I'd leave early in the morning. I'd probably reach by afternoon.

"I'll be late tomorrow," he said casually. "Big day at work."

Something in me sank. I wished, stupidly, that he would say he'd come home early. That he'd wait for me and that he'd want to be there when I arrived.

"Okay," I replied.

We hung up.

I fell asleep eventually.

Sometime in the night, I woke to a sound, a long, thin creak. The window.

The curtains were moving. Cold air brushed against my face.

I clearly remembered closing the window before sleeping. I always check twice.

I sat up slowly. The latch hung loose.

Who opened it? My heart began to thud, slow and heavy.

Was it her?

I got up and walked straight to Jake's cupboard. My hands trembled slightly as I opened it. No gown. It was gone. The space where it had once hung looked emptier than the rest of the wardrobe.

A chill ran down my spine, drawn by something I didn't understand. I moved toward the window and looked down into the garden.

Mrs. Halston was standing near the hedge.

Looking up.

Her face was pale in the dim light, her expression confused, almost searching.

Our eyes nearly met.

I stepped back immediately and shut the window with more force than necessary. I locked it this time. Twice.

I told myself I was overreacting. I went back to bed and forced my eyes closed.

Morning came too quickly.

I packed my bags, avoiding the cupboard entirely. Margaret hugged me at the door. She looked pleased. Calm. As I drove out of the driveway, I saw Mrs. Halston again, standing by her gate. She gestured for me to lower my window.

Mrs. Halston looked at me for a long moment. There was something unsettling about the way she stared. Not suspicion but recognition or perhaps... memory.

"You really do remind me of someone," she said quietly.

I offered a polite smile.

"Someone from around here?"

She nodded absentmindedly.

"For a moment..."

Her eyes drifted toward the old house behind me.

"...I could've sworn..."

She stopped.

The sentence remained unfinished.

"I could've sworn what?" I asked.

Mrs. Halston blinked, almost as though she'd forgotten I was standing there.

A faint, embarrassed smile crossed her face.

"Oh."

She shook her head gently.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I let an old memory get the better of me."

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"I should get going," I said at last.

"Of course, dear."

As I turned toward my car, I could still feel her watching me.

Not with fear or with curiosity but with sadness. I glanced back once before getting into the car. Mrs. Halston was no longer looking at me. She was looking at the upstairs window of the house. As though, for the briefest moment... She'd forgotten what year it was. I drove away without looking back again. *Poor woman*, I thought.

Maybe getting older really does blur the line between memory and the present.

But as the house disappeared in my rearview mirror, another thought quietly found its way in. If Mrs. Halston had only been remembering someone...

Why did it feel as though Margaret had been trying so hard to make sure I never asked who that someone was?

As the house disappeared in my rearview mirror, relief slowly spread through me. I was going back to the city. Back to familiarity, back to my husband.

Finally, I would feel normal again.

I turned the music up louder than I normally would. My favorite song filled the car, the bass vibrating faintly through the steering wheel, the lyrics wrapping around me like something familiar, something safe. I sang along at first, a little off-key, my fingers tapping lightly against the leather. The road stretched long and

endless ahead of me, the town shrinking slowly in the rearview mirror.

I refused to think about it, the gown, the window, or Mrs. Halston's question. Instead, I focused on practical things. What would Jake like for dinner? Something warm. Something indulgent. Something that said *I missed you* without me having to say it out loud. Steak, maybe. Yes. Steak sounded perfect. With garlic butter, mashed potatoes, and a glass of red wine. I could already picture it: the kitchen lights dimmed, soft music playing, and the two of us laughing over nothing. The thought steadied me.

The air changed as I approached the outskirts of the city. Buildings rose slowly from the horizon: glass, concrete, and movement. Traffic thickened. Honking. Bikers weaving through lanes. Billboards looming overhead. Relief washed over me so suddenly it almost made me dizzy. This was home. The town already felt distant, blurred, like something I had imagined. Whatever had happened there belonged there. Not here.

I stopped at the grocery store on the way in. The automatic doors slid open with a familiar hum, and the smell of fresh bread mixed with sharp cleaning products grounded me instantly. I picked up two thick cuts of steak, rosemary, garlic, cream, potatoes, wine... even a small dessert. Something sweet. Something unnecessary. If I made the night perfect, everything would fall back into place.

By the time I reached home, my chest felt lighter. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, and for a second, I froze. A sound, not voices, but chopping. Sharp. Rhythmic. I stepped in slowly, and then I saw him.

Jake stood in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, focused on slicing vegetables. Sunlight streamed through the windows, catching in his hair. He looked up and smiled. "You're early," he said. I didn't think. I dropped the grocery bags and ran to him, wrapping my arms around his waist, pressing my face into his chest. He

smelled like soap and something warm, something undeniably him. His arms came around me instinctively, holding me tighter than usual. For the first time in two days, my body relaxed. “You’re here,” I murmured. “Of course I’m here,” he laughed softly.

He pulled back and handed me a bouquet from the counter. Red roses. Deep crimson. My favorite. “I thought I’d surprise you.” My throat tightened. I hadn’t realized how much I needed something like this, something gentle, something intentional. “They’re beautiful,” I whispered.

I changed quickly into a loose T-shirt and soft shorts, the fabric falling comfortably against my skin. I trimmed the stems carefully and placed the roses in a vase near the window, where the light caught them just right. Jake moved around the kitchen with ease, stirring something on the stove. “What are you making?” I asked. “Just lunch,” he said. “Thought you’d be tired from the drive.”

Tired. I smiled faintly. The city hummed outside the windows: distant traffic, faint sirens, life moving exactly as it should. Everything felt normal again. Safe. I leaned against the counter, watching him, trying to let the memory of the town dissolve completely, and for a moment, it almost did.

The kitchen smelled warm, with butter melting into the pan and garlic softening in the heat. The soft clatter of utensils and the low hum of the stove filled the quiet. For a moment, I almost forgot. Almost. My fingers traced the cool edge of the countertop. “Jake...” I said softly. “Hmm?” he replied, not looking up.

“It’s going to sound silly.” “That’s usually when it’s interesting,” he chuckled. I looked down at my hands. “There was... a gown in your cupboard. At your mom’s place.” The spoon in his hand paused, just for a second, before moving again. “A gown?” he repeated lightly.

“Yes. A white one.” I swallowed. “I thought it belonged to someone. But... I saw someone wearing it.”

Something shifted. Subtle, but I felt it. “You’re overthinking it,” he said, turning back to the stove. “Stress does that. Especially after a change like quitting your job.” “Stress?” I repeated. He shrugged casually. “Yeah. It builds up. You don’t always realize it.”

My fingers curled slightly against the counter. “And seeing things... imagining things... it happens,” he added. “Maybe we should talk to someone. Just to be safe.” I blinked. “Talk to someone?” “Yeah,” he said calmly. “A therapist. A shrink, maybe.”

“Shrink?” I cut in.

He finally turned to look at me. “Seriously?” I let out a small, disbelieving laugh. “You think I need a shrink?” “I didn’t say that.” “You just did.” My chest tightened. “I’m not imagining things, Jake.”

“I’m not saying you are,” he said, hands lifting slightly. “I’m saying you might be overwhelmed.”

“I’m not under stress,” I insisted. “And I know what I saw.”

Silence fell between us, broken only by the faint sizzle of the pan. Jake sighed, soft, patient, and dismissive. “Just think about it,” he said. “You were alone, you weren’t sleeping properly... your mind filled in the gaps.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Don’t do that.” “Do what?” “Make it sound like I’m the problem.”

Something in his expression changed. Not anger. Not concerned. Something measured.

“I’m trying to help you,” he said.

“By not believing me?” My voice faltered. “Why can’t you just listen to me... and believe me?”

He didn't answer. He just turned back to the stove and lowered the flame. "We'll talk about this later."

That hurt more than anything else.

I stood there, the warmth of the kitchen suddenly feeling suffocating, my eyes drifting to the vase of red roses by the window. They looked perfect. Too perfect, and for the first time since coming home, I didn't feel as safe as I thought I would.

The argument didn't continue. It didn't need to. Jake finished cooking as if nothing had happened. Plates were set, food was served, and small conversations were forced in between. I responded when needed and nodded when expected. The normalcy felt practiced, like we were both stepping around something fragile lying between us.

By the time night settled in, the tension had quieted, not disappeared, just softened into something unspoken. I lay in bed later that night, staring at the ceiling, the faint glow of the city slipping through the curtains. Jake slept beside me, his breathing slow and steady, one arm resting loosely across my waist.

I should have felt comforted.

Instead, my mind kept circling back.

The gown. The window. Mrs. Halston. Jake's voice: *You're overthinking.*

I turned slightly, trying to get comfortable, but a strange heaviness sat in my body. Not quite pain. Not quite fatigue. Just... off. My stomach twisted faintly, and I frowned.

Maybe it was the food. I hadn't eaten properly all day, or maybe I had eaten too much. Margaret's meals were always heavy.

I closed my eyes. Sleep came in fragments.

Morning felt heavier than usual. My head ached faintly, my body slow to respond as I pushed myself upright. The sunlight

streaming through the window felt too bright, almost sharp against my eyes.

Jake was already up, moving around the kitchen.

“Morning,” he called out.

“Hmm,” I replied, my voice still thick with sleep.

I walked toward the kitchen, but the moment the smell hit me, coffee, toast, something frying, my stomach lurched unexpectedly. I stopped.

“You okay?” he asked, glancing at me.

“Yeah,” I said quickly, swallowing the discomfort. “Just... didn’t sleep well.”

He watched me for a second longer than usual.

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately,” he said.

I forced a small smile. “I’m fine.”

But as I sat down, pressing my fingers lightly against my temple, a quiet thought slipped in, small, almost dismissible.

Something wasn’t right.

The rest of the morning passed slowly. I tried to eat. I really did. I sat at the table, fork in hand, staring at the plate in front of me. The eggs had gone slightly cold, the toast losing its crispness. The smell still lingered, buttery and heavy, and every time I brought the fork closer to my mouth, my stomach tightened again.

I set it down.

“I’m not that hungry,” I said, pushing the plate away slightly.

Jake didn’t respond immediately.

“You barely ate yesterday too,” he said finally, not looking up from his phone.

“I told you, I just didn’t feel like it.”

“Hmm.”

That sound again. Neutral, but not really.

I stood up and rinsed my plate under running water, the cold slipping over my fingers, grounding me for a brief second.

“You should take care of yourself,” he added. “At least eat properly.”

Something about the way he said it made it feel less like concern and more like observation.

“I am,” I replied, a little too quickly.

He didn’t push further.

That was worse.

When he left for work, the house fell quiet again. Too quiet. The kind of silence that settles into the walls and makes every small movement feel louder than it is. I moved around slowly, picking things up and putting them back down without really knowing why. The roses caught my eye again, still fresh, still perfect. I reached out and touched one of the petals lightly. Soft. Almost unreal.

Everything felt slightly out of place.

Even me.

I walked into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, my hands resting loosely in my lap, my gaze unfocused. For a while, I just sat there, listening to nothing in particular, the faint hum of the city outside, a car passing, and a distant horn, and then it came to me.

A small thought.

So small I almost let it pass.

When was the last time...?

I frowned, trying to pull the memory forward, but it felt blurred, like something just out of reach. Days folded into each other. The trip. The sleepless nights. The arguments. Everything was overlapping until I couldn't separate one from the other.

No.

That didn't feel right.

I stood up abruptly and walked toward the bathroom, my pulse quickening slightly for no reason I could clearly explain.

"No," I murmured under my breath. "It's just stress."

It had to be.

That's what Jake said.

Stress does that.

I leaned against the sink, gripping its edge lightly, staring at my reflection. I looked the same. Maybe a little tired. Maybe a little pale.

Normal.

I exhaled slowly, forcing my shoulders to relax, but the thought didn't leave.

It stayed. Quiet. Waiting.

The thought didn't leave.

It stayed with me through the day, quiet but persistent, slipping in between everything I tried to focus on. I told myself I was overthinking. That my body was just reacting to the past few days, the travel, the lack of sleep, and the unease I couldn't quite explain.

I didn't bring it up again. Not to Jake. Not to anyone.

That evening felt easier. Lighter. Almost as if the tension from earlier had dissolved on its own. Jake came home earlier than I

expected, carrying takeout and that same easy smile, as though nothing had happened between us.

“Truce?” he asked casually, placing the bags on the counter.

I smiled before I could stop myself. “Truce.”

We didn’t talk about the argument. Not directly. Instead, we moved around it, laughing at small things, sharing food from the same plate, and brushing past each other in the kitchen like we always used to.

At some point, he reached for my hand without thinking, his fingers intertwining with mine naturally, like they had done a thousand times before, and I let myself fall back into it.

That version of us, the one that felt effortless.

That night, we lay close, his arm wrapped around me, his fingers tracing absent patterns against my skin. Familiar. Comforting. I closed my eyes and leaned into him, letting the warmth settle into my bones.

For a while, everything felt right again.

The next day passed quietly.

Then the next.

The thought returned each time, a little sharper now.

When was the last time?

I tried to count again. Tried to be certain, but the timeline refused to settle neatly in my head. It slipped every time I reached for it.

By the second day, I couldn’t ignore it anymore.

I found myself standing outside a pharmacy, staring at the glass door longer than necessary. People walked past me, going in and out without hesitation, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Maybe it was.

I stepped inside.

The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and something medicinally clean. Shelves lined with products I didn't really see. My eyes moved quickly, almost avoiding what I was looking for, until I finally found it.

I picked up the test. It felt too light in my hand. I didn't think about it.

I paid. Left. Came home.

The house was quiet again. I placed the small box on the bathroom counter and just... stood there for a moment, staring at it.

I wasn't scared. Not exactly.

Just... still, as if everything were waiting.

I didn't open it immediately. The box sat on the counter, small and ordinary, its presence far heavier than it should have been. The bathroom was quiet, the faint hum of the exhaust fan the only sound filling the space. Light from the window fell softly across the sink, too bright for how I felt.

I just stood there staring at it as if opening it would change something I wasn't ready to face yet.

My fingers finally moved, slow and hesitant, peeling back the cardboard. The sound felt louder than it should have, a soft tear in an otherwise still room. Inside, everything was neatly packed. Clinical. Precise.

Unemotional.

I followed the instructions without really thinking. Muscle memory, almost. My hands felt distant from me, like they belonged to someone else. The cold surface of the sink pressed against my fingertips as I steadied myself, and then it was done. I placed it down carefully. Too carefully. Like it might break.

The waiting was the worst part. Seconds stretched, thick and slow, pressing against my chest. I leaned back against the wall,

the tiles cold through the thin fabric of my shirt. My heart beat louder now, steady but heavy, each thud echoing in the silence.

I didn't look at it.

Not yet. Instead, my eyes drifted to my reflection in the mirror. I looked the same. Maybe a little pale, a little tired. Nothing had changed, but something was changing inside me.

A thought slipped in, uninvited.

What if this is real? Another followed, quieter but sharper.

What if I'm not ready? My throat tightened.

And then, another one. What if they're right?

I closed my eyes briefly, exhaling slowly, trying to steady the sudden rush of thoughts colliding all at once.

Pregnancy. Stress. Imagination. Reality.

Everything blurred together, and finally, I pushed myself off the wall.

My steps felt slow as I moved toward the sink. The air felt heavier now, harder to breathe through. I rested my hand lightly against the counter and looked down.

Two lines. Clear and unmistakable.

For a moment, I felt nothing.

No excitement, no fear. Just... silence as if my mind had emptied itself completely. I stared at it longer than necessary, willing it to change, to blur, to become something uncertain, but it didn't. It stayed.

Steady. Definitely real.

My fingers moved instinctively, hovering over my stomach, not quite touching it. The gesture felt unfamiliar, foreign, like I was reaching toward something I didn't fully understand yet.

There was something inside me, something growing.

A life.

The thought should have felt overwhelming.

Instead, it felt distant, like it belonged to someone else.

I sank down slowly onto the closed toilet lid, my body suddenly heavier than before. The cold air brushed against my skin, but I barely registered it.

Jake's voice echoed faintly in my head.

You're overthinking. Stress does that. Your mind fills in the gaps.

I looked back at the test again. Two lines.

Clear and certain. This wasn't in my head, and this was real, and yet for the first time, I didn't know if I trusted what I was seeing.

I didn't tell him that day or the next.

The test stayed where I had left it, tucked away in the drawer, hidden but not forgotten. I found myself opening it more than once, just to look at it again, as if it might have changed. As if certainty could somehow undo itself if I stared long enough, but it didn't.

Two lines. Always two lines.

Jake moved through the days like nothing had shifted. Work, calls, small conversations, and the usual rhythm of our lives continuing untouched. He kissed me before leaving, asked if I had eaten, and reminded me to rest.

Normal.

Everything felt normal except me.

I thought about telling him constantly. In the kitchen, while watching him make coffee. In the bedroom, when he lay beside me, scrolling through his phone. Even in the quiet moments when he held me, absentmindedly tracing circles on my arm.

I would open my mouth and then close it again.

How do you say something like that?

How do you place something so large into a moment so ordinary?

Sometimes, I imagined his reaction: surprise, disbelief, and happiness. Other times, something else crept in. Something quieter. Something harder to name.

What if he didn't believe me?

The thought unsettled me more than it should have.

I found myself overthinking everything. The timing. The symptoms. The test. My own memory.

Was it too early?

Was it accurate?

Was I... sure?

The questions didn't stop.

They multiplied, and by the third day, they had begun to spiral.

I sat on the edge of the bed, the test in my hand again, staring at it until my eyes blurred. My thoughts moved faster now, overlapping and colliding into each other.

Pregnant.

Am I ready? Is this real? What if something's wrong? What if I'm wrong?

Jake's voice slipped in again, uninvited.

You're overthinking. Stress does that.

I pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to quiet it, but it only grew louder. I needed to say it.

I couldn't carry it alone anymore.

That evening, when Jake came home, I felt it immediately, the same warmth, the same ease he brought with him. He smiled when he saw me, dropped his keys on the counter, and loosened his tie.

Normal.

“Hey,” he said, walking toward me.

“Hey,” I replied, my voice softer than I intended.

My heart had already started racing. Not fear. It was something heavier.

“Jake...” I began. He paused, noticing the shift in my tone.

“What is it?” For a second, I almost backed out, but I didn’t.

“I... I took a test,” I said, my fingers tightening slightly against each other. “A few days ago.”

His expression changed, not alarmed, just attentive.

“What kind of test?”

I swallowed.

“A pregnancy test.”

The words hung between us. For a fraction of a second, he just looked at me.

Then, “Wait... what?” he said, a small smile beginning to form.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

The silence broke. Jake's face lit up in a way I hadn't seen in a long time. Pure. Immediate.

"Are you serious?" he laughed, stepping closer. "Adelaide"

"I took it twice," I added quickly, my voice quieter now. "It's positive."

He didn't hesitate. He pulled me into him, arms wrapping tightly around me, lifting me slightly off the ground.

"That's amazing," he said, his voice filled with something bright, something certain. "That's, that's incredible."

I stood there in his arms, feeling his excitement, his warmth, and the way his entire body seemed to respond instantly to the news. He pulled back just enough to look at me, his hands still holding my face.

"We're going to have a baby," he said, almost in disbelief but smiling.

I nodded.

"Yes."

He laughed again, softer this time, pressing his forehead briefly against mine. "This is... this is perfect."

Perfect.

The word settled somewhere deep inside me.

I smiled. I did, but it felt... delayed like my body was catching up to something my mind hadn't fully reached yet.

Jake kissed me, quick and excited, already talking about plans and possibilities, telling his mom, doctor visits and everything moving forward, fast and certain, and I stood there, letting it happen, letting his joy fill the space, while somewhere beneath it, something in me remained quiet.

Still and watching.

That night, after the news settled between us and stopped feeling like something fragile we might break by speaking too loudly, Jake wouldn't stop smiling.

He moved around the kitchen with an energy I hadn't seen in him for a long time. He insisted on cooking dinner, though neither of us ate much. He opened the bottle of wine we had bought and then paused, laughing to himself when he remembered.

"Well," he lifted the glass with a grin, "more for me."

I laughed. Really laughed, which surprised even me.

For the first time in days, maybe weeks, the apartment felt warm in a way that reached me. Not just the rooms, but me.

Later, in bed, the sheets cool against our skin, the city lights slipping softly through the curtains, Jake rested his hand over my stomach as though something miraculous had already made itself known there.

"There's a little us in there," he whispered.

His voice held wonder, which made something in my chest ache. I placed my hand over his.

A strange tenderness moved through me, almost grief-like in its intensity, as though love and fear had somehow arrived together.

Could love become larger than this? Could a life begin this quietly?

I wanted to believe, yes.

In the dark he started talking about names. Ridiculous names, names I laughed at.

He spoke about schools, about whether the baby would have my eyes or his smile, whether it would inherit his stubbornness or my silence.

I laughed until tears came, and for a dangerous moment, I believed everything was going to be beautiful. I fell asleep

listening to his voice. Sometime near dawn, I woke. The room was blue with early morning light.

Jake was sitting at the edge of the bed. Still. Awake. Just staring.

For a second, I watched him without moving. His back was tense. His silhouette is almost unfamiliar.

“Jake?” I whispered.

He startled, turning too quickly.

“You okay?”

He smiled.

Too quickly.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

His voice sounded normal.

Then he leaned over and placed his hand on my stomach again; only this time, something felt different.

Not tender. Not absent-minded. Possessive.

The touch lingered a moment too long.

A strange chill moved through me before I could explain why.

Then he lay back down as if nothing had happened, pulling me against him, but sleep didn’t come easily after that.

I stayed awake listening to his breathing, feeling his arm around me, wondering why such a small moment had unsettled me.

By morning, I nearly convinced myself I had imagined it. Nearly.

Jake couldn’t stop smiling the next morning.

He stood in the kitchen making coffee barefoot, his hair still messy from sleep, looking younger and happier somehow. Sunlight spilled through the windows behind him, catching against the steam rising from the mugs. The apartment smelled

warm, like coffee and toasted bread, and the faint trace of his cologne lingered in the air.

I sat at the counter watching him quietly. Every few minutes he looked over at me and smiled again, like he still couldn't believe it.

It should have made me feel lighter.

Maybe it did.

"You know my mom's going to lose her mind when she hears this," he laughed softly.

I smiled faintly into my cup. "Hopefully in a good way."

"In the best way."

There was something so genuine in his excitement that I hated myself for the tiny knot forming in my stomach. Before I could think too much about it, he picked up his phone.

"Let's tell her now."

"Right now?" I asked.

"Why not?"

The phone rang twice before Margaret answered.

"Jake?" Her voice sounded softer than usual, slightly breathless. "Everything okay?"

Jake looked at me as he smiled.

"More than okay."

A pause. Then,

"Oh?"

I watched his face brighten further.

"You're going to be a grandmother."

Silence.

Not long, but long enough for me to notice it.

Then Margaret let out the softest sound, almost a laugh, almost a gasp.

“Oh, sweetheart...”

Her voice cracked slightly, and suddenly she sounded emotional enough that my guard lowered a little.

“When did you find out?” she asked softly.

“A few days ago,” Jake replied.

“A few days?” she laughed gently. “And you waited this long to tell me?”

“We wanted to be sure.”

Margaret immediately began asking questions, but gently this time. Was I eating properly? Sleeping enough? Had I been feeling sick?

Jake answered most of them before I could.

I didn’t think much of it at first because it felt normal and almost comforting.

Then Margaret asked to speak to me.

Jake handed me the phone immediately.

“Adelaide?” Her voice softened even further. “How are you feeling, dear?”

“I’m okay,” I replied quietly.

“You must feel overwhelmed.”

Something about the way she said it made my chest tighten unexpectedly.

Not because it sounded cruel but because it sounded understanding.

“I remember when I was pregnant with Jake,” she continued softly. “Your body stops feeling like your own for a while. It can make you emotional.”

I stared down at the counter silently. The coffee between my hands had already begun cooling.

“You need people around you right now,” she said gently. “You shouldn’t be alone too much.”

I laughed lightly. “I’m not alone.”

“I know,” she replied quickly. “I just mean... Jake works so much.”

Jake looked up briefly at that, and for the first time, I noticed guilt move across his face, small but there.

“You should come stay here for a little while,” Margaret continued carefully. “Not forever, just until you feel stronger.”

I opened my mouth to refuse immediately, but somehow the refusal didn’t come out as easily as I expected, because nothing about the way she said it sounded unreasonable.

That was the unsettling part.

Not force or control, but care, soft enough to make me question why I resisted it at all.

The decision happened so quietly that later, I couldn’t even remember when I had truly agreed to it.

Maybe it was the way Jake kept looking at me with concern every time I said I felt tired. Maybe it was Margaret calling every evening to ask if I had eaten properly, or maybe it was simply exhaustion. Either way, three days later, I found myself packing a suitcase again.

“You’ll only stay for a little while,” Jake said softly from the doorway, watching me fold clothes into the suitcase. A little while.

The phrase should have comforted me. Instead, something about it made me pause.

I folded another sweater carefully and placed it on top of the others.

The apartment felt strangely still around me. Open drawers. Half-empty shelves. The faint scent of my perfume lingering near the dressing table. It didn't feel like I was preparing for a short visit, but it felt like I was leaving something behind.

Jake walked over and wrapped his arms around my waist from behind.

"This is a good thing," he murmured against my hair.

I leaned back into him.

"Mom will take care of you better than I can right now."

I laughed softly.

"You make it sound like I'm sick."

He immediately pulled back enough to look at me.

"You know that's not what I mean."

I nodded. Of course I knew, but something about the way everyone had started speaking to me lately felt different.

Softer, as though I had become fragile overnight.

The morning I left, rain tapped gently against the apartment windows. The city looked washed clean, streets gleaming beneath grey skies, traffic lights reflecting in puddles scattered across the road. For the first time in years, I didn't want to leave it.

This city had been home for so long, and it held every version of me.

The shy girl who fell in love. The ambitious woman building a career. The wife and, now, the mother.

The thought still felt unfamiliar.

Jake carried my suitcase down for me despite my protests.

“You know I can still lift things, right?” I teased.

“Not taking any chances.”

His hand rested briefly against my stomach as he said it.

The gesture should have felt sweet.

Maybe it did, or maybe I was just thinking too much again.

Before I left, he kissed my forehead and held me for a moment longer than usual.

“Call me when you get there.”

“I always do.”

“Promise?”

I smiled.

“Promise.”

The drive felt different this time.

Quieter.

I left the radio off for a while and listened instead to the steady rhythm of rain against the windshield. The hum of the engine filled the silence as fields slowly replaced buildings and highways narrowed into familiar roads.

My hand drifted unconsciously toward my stomach whenever I stopped at traffic lights.

Still nothing.

No bump or visible change.

Just an idea.

A possibility. A life.

I still couldn't quite wrap my mind around it.

At some point the city disappeared completely behind me. Concrete gave way to open land. Tall buildings became rolling fields. The air itself seemed different somehow. Cleaner and lonelier, and with every mile that brought me closer to the town, a familiar unease began stirring quietly beneath my ribs.

I told myself it was because of Margaret, because of the strange visit, and because of Mrs. Halston and the gown.

Anything but the truth I didn't want to admit. That part of me simply didn't want to go back.

By the time I reached the town, evening had begun settling over everything.

The sky was painted in deep shades of purple and blue, and streetlights flickered awake one by one, casting pale pools of light onto quiet roads.

The town looked exactly the same and yet somehow different, as if it remembered me.

Margaret's house appeared at the end of the street, warm light glowing through the windows.

Before I had even switched off the engine, the front door opened and Margaret stepped outside. A smile immediately spread across her face when she saw me. She walked toward the car before I had even gathered my things.

"There you are," she said warmly.

Her arms wrapped around me before I could react.

For a brief moment, I allowed myself to relax into the embrace, and then she pulled back, and her eyes immediately dropped straight to my stomach only for a second.

A second so brief most people wouldn't have noticed, but I did, and then she smiled again.

Wider this time, and something about it made a chill move quietly down my spine.

The first few days passed more peacefully than I expected, almost disappointingly so.

After everything that had happened during my last visit, I had prepared myself for tension. For criticism and for Margaret hovering over my shoulder and reminding me that nobody could take care of Jake the way she could.

Instead, she was kind, almost painfully kind.

Every morning, I woke to the smell of breakfast drifting upstairs. Fresh bread, coffee, cinnamon, and butter melting somewhere in the kitchen.

By the time I came downstairs, the dining table would already be set.

Not just set, but covered.

Plates of fruit. Eggs. Toast. Tea. Juice.

Enough food to feed an entire family.

“Margaret,” I laughed one morning, staring at the table. “Are we expecting guests?”

She smiled as she poured tea into my cup.

“No, dear.”

Her eyes dropped briefly to my stomach.

“I’m feeding my grandchild.”

I smiled politely. The comment was harmless, sweet, even.

Yet something about it lingered with me long after breakfast was over.

The baby. Everything seemed to circle back to the baby, not me.
The baby.

Was the baby getting enough nutrition? Was the baby growing properly? Was the baby healthy?

The first few times, I barely noticed it, but then I started paying attention, and once I did, I couldn't stop noticing.

One afternoon, Margaret came home carrying several shopping bags; her face was glowing with excitement.

"Come see what I found," she said.

She unpacked everything carefully onto the sofa.

Tiny socks, hats, and soft blankets; little baby clothes folded neatly inside tissue paper.

I stared at them.

The clothes looked impossibly small and fragile as though they belonged to a doll rather than a child.

"Don't you think this is a little early?" I asked carefully.

Margaret picked up one of the sweaters and smiled.

"It's never too early."

She folded it again with surprising tenderness. The conversation ended there, but the feeling stayed with me.

That night, after dinner, the house settled into its usual silence.

Margaret had gone to bed early. The grandfather clock downstairs ticked steadily through the darkness.

I couldn't sleep, not yet.

Maybe it was the unfamiliar bed or the pregnancy, or maybe it was the memory of that white gown. I found myself walking down the hallway toward Jake's old room. The room I was

staying in. The one where I thought I had seen the woman standing by the window.

Moonlight spilled through the curtains when I entered, washing everything in pale silver.

The room looked ordinary and still.

Silent.

Yet my eyes immediately drifted toward the cupboard.

My chest tightened.

Slowly, I walked over and opened it.

The hinges groaned softly. Inside were neatly hung shirts, old jackets, a few storage boxes, and nothing else.

No white gown. No trace that it had ever been there.

I stared for several moments.

Longer than necessary.

Maybe Margaret had moved it, or maybe she had thrown it away, or maybe, for a brief, uncomfortable moment, I wondered if Jake had been right. Maybe I really had imagined it.

The thought unsettled me more than the gown itself. I closed the cupboard quickly. The sound echoed faintly through the room. I turned away and let my eyes wander around the space.

Old books. Framed photographs. A few trophies from Jake's school days.

The usual things people kept from their childhood.

That's when something caught my attention.

A photograph, partially hidden behind a stack of books near the window.

Slowly, I picked it up. A thin layer of dust coated the frame. The photograph looked old, years old.

Jake couldn't have been older than twenty. He stood smiling at the camera.

Margaret stood beside him, one arm wrapped proudly around his shoulder, and next to them, a woman. Young. Beautiful. Smiling.

Someone I had never seen before. I studied her face carefully. Something about her felt strangely familiar.

Then my eyes drifted lower.

My breath caught. She was wearing white, not a wedding dress, but a long white dress. The kind that, in dim light, could easily be mistaken for a gown.

A chill slowly moved through me.

I looked toward the cupboard and then back at the photograph. The house suddenly felt very quiet. Too quiet. For the first time since arriving, a single question settled firmly in my mind.

Who was she, and why had nobody ever mentioned her?

I barely slept that night. The photograph sat on my bedside table long after I had switched off the lamp. Moonlight spilled across the frame, illuminating the smiling faces frozen inside it.

Jake.

Margaret.

And Emily—or at least that was what I had started calling her in my head.

The woman in white. The woman nobody had ever mentioned, who somehow felt connected to the gown.

Every time I closed my eyes, I found myself looking at her face again.

By morning, I had convinced myself I was being ridiculous because every family had old photographs; every family had

people who drifted away. There was probably a perfectly reasonable explanation.

The smell of pancakes greeted me before I even reached the kitchen.

Margaret was already standing at the stove, humming softly to herself as she flipped another pancake onto a plate.

"Good morning, dear," she smiled.

"Morning."

I sat down across from her and wrapped both hands around a mug of coffee. The warmth seeped into my fingers, and for a while, neither of us spoke.

The grandfather clock ticked steadily in the next room, and the radio played softly somewhere in the background.

Normal, everything felt painfully normal.

I studied Margaret over the rim of my cup. The neat hair, pearl earrings, and practiced smile. I searched her face for something.

A memory. A sadness, a secret. Anything.

Finally, I spoke.

"Who's Emily?"

Margaret's hand stopped, only for a second, a second so brief I almost missed it.

Then she continued spreading butter across a pancake.

"Emily?" she repeated.

"The woman in the photograph with the white gown."

The knife stopped again.

This time I knew I hadn't imagined it. A shadow crossed her face, small but unmistakable.

"Oh."

The word came out softer than I expected.

For the first time since I had known her, Margaret looked genuinely sad. She lowered her eyes to her plate.

"That's Freiah."

Silence settled between us. I waited.

When she didn't continue, I asked quietly,

"Who was she?"

Margaret stared into her tea for a long moment, then a faint smile appeared. A sad smile.

"An old family friend."

That was all, no explanation or a story. Nothing. The answer should have satisfied me. Instead, it left me with even more questions. The rest of breakfast passed quietly. Margaret spoke about groceries, the weather, and a neighbor's new dog. Freiah never came up again. It was as though the conversation had never happened.

Later that afternoon, I decided to go for a walk. The town was unusually quiet. A cool breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass and damp earth through the streets.

Most of the houses looked unchanged since my last visit. Neat gardens. White fences. Curtains fluttering behind windows.

I found myself walking without much direction until I reached Mrs. Halston's house. She was outside watering her roses. The moment she saw me, she smiled.

"Back again?" she asked.

"Looks like it."

We exchanged a few polite words before her eyes drifted toward the photograph tucked beneath my arm. I had brought it without

thinking. Perhaps because I hoped someone would finally tell me something.

Mrs. Halston's smile faded. Her gaze fixed on the photograph. For a long moment, she didn't move. Then, almost under her breath, she whispered,

"Oh..."

A chill moved through me.

"You know her?" I asked.

Mrs. Halston didn't answer immediately. Instead, she stepped closer and gently took the photograph from my hands. The garden seemed to fall unusually quiet. Even the soft trickle of water from the hose sounded distant. She stared at the picture for so long that I began to wonder if she'd forgotten I was standing there.

"Where did you find this?" she asked at last.

"In Jake's old room."

Her eyes widened ever so slightly.

Then she looked at me and back at the photograph, then at me again. A faint crease appeared between her brows.

"I thought..."

She stopped.

"What?"

Mrs. Halston let out a slow breath.

"I thought it was you."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

She looked down at the photograph again.

"This young woman..."

Her fingertips brushed lightly over the edge of the frame. "...for a little while, I couldn't separate her face from yours."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either."

She gave a small, weary smile.

"The older you get, memories become strange things."

"They don't stay where you leave them."

Her eyes drifted toward Margaret's house. Toward the upstairs window.

"I still catch myself looking up there."

She said it so quietly I almost missed it.

"I expect to see someone standing there."

A silence settled between us.

"Someone from this photograph?"

Mrs. Halston nodded.

"Sometimes."

She looked almost embarrassed by her own admission.

"Then I remember."

"Remember what?"

"That I'm remembering."

The words puzzled me.

She laughed softly, though there was no humor in it.

"For a heartbeat, the years disappear."

"I look toward that window...and my mind forgets she's been gone."

The hairs on my arms prickled.

"Gone?"

Mrs. Halston blinked, as though she'd said more than she'd intended.

She lowered her eyes.

"I've said too much. Please."

I leaned forward.

"Who is she?"

Mrs. Halston remained silent.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the photograph before she carefully handed it back to me.

"I'm sorry, dear."

"Some stories belong to the people who lived them."

"I've no right to tell them."

I looked from the photograph to Margaret's house. The upstairs curtains shifted gently in the breeze. Nothing more. Just white fabric moving behind old glass, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I had missed something, not because I'd seen someone, but because everyone else seemed to be looking at the same house...and remembering someone I had never known.

As I slipped the photograph back into my bag, one question refused to leave me.

Who was the woman everyone seemed to remember...but no one was willing to name?

And Margaret's house, sitting peacefully at the end of the street, no longer felt quite as welcoming as it had that morning.

The walk back to Margaret's house felt longer than usual. I couldn't stop replaying Mrs. Halston's words in my head.

The afternoon sun felt too bright. The town suddenly felt unfamiliar. Every house I passed seemed to be watching me. Every window looked occupied.

I tightened my grip around the photograph.

By the time I reached the house, my hands were trembling.

Margaret wasn't home.

A note sat on the kitchen counter informing me she had gone grocery shopping and would be back later. The silence felt unbearable. I stared at the note for a few seconds before pulling my phone from my pocket.

Jake answered on the third ring.

"Hey, beautiful."

The sound of his voice immediately softened something inside me.

"Hey."

A pause.

"You okay?"

"No."

The word came out before I could stop it. Jake immediately sounded concerned.

"What happened?"

I sat down at the kitchen table; the chair felt cold beneath me.

"I spoke to Mrs. Halston."

Silence. Then,

"The neighbor?"

"Yes."

"What about her?"

I looked down at the photograph lying in front of me.

The smiling woman seemed to stare back.

"She seemed really unsettled seeing Freiah in the photograph. It's like she remembers something, but she couldn't tell me anything. She said that "some stories belong to the people who lived them."

Jake was quiet for a moment.

Then he laughed softly, not mockingly. Just confused.

"Freiah?"

"The woman in the photograph."

Another pause.

"Adelaide..."

The way he said my name made my stomach sink.

"What?"

"I don't know who Freiah is."

I frowned.

"What do you mean you don't know who she is?"

"Exactly what I said."

I felt irritation rising inside me.

"Jake, she was standing next to you in a family photograph."

"I've been photographed with hundreds of people."

His voice remained calm, almost too calm.

"I don't remember every person from twenty years ago."

I stared at the photograph. That didn't feel right.

How could he not remember?

Margaret knew her name immediately. Mrs. Halston recognized her instantly, yet somehow Jake remembered nothing.

This time Jake sighed.

A long sigh.

The kind adults use when speaking to children.

"Adelaide."

My jaw tightened.

"No. Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Talk to me like that."

There was another silence. When he spoke again, his voice was gentler.

"I'm not trying to upset you."

"Then believe me."

"I believe that you believe you saw something."

The words hit harder than they should have. I closed my eyes. There it was again. That feeling. The feeling that everyone around me was standing on one side of a glass wall while I stood on the other.

Alone.

"You think I'm imagining it."

"I think you're tired."

"I'm not tired."

"You're pregnant."

I laughed bitterly.

"So now every thought I have is because I'm pregnant?"

"No."

"But stress can affect people."

There it was, again.

The same conversation. The same implication. I already knew what was coming before he said it.

"Maybe you should talk to someone."

I closed my eyes.

"Jake."

"A professional."

"Jake."

"A therapist."

I stood up so quickly the chair scraped against the floor.

"A shrink?"

Silence.

"I didn't say that."

"You keep saying that."

"Because I'm worried about you."

The concern in his voice sounded genuine; that was the worst part. Maybe if he sounded cruel, it would have been easier. Instead, he sounded loving.

Patient and reasonable. The unreasonable one was beginning to feel like me. By the time the call ended, I wasn't sure what upset me more.

Mrs. Halston's story.

Or the fact that nobody seemed to think it mattered. I looked down at the photograph again. Freiah smiled back at me, and for the first time, a frightening thought crossed my mind.

What if they were right? What if I were the only one making this into something bigger than it was?

I stared at the photograph long after the call ended. The kitchen had grown quieter. The afternoon sunlight had shifted across the floor, casting long shadows through the windows.

Freiah smiled up at me from the frame. A stranger. A complete stranger, yet somehow she had occupied more of my thoughts in two days than some people had in years.

I was tired. Tired of wondering, of questioning, of feeling ridiculous every time I brought it up.

Maybe Jake was right. Maybe Mrs. Halston had simply mistaken someone else for the woman in the photograph. Maybe Margaret's sadness came from a memory she didn't want to revisit. Maybe there was no mystery. No secret. No woman standing at the windows. Just an old photograph and an overactive imagination. I hated how convincing that explanation sounded.

Slowly, I picked up the frame. The glass felt cool beneath my fingertips.

"I'm done with you," I muttered.

Freiah continued smiling. Unbothered. I laughed softly at myself, then I opened the bedside drawer and placed the photograph inside.

Out of sight. Out of mind, or so I hoped.

That evening, Margaret returned home carrying bags of groceries and enough food to feed half the town. I helped her unpack, and we cooked together and talked about nothing important.

The weather. The baby. The town. Normal conversations. Comforting conversations, and for the first time since arriving, I didn't ask a single question about Freiah, nor did Margaret.

It was as though she had never existed. A few days later, I returned to the city, and slowly, life moved forward.

The drive back to the city felt lighter. The further I got from the town, the easier it became to breathe. The fields disappeared first, then the old houses, then the quiet. Soon the familiar skyline appeared in the distance. Glass buildings. Traffic. Noise. Home.

By the time I pulled into the driveway, I had almost convinced myself that everything that had happened in Margaret's town belonged there.

A strange little chapter, nothing more.

Jake was waiting for me when I walked through the door.

The moment he saw me, he smiled, not the polite smile he gave colleagues, not the smile he gave strangers. My smile.

The one that had made me fall in love with him years ago. I dropped my bags and threw my arms around him. He laughed as he caught me.

"Missed me?"

"Terribly."

"Good."

His lips brushed my forehead.

"I missed you too."

For a moment, everything felt right again.

Simple. Safe. The way it used to be.

A week later, we heard the heartbeat. The room was dark except for the glow of the monitor. I lay back on the examination table while Jake sat beside me. His hand never left mine. The doctor moved the scanner gently across my stomach. Then, a sound.

Fast. Steady. Alive.

The room disappeared. The city disappeared. Everything disappeared.

There was only that heartbeat. I looked at Jake. His eyes were already shining.

"Oh my God," he whispered. I started crying before I realized I was crying. Jake laughed through tears of his own. Neither of us spoke. Neither of us needed to.

For the first time, the baby felt real. Not an idea or a test. Not a future possibility.

A person. Our person.

Afterward, Jake insisted we celebrate. We spent the afternoon wandering through baby stores, looking at tiny clothes.

Tiny shoes, blankets, things no bigger than my hands.

Jake picked up a ridiculous dinosaur onesie. I told him absolutely not, but he bought it anyway. The entire day felt perfect. Almost. As we stood looking at cribs, Jake's phone buzzed.

Once, then again, then a third time.

His smile disappeared immediately.

"Sorry," he said.

"Work."

I nodded.

He stepped outside.

I watched through the store window as he answered. His expression changed.

Serious. Focused. Almost tense. The conversation lasted less than a minute.

When he came back, he smiled again, too quickly.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Yeah."

He slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"Just work."

I believed him. Mostly, but as we continued walking through the store, I found myself glancing at him more often than before, and for the first time in years, I wondered what Jake wasn't telling me.

A few weeks passed quietly. The days seemed to blur together now. Morning sickness. Vitamins. Doctor's appointments. Afternoon naps.

Pregnancy had a strange way of changing time. Some days felt endless, while entire weeks disappeared before I noticed.

The baby had become the center of everything. Every conversation, plan, and thought and despite the nausea, the exhaustion, and the occasional fear, I was happy, genuinely happy.

One Thursday morning, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror holding up three different dresses. I knew it was ridiculous.

The baby wasn't going to care what I wore, and neither was the doctor, but today's appointment felt important.

The scan. Another chance to see our baby and another chance to hear that tiny heartbeat. I wanted everything to be perfect. Jake had promised he would come.

Not maybe, not if work allows. Promised. I remembered him kissing my forehead the night before.

"I'll be there," he had said.

"Wouldn't miss it."

The waiting room smelled faintly of disinfectant and coffee. Soft instrumental music played from hidden speakers overhead. Around me sat other couples. Some looked nervous, others excited. One woman leaned against her husband's shoulder while he absentmindedly rubbed her hand. I found myself smiling at them, and then I checked the time. Jake was five minutes late, not unusual.

I sent him a quick message, but there was no response. I told myself he was driving.

Ten minutes passed.

The smile slowly disappeared from my face.

Fifteen, then twenty.

My phone remained silent.

The receptionist called my name. I glanced toward the entrance one last time; still no Jake. My chest tightened.

"Just a few more minutes," I told the receptionist.

She smiled politely.

"Of course."

I sat back down. The waiting room suddenly felt colder than before. The couple beside me was laughing about something. Someone's baby was crying in another room. Life continued around me, yet all I could focus on was the empty chair beside mine, then my phone buzzed. Relief flooded through me instantly.

Jake.

I opened the message.

“Emergency meeting. I’m so sorry, baby. I’ll make it up to you.”

The words blurred for a moment, not because I was crying but because I had already built this day up so much in my head.

I stared at the screen, reading the message again and again.

I wanted to be angry, but I couldn’t. This was Jake: work happened, meetings happened, and life happened.

Still, the disappointment sat heavily in my chest.

The receptionist called my name again. This time I stood all alone. The examination room felt much quieter without him. The lights were dimmed. The familiar smell of sanitizer lingered in the air. I climbed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling while the doctor prepared the equipment.

"Father couldn't make it?" she asked kindly.

I forced a smile.

"Work."

She nodded as though she’d heard the answer a thousand times before.

The cold gel touched my stomach. A moment later, the screen flickered to life.

There.

Our baby. Tiny. Perfect. Moving. The doctor pointed things out. Little details. Things I barely processed because all I could think about was the empty space beside me. Jake should have been here, and he should have seen this; he should have heard this.

The heartbeat filled the room again. Strong and beautiful.

I smiled, then I wiped away a tear before anyone noticed.

When the appointment ended, I sat alone in my car for several minutes. The scan photos rested on my lap. Sunlight streamed through the windshield. People walked past carrying coffees and shopping bags.

Normal lives and days.

I picked up my phone; without thinking, I called Margaret.

She answered immediately.

"Adelaide, dear."

Her voice sounded warm, almost eager.

"How did the appointment go?"

I looked down at the photographs.

"It went well."

A pause.

"Did Jake make it?"

Something about the question made me freeze.

"No."

Margaret was silent for a moment.

Not surprised or shocked, just silent, then she sighed softly.

"Oh, dear."

I stared out through the windshield. Cars rolled past. People hurried along the sidewalk. Somehow, for the first time all day, I felt lonely. Very lonely.

The weeks that followed slipped by quietly.

Pregnancy had a strange way of changing my relationship with time. Entire mornings disappeared between cups of tea growing cold on the kitchen counter and half-finished books resting on my

lap. Some days felt endless, stretching from one hour to the next. Others disappeared before I even realized they had begun.

At first, I welcomed the slower pace.

After years of balancing work, deadlines, social commitments, and the constant noise of city life, there was something comforting about waking up without a schedule. The apartment slowly filled with warm morning sunlight, spilling across the wooden floors while dust drifted lazily through the air. I spent hours wandering from room to room, imagining where the baby's crib would go, what color the nursery walls should be, and what our lives would look like a year from now.

It felt peaceful. It felt like the beginning of something beautiful, but peace has a way of becoming loneliness when it lasts too long.

Every morning, Jake left with a hurried kiss on my forehead and a promise that he'd be home early. His cologne lingered in the hallway long after the front door had closed.

Every evening, I found myself standing in the kitchen long after dinner was ready, glancing at the clock more often than I cared to admit.

The apartment always felt different after he left.

Larger. Quieter. The silence settled into every corner of the house. I could hear the steady hum of the refrigerator, the ticking of the clock above the dining table, distant traffic beyond the windows, and the occasional bark of a dog somewhere below on the street. Tiny sounds I had never noticed before. Sometimes I switched on the television simply to hear another voice in the room. Other times I played music while moving around the apartment, pretending I wasn't listening for the sound of keys turning in the lock.

As my pregnancy progressed, my world seemed to grow smaller while everyone else's continued moving forward.

My friends still called occasionally. They talked about promotions, office gossip, new projects, and weekend plans.

I listened and laughed. I was genuinely happy for them, yet after every conversation, I found myself staring at my phone long after the call had ended. Their lives still revolved around possibilities. Mine revolved around anticipation. Everything somehow led back to the baby. Every decision. Every plan. Every fear. Even the smallest things suddenly felt important.

What I ate. How much water I drank. Whether I had rested enough. Whether I was worrying too much. Without realizing it, the baby had quietly become the center of my universe.

Jake, meanwhile, seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. The closer I felt to our little world, the further he seemed pulled into his own.

More meetings and calls. More evenings spent with his laptop balanced on his knees, the pale blue glow reflecting against his tired face.

Sometimes I woke in the middle of the night to find his side of the bed empty.

I'd walk to the study and find him still working. A cup of coffee sat forgotten beside him. Cold. Untouched. Dark circles had begun settling beneath his eyes.

Whenever I complained, he apologized immediately. He always looked guilty and always promised things would settle down soon, and because I loved him, because I knew how hard he worked, I never pushed the issue any further.

I told myself it was temporary; once the baby arrived, everything would slow down.

One afternoon, after spending nearly the entire day alone, I found myself scrolling through old photographs on my phone.

Pictures from college. Birthdays. Vacations. House parties. Moments I had forgotten existed until they appeared on the screen. There was one photograph of Jake and me sitting cross-legged on the floor of our first apartment, surrounded by unopened boxes and cheap furniture. We looked exhausted. Completely broke. Ridiculously happy.

I stared at that picture for longer than I meant to. Back then, we had almost nothing, yet somehow it felt as though we had spent more time together than we did now.

The thought lingered longer than I wanted it to. I quickly locked my phone and placed it beside me. That evening, without really planning to, I called Margaret.

The conversation lasted nearly an hour.

Most of it was harmless. She asked how I was feeling. Whether I was eating properly. Whether the morning sickness had eased. Whether I was getting enough sleep. Then she told me stories about Jake as a little boy. How stubborn he had always been. How he once climbed onto the roof trying to rescue a frightened kitten.

I smiled through most of it.

By the time the call ended, the apartment didn't feel quite as empty anymore.

It wasn't until I placed my phone back on the coffee table that a strange thought crossed my mind.

Somewhere along the way, without ever noticing when it had happened...

Margaret had become the person I spoke to most during the day, and for reasons I couldn't quite explain, that realization unsettled me. The calls became a part of my day before I even realized it.

It always started the same way, just after Jake left for work, my phone would ring.

Margaret.

Sometimes she called while I was making breakfast. Other times, while I was watering the plants or folding laundry. It was never planned, yet somehow her timing was always perfect. Just when the apartment began to feel too quiet.

She never kept the conversations short.

She would ask whether I had eaten. Whether the baby had been kicking. Whether the morning sickness had eased. If I mentioned feeling tired, she'd immediately remind me to rest. If I said I'd been craving something sweet, she'd laugh and tell me pregnancy had strange ways of making women demand impossible things.

Some days, she would read out recipes she swore had helped her through her own pregnancy with Jake.

Other days, she'd tell me stories about him as a little boy. I had heard many of them before, yet I never stopped listening.

I loved hearing about the version of Jake I had never known. The little boy who cried when he found an injured bird in the garden. The teenager who insisted on fixing everything around the house himself, even when he had no idea what he was doing. The young man who would call his mother every Sunday after moving to the city because he worried she would feel lonely.

"He still does that," she laughed one afternoon.

"He worries too much."

I smiled.

"That sounds like Jake."

"It is Jake."

For the first time in years, our conversations no longer felt forced. There were no comparisons. No subtle remarks about how I looked after him or comments that made me feel as though I

wasn't enough. She simply talked, and I listened. Slowly, I found myself looking forward to her calls.

If my phone stayed silent longer than usual, I'd catch myself wondering whether she was busy. Sometimes I was the one who called first and she always answered.

Always.

Jake noticed it before I did.

"You and Mom seem to be getting along these days."

He smiled when he said it.

"I think so."

"I'm glad."

There was something relieved about the way he looked at me. As though a weight he had been carrying for years had finally become lighter.

"I've always wanted the two of you to be close."

"I know."

And strangely... So did I.

The loneliness that had settled over the apartment wasn't quite as heavy anymore. Even when Jake worked late, there was always someone I could call. Someone who asked how I was doing, who reminded me to eat, and who told me to take care of myself.

It felt... comforting.

I didn't notice that our conversations had slowly changed. At first, Margaret asked about me, then she asked about the baby. Eventually, she began asking about Jake.

"What time did he get home yesterday? Is he sleeping enough? Has work been difficult lately?"

The questions felt harmless, just a mother worrying about her son. I answered every one of them without thinking. Sometimes I even found myself defending him.

"He's just busy."

"I know," she'd say softly.

"He's always carried too much on his shoulders."

There was never judgment in her voice. Only understanding.

One rainy afternoon, while the windows rattled gently beneath the weight of the storm, Margaret called as usual.

The conversation drifted from the baby to recipes, from recipes to old family stories, until she asked, almost absentmindedly,

"Has Jake been working later than usual?"

I looked toward the clock. It was nearly nine.

"He has."

"He must be exhausted."

"I'm sure he is."

There was a brief silence, then she sighed.

"My poor boy."

Something about those words stayed with me long after the call had ended, not because they were strange, but because they sounded so natural. Without realizing it, I had started seeing Jake through Margaret's eyes. Not as my husband, but as her son.

The days settled into a rhythm that was beginning to feel familiar.

Jake left before I had properly woken up. I would hear the shower running, the clinking of his coffee mug against the kitchen counter, and the quiet rustle of his shirt as he buttoned it in front of the bedroom mirror. Before leaving, he'd lean down, kiss my forehead, tell me he loved me, and promise he'd be home early.

"I'll make it up to you tonight," he would say.

I believed him every single time.

One evening, I decided to surprise him.

The apartment had felt particularly empty that day, and I missed him more than I wanted to admit. I drove to the grocery store and wandered through the aisles longer than necessary, picking up everything I knew he loved. Fresh rosemary, garlic, butter, potatoes, and a thick cut of steak. I even bought a small chocolate cake from the bakery section because I couldn't remember the last time we'd had dessert together.

By the time I got home, the kitchen smelled warm and inviting. Butter sizzled gently in the pan while garlic softened into a sweet aroma that filled the apartment. The potatoes simmered quietly on the stove, and soft music played from the speaker on the counter. For the first time in days, I didn't feel lonely. I felt excited. It wasn't a special occasion. There was no anniversary or celebration. I simply wanted one evening that belonged to the two of us.

I glanced at the clock.

Seven o'clock.

He would be home soon.

I set the table carefully, placing two plates opposite each other. I lit a pair of candles I had forgotten were tucked away in one of the kitchen drawers and changed into one of Jake's oversized sweaters. It still carried the faint scent of his cologne. It made me smile.

Seven-thirty came and went, then eight.

The food was still warm, but only just.

I reached for my phone. No messages. I told myself not to be impatient. Meetings ran late; they always did.

At eight forty-three, my phone finally buzzed.

"Running late, don't wait for me. Eat without me. I'm sorry."

I read the message twice before locking my phone.

The candles continued burning quietly between the empty plates.

I couldn't bring myself to eat, so I waited. By the time Jake came home, it was nearly midnight. The apartment was dark except for the television, which was still playing softly in the background. I had fallen asleep on the couch without realizing it.

The sound of the front door opening stirred me awake. Jake stood in the hallway, shoulders slumped, his tie loosened, his laptop bag hanging heavily from one shoulder. He looked exhausted.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered as soon as he saw me.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and forced a smile.

"It's okay."

He walked over immediately, crouching beside the couch before pressing a kiss against my forehead.

"I know I promised."

"You did."

"I couldn't get out of it."

"I know."

He looked genuinely guilty, almost relieved that I wasn't angry.

"I'll make it up to you this weekend," he said.

I nodded.

"I'd like that."

He smiled softly before disappearing into the kitchen. A few seconds later, I heard the microwave door open. The familiar hum filled the apartment.

I closed my eyes. Somehow, hearing him eat the dinner I'd spent hours preparing made me feel lonelier than eating it alone ever could.

The next few days passed much the same.

Jake was home physically, but work seemed to follow him everywhere. His laptop stayed open through dinner. Emails arrived late into the night. Even when we watched television together, his phone rarely left his hand.

One evening we sat side by side on the couch, half watching a movie neither of us was really paying attention to.

His phone buzzed against the coffee table.

Without thinking, both our eyes drifted toward it.

The screen lit up for only a second, long enough for me to notice his expression.

He smiled, not at me or at the movie but at whatever had appeared on that screen.

It wasn't a big smile. Just... different.

Small. Instinctive. The kind people make before they realize they're smiling at all. Almost immediately, he reached forward, picked up the phone, and turned it face down on the table. Then he looked back at the television as though nothing had happened.

I looked away too.

Work, I told myself. It was probably work. Everything was work these days.

A few nights later, I woke to the sound of a phone vibrating somewhere nearby. The bedroom was dark except for the pale glow of the digital clock. Jake wasn't beside me.

I sat up slowly.

The vibration came again. It was coming from the living room. Curiosity pulled me from the bed. As I stepped into the hallway, I saw Jake standing near the balcony doors, his phone pressed against his ear. He was speaking quietly, too quietly for me to make out the words.

The sliding door was open just enough to let the cool night air drift inside. When he turned slightly, he noticed me. His conversation stopped instantly.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said, slipping the phone into his pocket almost too quickly.

"I just heard the phone."

He smiled.

"Work."

That single word had become an answer for everything. I nodded and walked back toward the bedroom. I wasn't suspicious, not really. If anything, I felt sorry for him. He looked exhausted. His work had become relentless.

The next morning, Margaret called as she usually did. She asked how I was feeling, whether the baby had been kicking, and if I

was remembering to rest. Before hanging up, she asked, almost casually, "Has Jake been coming home late again?"

"He has," I admitted.

She sighed softly.

"My poor boy."

I smiled to myself.

"He works too hard."

"He always has," she replied. "Just make sure he's eating properly. When Jake gets busy, he forgets to look after himself."

"I will."

After we ended the call, I sat quietly for a while.

Instead of thinking about the dinner that had gone cold.

Instead of thinking about the late-night phone call.

Instead of wondering why he had smiled at that message... I found myself worrying about Jake.

Maybe Margaret was right. Maybe he was simply carrying too much, and maybe I was expecting too much from him.

"Saturday" had become my favorite word. For an entire week, I looked forward to it.

It wasn't because we had extravagant plans or reservations at expensive restaurants. It was simply because Jake had promised me the whole day. No meetings, conference calls, or laptops balanced on his knees while we watched television. Just us. I held onto that promise all week.

Every night before bed, I'd ask him what we should do first.

"Breakfast?" I'd ask.

"Breakfast," he'd reply.

"And then?"

"We'll figure it out."

"We could finally start the nursery."

He smiled.

"We'll start the nursery."

It was enough. The excitement stayed with me for days.

By Friday evening, I'd already made a list of everything we needed. Paint samples. Curtains. A rocking chair I'd been looking online for weeks. Tiny shelves for children's books. Jake laughed when I showed him the list.

"You've planned the entire day."

"I've only planned half of it."

"What's the other half?"

"You."

He leaned over and kissed my forehead.

"I'll be all yours tomorrow."

I believed him.

Saturday morning arrived quietly.

For the first time in weeks, neither of us set an alarm.

Sunlight spilled through the curtains, warming the bedroom in soft shades of gold. I woke before Jake and lay beside him for a while, watching him sleep. He looked younger somehow. Peaceful. The lines of exhaustion that had settled across his face over the past few months seemed to disappear whenever he slept.

I reached over and brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead. He stirred.

"You've been staring at me."

"I have."

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

He laughed softly and pulled me closer.

"I've missed this."

"So have I."

We stayed there for a while, saying nothing. It felt like we'd finally found each other again.

Breakfast was slow. We made pancakes together, though Jake insisted on flipping them despite burning the first two. Flour somehow ended up on my nose. I smeared a little on his cheek in return. He laughed, scooped me into his arms for a brief moment,

and kissed me until I forgot about everything else. For those few hours, it felt like nothing had changed.

Like we were simply Jake and Adelaide again.

No work or loneliness. No unanswered questions.

Just us.

After breakfast, we carried mugs of coffee into the room that would soon become the nursery. The walls were still plain white. The furniture hadn't arrived yet. It was nothing more than an empty room, yet I could already imagine it.

A crib near the window, soft curtains moving gently in the breeze. Tiny socks folded neatly into drawers.

Jake stood beside me, his arm resting around my shoulders.

"It'll look beautiful," he said.

"It will."

His phone rang. The sound cut through the quiet so suddenly that we both looked toward the kitchen.

Jake frowned.

"I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the hallway with his phone.

At first, I didn't think anything of it. I wandered around the room, measuring walls with my eyes, trying to imagine where everything would go.

Five minutes passed, then ten.

His voice drifted faintly from the living room, too quiet to understand. When he finally returned, something about his expression had changed. The easy smile was gone.

"I'm so sorry," he said before I could ask.

I already knew.

"You have to go."

He nodded.

"Just for a couple of hours."

I looked past him toward the window.

"I thought today was ours."

"It is."

He stepped closer and took both my hands.

"I promise. I'll come back as quickly as I can."

I wanted to believe him; I really did. So I smiled, a small one.

"It's okay."

He kissed my forehead.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Then he was gone. The apartment fell silent again. I stood in the nursery for another minute, staring at the empty walls. The room suddenly looked much bigger than it had a few moments ago.

I told myself not to waste the day. If Jake couldn't help me, I could at least get started. I opened the paint cans we'd bought the day before. A soft cream color.

Warm. Comforting. Perfect for a nursery.

Music played quietly from my phone as I spread an old sheet across the floor and dipped the roller into the paint.

The first few strokes felt satisfying, like I was finally building something, creating a home for our baby, but as I reached higher along one corner of the wall, I realized I couldn't quite reach.

I looked around the room. The small wooden chair from the dining table would do. I climbed onto it carefully. One hand held

the roller. The other steadied me against the wall, just a little higher.

The chair shifted, only slightly, but it was enough.

My heart lurched into my throat. I grabbed the wall instinctively, dropping the roller onto the sheet below. Paint splattered across the floor. For one terrifying second, all I could think about was the baby.

I climbed down immediately, my hands trembling so badly I could barely steady myself.

I sank onto the floor, and then, without warning, I started crying.

Not because I had fallen.

I hadn't.

Not because of the spilled paint or because the room was a mess.

I cried because I was scared because I had reached for Jake without thinking...and he wasn't there. When my breathing finally slowed, I reached for my phone. My thumb hovered over Jake's name. Then moved away.

Instead... I called Margaret.

I don't remember how long I sat on the nursery floor.

The paint had begun to dry in uneven streaks where the roller had fallen. My hands were still trembling, though not as badly as before. Every now and then, I'd place a hand over my stomach, waiting for some reassurance that everything was alright.

I kept telling myself I was overreacting, that nothing had happened. Still, I couldn't stop crying.

A little while later, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find Margaret standing there with an overnight bag in one hand and two paper grocery bags in the other.

She smiled the moment she saw me.

"Oh, sweetheart."

She didn't ask what had happened. She didn't need to. One look at my face was enough. She stepped inside, placed the bags on the kitchen counter, and wrapped her arms around me.

"It's alright," she whispered. "I'm here."

For the first time that day, I let someone else hold me together. Margaret walked through the apartment as though she'd always belonged there. She unpacked the groceries without asking where anything went. A pot of soup was soon warming on the stove. Fresh bread sat on the counter beside a bowl of fruit she'd brought from home. The apartment, which had felt so empty only an hour earlier, slowly filled with the comforting smell of vegetables, herbs, and warm broth. Only after making sure I had eaten did she ask what had happened.

I told her everything.

How I'd climbed onto the chair.

How it had shifted beneath me.

How terrified I'd been. I expected her to tell me I was worrying too much.

Instead, she reached across the table and squeezed my hand.

"You did the right thing by stopping."

"It wasn't a bad fall," I said quietly.

"I know."

"But..."

She smiled gently.

"You're carrying my grandchild."

Her voice was calm.

"We don't take chances."

Before I could argue, she had already picked up her phone. She called the doctor's office and insisted they see me that afternoon, just to make sure everything was alright.

The appointment didn't take long. The doctor examined me carefully before smiling.

"The baby's perfectly fine."

I hadn't realized how tightly I was holding my breath until I finally let it out. Relief washed over me so suddenly that my knees felt weak. Margaret reached for my hand as we walked back to the car.

"I told you everything would be alright."

Back at the apartment, she insisted I stay off my feet.

"No more painting today."

"I can still help."

"You can help by resting."

There was something strangely comforting about being told what to do. For once, I didn't have to think.

Margaret moved around the kitchen with quiet confidence. She brewed tea, washed the dishes I'd left in the sink, folded the blanket I'd forgotten on the couch, and watered the plants by the window without asking where the watering can was.

I watched her from the sofa.

"You've done this before," I laughed.

"A few times."

She smiled without looking up.

"I've looked after Jake his entire life."

Then, after a brief pause, she added softly,

"And now I suppose I have two people to look after."

The words warmed something inside me. No one had looked after me like this in a very long time. By the time evening settled over the city, the apartment no longer felt lonely.

It felt... lived in.

Jake arrived home just after eight. The moment he walked through the door, he came straight to me.

"I'm so sorry."

He knelt beside the couch, taking both my hands in his.

"I should've been here."

I shook my head.

"I'm okay."

"I know what happened."

His eyes shifted toward Margaret.

"Thank you for coming."

She simply smiled.

"There wasn't anywhere else I'd rather be."

Jake sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I feel terrible."

Margaret walked over and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"She was frightened."

Her voice was gentle.

"She just needed someone."

Jake lowered his eyes.

"I know."

For the rest of dinner, he hardly let go of my hand. Every few minutes, he'd ask if I was alright. If the baby was alright. If I needed anything. Watching him worry made me realize how guilty he felt. When the dishes were done, Margaret cleared her throat.

"If you don't mind..."

Jake looked up.

"I was thinking I could stay tonight."

"Just until tomorrow."

"In case Adelaide needs anything."

Jake answered before I could.

"I'd really appreciate that."

I glanced between the two of them.

Margaret smiled reassuringly.

"I'll be out of your way."

I nodded.

"I'd like that."

That night, I slept more peacefully than I had in weeks. Sometime after midnight, I woke with a dry throat. Careful not to wake Jake, I slipped quietly out of bed and padded toward the kitchen.

The apartment was silent, only the faint glow of the city spilled through the windows. As I passed the nursery, I noticed a thin line of light beneath the door.

I frowned.

Had I left the light on?

I pushed the door open slightly. Margaret stood in the middle of the room. She wasn't painting or cleaning. She was simply standing there. Her eyes rested on the freshly painted walls, one hand absentmindedly brushing across the small crib catalogue we'd left on the windowsill.

For a long moment, she didn't move.

"Margaret?"

She turned slowly. A gentle smile spread across her face.

"Oh."

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"What are you doing?"

She looked around the room before letting out a quiet laugh.

"I couldn't sleep."

Her eyes drifted back toward the empty nursery.

"I was just trying to imagine what it'll look like when the baby's finally here."

I smiled. It seemed like such a simple answer, yet as I walked back to bed, I couldn't explain why the image of Margaret standing alone in the nursery stayed with me long after I closed my eyes.

The following week, Margaret called earlier than usual.

"I've been thinking," she said, her voice unusually cheerful. "We should have a little celebration."

"A celebration?"

"For the baby, of course."

I laughed softly.

"I don't think I'm ready for that."

"Oh, nonsense."

"It doesn't have to be anything grand. Just a few close friends, some food, a little laughter. This is my first grandchild, Adelaide. Let an old woman have her moment."

I couldn't help smiling. There was something almost childlike about the excitement in her voice.

"Alright," I finally said.

"But nothing too big."

"I promise."

She sounded far too pleased with herself. The entire week disappeared into small preparations. Margaret insisted on handling most of it herself. Every morning she'd call to ask what color balloons I preferred, whether I wanted flowers, or which desserts I liked best. By the second day, she had stopped asking altogether and simply informed me what she'd already ordered.

Jake found it amusing.

"I've never seen Mom this excited."

"I don't think she sleeps anymore," I laughed.

"She probably doesn't."

For the first time in weeks, our apartment felt alive again.

The morning of the baby shower, sunlight poured through every window, making the white walls seem warmer than usual. Fresh flowers filled the living room with the scent of lilies and roses. Margaret had somehow transformed the apartment overnight. Tiny decorations hung from the ceiling, soft cream-colored ribbons framed the windows, and a beautifully decorated cake sat proudly in the center of the dining table.

"It looks beautiful," I whispered.

Margaret brushed an invisible speck of dust from the tablecloth.

"It should."

She smiled proudly.

"My grandchild deserves nothing less."

Friends began arriving shortly after noon.

The apartment filled with voices, laughter, and music. Someone insisted on taking endless photographs while another argued that I wasn't eating enough. Gifts slowly piled up beside the sofa, tiny clothes, blankets, stuffed animals, picture books, and more knitted socks than one baby could ever possibly wear.

For the first time in months, I forgot about the silence that usually lived inside these walls.

Jake stayed beside me for most of the afternoon.

He greeted every guest with the same easy smile I'd fallen in love with years ago. Every now and then, he'd squeeze my hand

beneath the table or quietly ask whether I was tired. Watching him laugh with my friends felt strangely comforting.

It reminded me of us, of the way we used to be before work began, stealing so much of his time.

At one point, Margaret disappeared into the bedroom and returned carrying a thick photo album.

"I thought everyone might enjoy these."

She placed it on the coffee table; old family photographs spilled across its pages.

Jake as a baby. Jake covered in mud after falling off his bicycle. Jake on his first day of school.

Everyone laughed.

"So that's where you got your curls," one of my friends teased.

Jake groaned dramatically.

"My mother kept everything."

"Of course I did."

Margaret sounded almost offended.

A few minutes later, one of my friends turned another page. Her laughter faded. She leaned closer to the photograph.

"Who's this?"

The room grew quieter, not silent. Just... quieter. I looked down.

The photograph showed a much younger Margaret standing in her garden. Jake couldn't have been more than twelve. Beside him stood a young woman dressed in a simple white dress, smiling directly at the camera.

Freiah, or Emily, whatever I had called her

Whatever her real place in this family had been. Margaret answered before anyone else could.

"Oh."

"That was Freiah. She helped around the house years ago. A lovely girl. Jake was very fond of her."

She said it so naturally and effortlessly with no hesitation or discomfort, just another memory from another time.

My friend smiled politely and turned the page. The conversation moved on almost immediately. Someone commented on how young Margaret looked. Someone else laughed at one of Jake's embarrassing childhood photographs. Within seconds, everyone had forgotten about Freiah.

Everyone except me. I glanced toward Jake. He barely looked at the photograph.

Instead, he reached for another slice of cake.

"You remember her?" I asked quietly.

He frowned for a moment, as though searching through old memories.

"Vaguely."

"I was pretty young. I remember she worked for Mom for a while. That's about it."

Then he shrugged.

"I honestly haven't thought about her in years."

His answer sounded ordinary. Completely ordinary, yet something about it lingered in my mind, not because of what he said but because of what I remembered.

The last time I'd mentioned Freiah... Jake had looked at me with complete certainty.

"I don't know anyone by that name."

Now... He remembered just enough.

I stared at the photograph for another moment before quietly closing the album.

Maybe memories changed with time. Maybe I had misunderstood him.

Or maybe...

I was thinking about it too much again. The thought embarrassed me.

I smiled, joined the conversation once more, and let the afternoon carry on as though nothing had happened.

But that night, after everyone had gone home and the apartment had fallen quiet again, I found myself thinking about that photograph.

Not the woman standing beside Jake, but the way both he and Margaret had spoken about her. Their answers had sounded rehearsed, almost as though they'd told the same story before.

I couldn't explain why that thought unsettled me. So, like I always did, I pushed it aside.

After all...

I was probably overthinking it.

Life settled back into its familiar rhythm after the baby shower.

The decorations came down one by one. The flowers slowly began to wilt, and the stack of unopened gifts found a temporary home in the nursery. Every now and then, I'd wander into the room, running my fingers over tiny knitted sweaters and impossibly small socks, trying to imagine the little person who would one day wear them.

It still didn't feel real.

Not completely.

Some mornings I'd wake up smiling, remembering there was a tiny life growing inside me. Other mornings, I'd wake with an ache I couldn't quite explain.

Jake was busier than ever. I tried not to let it bother me.

Whenever he apologized for another late evening or another canceled plan, I reminded myself that he was doing all of this for us. For our future and our baby. That thought made it easier, or at least, I kept telling myself it did.

One Tuesday evening, Jake came home looking unusually exhausted. His tie hung loose around his neck, and his laptop bag slipped from his shoulder onto the dining chair with a heavy thud.

"I need a shower," he sighed.

"I'll heat dinner."

He smiled gratefully.

"You're the best."

As he disappeared down the hallway, he stopped for a moment and looked back at me.

"Oh, could you grab the blue file from my work bag?"

"I need it after dinner."

"Sure."

I walked over to the dining table and pulled his bag closer. It was heavier than I expected. The zipper caught for a second before giving way. Inside were the usual things. His laptop. A notebook filled with scribbled meeting notes. Pens scattered loosely across the bottom. A charger tangled around a pair of earphones.

I searched for the blue file, shifting a few papers aside. As I lifted one of the folders, something slipped free. A folded receipt. It floated gently to the floor.

I bent down and picked it up without thinking. I only meant to tuck it back inside the bag, but my eyes caught the date.

Saturday.

That Saturday Jake had left halfway through painting the nursery. The Saturday he'd promised would be ours. My fingers tightened around the paper. I unfolded it.

A small café.

Not one I recognized.

Two coffees. Two lunches. One slice of cheesecake.

I read it again, then again.

Maybe it was a work meeting.

People met clients over lunch all the time.

Maybe the company had chosen the café, or maybe someone else had paid, and Jake had simply kept the receipt by accident. There were dozens of reasonable explanations.

Weren't there?

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the faded ink.

The shower continued running down the hallway. Steam drifted faintly beneath the bathroom door.

I could ask him. It would be simple.

"Hey, what's this?"

He'd explain it and I'd feel ridiculous; we'd laugh about it.

Instead, I folded the receipt exactly the way I'd found it. I slid it back between the papers and closed the bag. When Jake came back into the kitchen a few minutes later, his hair was still damp.

"Did you find the file?"

"I did."

I handed it to him.

"Thanks."

He smiled before leaning over to kiss my forehead.

It was such an ordinary moment, so ordinary that I almost convinced myself I'd imagined the uneasiness creeping into my chest.

Dinner passed quietly.

Jake talked about work. A client who couldn't make up their mind, a project that had been delayed, and a meeting he'd have to attend later that week.

I listened and nodded and smiled when I was supposed to, but every now and then, my mind drifted back to the receipt folded neatly inside his bag.

Two coffees. Two lunches. One slice of cheesecake.

Such small details. Such ordinary details, yet they refused to leave me alone.

That night, after Jake had fallen asleep, I lay awake beside him. The city lights spilled faintly through the curtains, casting soft shadows across the bedroom ceiling. His breathing was slow and even. Peaceful.

I turned onto my side and watched him for a while.

He looked exactly like the man I had fallen in love with. The man who had never given me a reason to doubt him. The man I trusted more than anyone else.

I felt ashamed. Ashamed that a single receipt had planted something ugly inside me. Ashamed that, for the first time since we'd been together, I had looked at him and wondered if there was something he wasn't telling me.

Eventually, I reached for his hand beneath the blanket.

He instinctively curled his fingers around mine without waking. A small smile found its way onto my face.

See?

I told myself.

You're doing it again. You're overthinking.

The next morning, I decided I was done.

Not with Jake or with us, but with the doubts.

The receipt had sat in my mind all night, growing into something much larger than it actually was. A small piece of paper had managed to make me question the person I trusted most in the world, and I hated that.

I hated that my first instinct had not been trust. Jake had never given me a reason to doubt him. He worked hard. He was tired. He was preparing for a baby. Maybe that was all it was.

Maybe I was looking for problems because I had too much time alone with my thoughts. I placed my hand over my stomach and took a deep breath. I didn't want to become someone who searched for things to be wrong.

I wanted to enjoy this.

I wanted to enjoy him.

So I made a decision.

I was going to stop overthinking.

That evening, I decided to surprise him.

Nothing dramatic or extravagant, just something simple, something that reminded us of who we used to be.

I cooked his favorite dinner. I put on the soft music we always listened to when we first moved in together. I even found the old movie we used to watch every year after our anniversary.

For a while, I felt like myself again.

Not a worried wife or an expectant mother constantly checking if everything was okay.

Just Adelaide.

The woman who fell in love with Jake.

The woman who knew exactly how he liked his coffee and which side of the bed he preferred sleeping on.

I checked the clock.

Seven thirty.

Then eight.

Then nine.

The food slowly lost its warmth.

The candles burned lower.

I looked at my phone more times than I wanted to admit.

Finally, at nine forty-five, I heard the lock turn. Jake walked inside. For a second, relief washed over me, then I noticed something. Before he even looked at me, his eyes went to his phone.

Just for a moment. A quick glance, almost automatic. Then he looked up. His expression changed immediately. Like he remembered I was there.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey."

He smiled and walked toward me.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"It's okay."

The words came out easily. Too easily. He kissed my cheek and placed his bag down.

"Crazy day."

I nodded.

"Work?"

"Yeah."

That word again.

Work. Always work.

I pushed the thought away.

"So how was your day?" I asked.

He started telling me about meetings, deadlines, and a project that was becoming difficult.

I listened.

I really did.

But somewhere between his second explanation about his schedule and his third apology for being busy, I felt myself drifting away, not because I didn't care but because I did. Too much.

Later that night, we sat together on the couch, his arm around me.

My head rested against his shoulder.

For a few minutes, everything felt normal.

Then his phone buzzed. I felt his body shift slightly, not much, just enough.

He reached for it. The screen lit up. I didn't see the name, only his face. The tiredness disappeared and a small smile appeared. A real one.

The kind I hadn't seen directed at me in a while. It lasted only a second, then he locked the phone and placed it face down.

My chest tightened, not because of the message but because I noticed. I didn't want to notice.

"Everything okay?" I asked casually.

"Yeah."

A pause.

"Just someone from work."

Someone from work.

I nodded.

I didn't ask anything else because asking would mean admitting I was suspicious and I didn't want to be suspicious. I wanted to trust my husband.

The next afternoon, Margaret called. She had a way of calling exactly when I needed someone to talk to.

"How are you feeling today, sweetheart?"

"I'm good."

"Are you resting enough?"

I smiled.

"Yes, Margaret."

She laughed softly.

"I know you. You always try to do everything yourself."

I looked around the apartment.

The quiet rooms. The untouched baby books. The half-organized nursery.

Maybe she was right.

"I just miss Jake," I admitted quietly.

There was a small silence on the other end, not long, just enough for me to notice.

"He's been very busy," she said.

"I know."

"He has always been like this."

"What do you mean?"

Margaret sighed gently.

"Jake carries everything on his shoulders. He always has."

I listened quietly.

"When he was younger, he never wanted anyone to worry about him. Even when things were difficult, he would keep everything inside."

Her voice softened.

"Sometimes men don't know how to ask for help."

I looked down.

"Do you think I'm making things harder for him?"

"Oh, Adelaide, no."

She answered quickly.

"But don't forget... he has a lot of pressure right now."

Pressure.

The word stayed with me.

"The baby. Work. Being a husband."

She paused.

"Just make sure he knows he doesn't have to choose between his responsibilities and the people he loves."

After we hung up, I sat there for a long time.

I hated that part of me understood what she meant.

Maybe I had been unfair. Maybe Jake wasn't pulling away. Maybe he was simply overwhelmed.

Maybe I needed to be more patient?

That evening, Margaret came over with some baby clothes she had bought. We sat together in the nursery, folding tiny shirts and blankets.

She talked about Jake as a child. How he hated sleeping alone and how he used to follow her around the house. How protective he had always been.

I smiled as she spoke. I loved hearing those stories. They made me feel closer to him, but then, while looking through one of the

old photo albums she had brought, something caught my attention.

A picture tucked between two pages.

It was an old photograph of Margaret's house.

The garden.

The front porch. The same house I had visited. I stared at it for a moment. Something felt strange. Behind Margaret, near the entrance, there was a woman's coat hanging by the door.

A white coat. I blinked.

Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was just an old photograph. Maybe I was searching again.

I quickly turned the page, but the feeling remained.

The uncomfortable feeling that I was surrounded by memories everyone else seemed to understand...

except me.

The photograph stayed in my mind longer than it should have, not because there was anything unusual about it, at least that was what I kept telling myself. It was just an old family photograph. A memory from years ago. A young woman standing beside Margaret and a younger version of Jake, smiling at a time I had never been a part of.

Freiah, or my so-called Emily The name felt strange in my head. Like a word I had heard before but never truly understood.

I found myself thinking about her while folding baby clothes that afternoon. Tiny onesies, small socks, little blankets that seemed too delicate to belong to a real person.

A part of me wanted to let it go.

Freiah had been explained.

She was the woman in the photograph. She had worked in Margaret's house.

That was all. There was no mystery and no reason to keep searching, but then why did it feel like there were pieces missing?

A few days later, Margaret came over with another box of baby things. She had become a regular part of my routine by then. Some days she stayed for lunch. Some days she helped me organize the nursery. Other days, we simply sat together drinking tea while she told me stories about Jake.

I had started looking forward to those conversations.

There was something comforting about hearing about the little boy he used to be before I knew him.

"Jake was always so independent," Margaret said one afternoon as she folded a tiny blue blanket.

"Even when he was young, he hated asking for help."

I smiled.

"That sounds like him."

She laughed softly.

"It still is."

For a moment, everything felt normal.

Then I remembered.

"Margaret?"

"Hmm?"

I hesitated before asking.

"Freiah... she worked here for a long time?"

Her hands paused, only briefly, but I noticed.

"Why do you ask?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know. I was just curious."

Margaret looked down at the blanket in her hands.

"She was around for a while."

"A while?"

"Yes."

There was a softness in her voice.

Almost affection.

"She was a good girl. Very kind. Jake was young when she was here, but he liked her."

I looked at her.

"Like family?"

Margaret smiled faintly.

"Something like that."

The answer stayed with me.

"Something like that."

"Not family. Not exactly, but not just an employee either."

I tried not to read too much into it. Maybe that was simply how people spoke about someone who had been part of their lives for years. A few minutes later, Margaret changed the subject. She started talking about the baby's room and whether we should put a bookshelf near the window.

The conversation moved on, but the next morning, while making coffee, I remembered something.

The first time I had asked Jake about Freiah.

His expression.

His certainty.

"I don't know anyone named Freiah."

I stared at the coffee machine as it filled my cup.

Maybe he had misunderstood. Maybe he didn't remember. It had been years ago.

People forgot things. Especially things from childhood. I repeated that to myself until it felt believable.

Later that afternoon, Jake came home earlier than usual.

I was sitting in the nursery, sorting through clothes, when he walked in.

"Mom came over today?"

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"She probably brought enough things for three babies."

I laughed.

"Probably."

There was a small silence.

Then I said casually,

"She told me about Freiah."

Jake looked up.

Just for a second.

"Freiah?"

The way he repeated the name made my stomach tighten.

Then his expression softened.

"Oh."

"Yeah. She used to help Mom around the house."

I watched him carefully.

"You remember her?"

He shrugged.

"Not much."

A pause.

"I was young."

I nodded slowly.

There it was again.

Another version. Not completely different. Just different enough.

Later that night, I lay beside Jake and stared at the ceiling. I wasn't angry. I wasn't even suspicious. I just felt unsettled because I couldn't figure out what bothered me... or that every time I asked about her, I walked away feeling like I had misunderstood something.

I turned toward Jake.

He was asleep. Peaceful. Unaware.

I closed my eyes.

Maybe I was searching for patterns where there were none. Maybe pregnancy had made me more emotional or maybe I needed to stop looking for things that weren't there because lately... The only person making me question reality was myself.

After that conversation, I tried to stop thinking about Freiah.

I really did.

I threw myself into normal things.

The nursery, the baby, and the endless list of things we still needed to buy. There was always something to do. Something to organize. Something to prepare, but some thoughts don't disappear just because you ignore them.

They wait quietly. They return when the house is silent.

I started noticing little things. Not big things. Nothing that could prove anything.

Just small moments that made me pause.

Like the way Margaret spoke about Freiah with such familiarity, yet never seemed to mention her unless I brought her up. Like the way Jake remembered her name but not the person behind it. Like

the way both of them seemed to have pieces of a story that I didn't.

I told myself it was normal.

Families had old memories. People forgot things. Not everyone remembered the same details.

That was all.

But still...

I started writing things down.

At first, it was only because I was afraid of forgetting.

Pregnancy had made my mind feel different. Some days I walked into a room and forgot why I was there. Sometimes I lost track of conversations. I blamed hormones. Everyone did.

So I kept a small notebook in my bedside drawer.

Nothing dramatic, just little reminders.

Doctor appointments, baby purchases, and things I needed to ask Jake, but slowly, without realizing it, other things began appearing on those pages.

Freiah.

The date I found the photograph.

The things Margaret had said. The things Jake had said.

I wasn't trying to investigate. At least, that's what I told myself. I was only trying to understand.

One evening, I found myself reading through the notes again. The page looked strange, almost like it belonged to someone else.

A list of conversations, questions, and things that bothered me.

I closed the notebook quickly.

What was I doing?

I had never been this person. I had never been someone who analyzed every word, every expression, every pause. I was starting to feel like I was searching for something to be wrong, and I hated that.

That night, Jake found me sitting in bed with the notebook beside me.

"What are you writing?"

I immediately closed it.

"Nothing."

He looked at me for a moment.

Not suspicious, just concerned.

"You've been quiet lately."

"I'm fine."

He sat beside me.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded.

"Just tired."

He brushed my hair away from my face.

"You know you can tell me anything, right?"

The words should have comforted me. Instead, they made me feel guilty because there was something I hadn't told him that I had been keeping track of, that I was noticing things. That a small part of me was afraid I was becoming someone I didn't recognize.

"I know," I whispered.

He kissed my forehead.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

And I meant it. That was the hardest part. I loved him so much that I kept finding excuses for everything.

The next morning, Margaret called. She immediately knew something was wrong.

"You sound tired."

"I'm okay."

"You always say that."

I smiled faintly.

"Maybe because I am."

She laughed softly, then her voice became gentler.

"Sweetheart, pregnancy can be overwhelming."

"I know."

"And your mind is going through a lot right now."

I looked down at my hands.

"Do you ever feel like you can't trust your own thoughts?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

There was a pause, a very small pause.

Then Margaret answered carefully.

"Everyone feels that way sometimes."

I waited.

"When you're carrying a child, your emotions can become very intense. Things that normally wouldn't bother you can feel much bigger."

Her voice was kind, almost soothing.

"I remember when I was pregnant with Jake. I worried about everything."

I smiled slightly.

"You did?"

"Oh, constantly."

She laughed.

"I would imagine problems before they even existed."

The words were comforting, but later, after the call ended, they stayed with me. Problems before they even existed. I hated that a part of me wondered if that was what I was doing.

Creating problems, seeing patterns, and turning ordinary things into something they weren't.

That afternoon, I opened the notebook again. My fingers rested on the page. For a long moment, I considered tearing it apart and throwing it away. Pretending none of this had happened. Instead, I closed it and placed it back inside the drawer because whether I was imagining things or not... something inside me was still telling me not to forget, and I didn't know which voice scared me more.

The one telling me something was wrong or the one telling me I was the problem.

Somewhere along the way, Margaret stopped feeling like my mother-in-law and started feeling like home. I couldn't point to the exact moment it happened. It wasn't sudden. It happened quietly, over weeks of phone calls, shared lunches, and slow afternoons spent together in the nursery.

She became the person I called when I couldn't decide which crib sheets to buy. The person who reminded me to take my vitamins before I forgot. The person who always asked if I'd eaten before asking how I was feeling. Without realizing it, I had begun relying on her in ways I hadn't relied on anyone in years.

Her visits slowly became a part of my routine. Some mornings she would call to ask if I needed anything from the grocery store.

Before I could tell her no, she'd already be on her way with bags full of fruit, homemade soup, fresh bread, and little things she'd insist the baby would need. Other days, she'd simply show up at my door with a warm smile, as though she had sensed I was lonely before I had admitted it to myself.

The apartment always felt different when she was there. Warmer and livelier. She filled every room with conversation while she cooked or folded tiny baby clothes. She told stories about Jake as a little boy, about the town he grew up in, about neighbors I'd never met, and about recipes passed down through generations. Most of the time I simply listened, but somehow I always felt lighter after she left.

One rainy afternoon the power went out across the neighborhood. The apartment fell into complete silence except for the rain tapping gently against the windows. Margaret lit a few candles around the living room, and we sat together with mugs of hot tea warming our hands.

She smiled as she looked at the rain outside.

"When I was pregnant with Jake," she said softly, "I worried about everything. Every ache. Every headache. Every little pain."

I looked at her in surprise.

"You did?"

She laughed.

"Constantly. I convinced myself something was wrong almost every week."

Hearing her say that made me laugh too. For the first time, my own fears didn't feel so unreasonable. The words slipped out before I could stop them.

"I'm scared," I admitted quietly.

She didn't ask me why. She simply reached across the couch and took my hand.

"I know."

"I'm scared I won't be a good mother."

Margaret squeezed my hand gently.

"The women who worry the most are usually the ones who love the deepest."

I felt tears sting my eyes. She didn't tell me to stop crying. She didn't try to fix anything. She simply stayed beside me until I felt calm again.

After that day, I found myself reaching for my phone whenever something happened. If the baby kicked a little harder than usual, I called Margaret. If I found a tiny sweater I couldn't resist buying, I sent her a picture. If I couldn't decide between two paint colors for the nursery, I asked for her opinion.

Somewhere along the way, she became the first person I wanted to share things with.

Jake was happy about it.

Whenever he came home late and found Margaret helping me around the apartment, he'd smile with obvious relief. He thanked her more than once for looking after me while work kept him busy.

She always brushed it off with a smile.

"What else are mothers for?" she'd say.

Watching the two of them together filled me with comfort. It made me feel as though I had married into a family that genuinely cared about me.

Looking back now, I think that was my mistake. I confused comfort with safety. I never questioned why Margaret always seemed to know exactly when I needed someone. I never wondered how she always called on the days I felt most alone. At the time, I simply believed I was lucky.

I didn't realize I had slowly begun depending on her more than anyone else. The more time I spent with Margaret, the more I found myself confiding in her. It wasn't intentional. It just... happened.

Some conversations were about the baby. Others were about recipes, old family stories, or the nursery, but every now and then, I'd mention something that had been sitting quietly in the back of my mind, something I hadn't even realized was bothering me until I heard myself say it out loud.

One afternoon, while we were folding freshly washed baby clothes, I found myself staring at a tiny white onesie in my hands.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

Margaret looked up from the little socks she was matching.

"Of course."

I hesitated.

"Do you ever feel like your mind plays tricks on you?"

She didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she finished folding the blanket in her lap before placing it neatly on the growing pile beside her.

"What makes you ask that?"

I shrugged, pretending it wasn't important.

"I don't know."

"I've just been forgetting things lately."

"I'll walk into a room and completely forget why I went there. I'll remember conversations differently. It feels... strange."

Margaret smiled sympathetically.

"Oh, sweetheart."

She reached across the couch and rested her hand over mine.

"Pregnancy does that."

I frowned.

"It does?"

She nodded.

"Your body changes."

"So does your mind."

"Hormones can make you emotional. They can make you forgetful. They can even make little worries feel much bigger than they really are."

I listened quietly. She spoke with such certainty, the kind of certainty that only comes from someone who had lived through it herself.

"I remember crying because I thought I'd left the front door open all day," she said with a soft laugh.

"Your father-in-law came home to find me sitting by the window convinced someone had broken into the house."

"What happened?" I asked.

She smiled.

"The door had been locked the entire time."

I laughed.

"I felt so silly afterwards."

The story comforted me more than I expected.

Maybe I wasn't changing. Maybe this was simply part of becoming a mother.

Margaret picked up another tiny shirt and folded it carefully.

"The mind is a funny thing," she said.

"When we're frightened or overwhelmed, it starts connecting things that aren't really connected."

I looked at her.

"It does?"

"Oh, yes."

"We're always trying to make sense of the world. Sometimes we create patterns simply because we want answers."

Her words settled somewhere deep inside me.

Without realizing it, I thought about the gown.

About Freiah, the photograph, and the receipt.

Were they connected? Or had I connected them myself?

Margaret didn't ask what I was thinking. She simply smiled and handed me another pile of baby clothes.

"I don't want you worrying so much," she said softly.

"Stress isn't good for you, and it certainly isn't good for my grandbaby."

I smiled faintly.

"I'll try."

"I know you will."

She reached over and brushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"You have such a kind heart, Adelaide."

"You care so deeply that sometimes you carry things that don't deserve to be carried."

The words were gentle and comforting. Exactly what I needed to hear.

That evening, after she had gone home, I stood alone in the nursery for a long time. I looked around the room. The painted walls, the tiny clothes, and the little crib waiting patiently in the corner. Everything looked exactly as it should.

Normal. Safe.

I thought about everything that had happened over the last few months.

The town, the gown, Mrs. Halston, Freiah, and the receipt.

One by one, I tried to explain each memory away, and by the time I climbed into bed beside Jake, I had almost convinced myself.

Maybe nothing was wrong. Maybe everyone else was seeing things clearly.

Maybe...

I was the one who had stopped seeing them clearly.

By the beginning of my second trimester, life had settled into a rhythm I hadn't expected.

The days were quieter now. Slower. They revolved around doctor appointments, afternoon naps, baby books, and the little fluttering movements that had started becoming more frequent. Every kick felt like a tiny reminder that I wasn't alone anymore.

The doctor was pleased with my progress.

"The baby's doing well," she said with a reassuring smile after one of my routine checkups. "But I'd like you to avoid unnecessary strain. No long drives if you can help it. Get plenty of rest."

I nodded.

It seemed like sensible advice.

On the drive home, I mentioned it to Jake.

"It's probably for the best," he said, his eyes fixed on the road. "You don't need to be driving all over the city."

"I don't drive all over the city."

"You know what I mean."

He smiled at me briefly.

"I'd rather not worry."

His concern felt genuine. I reached across the console and squeezed his hand.

"I'll be careful."

A few days later, Margaret called.

"Your next appointment is on Thursday, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I'll take you."

"Oh, Margaret, you don't have to."

"I know I don't."

She laughed.

"I want to." There was something comforting about how naturally she said it. I didn't argue. Thursday came, and right on time, Margaret pulled into the driveway.

She chatted the entire journey, telling me stories about Jake's first ultrasound and how terrified she had been throughout her own pregnancy. By the time we reached the hospital, I had almost forgotten how nervous I had been that morning.

It became our routine after that. If I needed groceries, Margaret would offer to come with me. If I had a doctor's appointment, she'd insist on driving, or if I wanted to buy something for the nursery, she'd tell me she'd been meaning to visit that part of town anyway.

At first, I appreciated it. It was nice having someone beside me. Especially on the days when Jake couldn't leave work. Without realizing it, I slowly stopped driving altogether.

One Saturday morning, Margaret arrived with a wide smile.

"I've decided something."

I laughed.

"That usually means I don't get a vote."

"You don't."

She grinned.

"We're going shopping."

"For what?"

"For my grandchild, of course."

I smiled despite myself.

"I think we already have enough baby clothes."

"There is no such thing."

The afternoon passed more quickly than I expected.

We wandered from one baby store to another, running our hands over impossibly soft blankets and laughing over tiny shoes no bigger than the palm of my hand.

Margaret picked up a knitted yellow sweater.

"Oh, look at this."

"It's adorable."

"It is."

She placed it in the basket before I could protest.

"Margaret..."

"No."

She shook her head firmly.

"Grandmothers are allowed to spoil babies."

I laughed.

"I don't think that's an official rule."

"It is now."

For the first time in weeks, I wasn't thinking about doctors or receipts or strange conversations. I was simply enjoying the afternoon. We stopped for lunch at a quiet little café tucked

between two bookstores. Margaret spent most of the meal telling me stories about how impossible Jake had been as a toddler. Apparently, he'd once hidden every spoon in the house because he'd decided they were pirate treasure.

I laughed so hard that people at the next table turned to look at us.

It felt good.

Normal.

When we finally left the café, the afternoon sun had begun to soften. The streets were busy. People hurried past carrying shopping bags and takeaway coffee. As we waited at the pedestrian crossing, my eyes wandered across the street. A woman stood near the entrance of an old bookstore. She wasn't doing anything unusual, just standing there looking in our direction.

For some reason, I couldn't look away. She had long dark hair that moved gently in the breeze.

Something about her felt... familiar.

The traffic lights changed. A bus passed between us, only for a moment. When it moved on, she was gone. I looked around instinctively. The sidewalk was crowded. People moved in every direction. There was no sign of her.

"You coming?" Margaret called gently.

I blinked.

"Sorry."

I hurried after her. I didn't mention the woman because there was nothing to mention. People disappeared into crowds all the time. Besides... I was tired of questioning every little thing I saw. By the time we reached home, the shopping bags had filled the back seat of Margaret's car.

We carried everything upstairs together, laughing as we argued over where to put each new purchase. The nursery was beginning to look complete. Tiny clothes hung neatly inside the wardrobe. Books filled the shelves. Stuffed animals sat waiting in the crib.

For the first time, it truly looked like a baby's room.

After Margaret left, I stood there for a while, carefully folding the little yellow sweater she'd bought earlier. A smile spread across my face. She really had spoiled this baby already.

As I placed it inside the drawer, a thought drifted quietly into my mind. I had never told Margaret that I wanted to go shopping today.

I frowned. Maybe I'd mentioned it to Jake, and maybe he'd told her.

Or maybe... she had simply known.

The thought lingered for only a moment. Then I closed the drawer. There was no point thinking about it. Not everything needed an explanation anymore.

At least... that's what I kept telling myself.

Sleep had become unpredictable.

Some nights I drifted off the moment my head touched the pillow. Other nights, I lay awake for hours, listening to the city breathe outside our apartment. The soft hum of distant traffic, the occasional siren, and the faint rustle of leaves against the balcony railing. Pregnancy had changed my body in ways I expected. It was the changes in my mind that unsettled me more.

One night, I reached across the bed without opening my eyes. The space beside me was empty. I frowned.

"Jake?"

No answer. I pushed myself up slowly, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. A thin line of light slipped through the gap in the bedroom curtains. The balcony door was slightly open.

Jake stood outside.

His back was turned toward me. One hand rested against the railing while the other held his phone. He wasn't typing. He wasn't talking to anyone.

He was just... staring. For a moment, I watched him in silence. There was something lonely about him. Something distant. I slid the balcony door open. The sound made him turn immediately. His thumb brushed across the screen, and the phone went dark before he slipped it into his pocket.

"So you're awake," he said with a tired smile.

"I could ask you the same thing."

He let out a quiet laugh.

"Couldn't sleep."

I walked beside him and rested my elbows on the railing. The city stretched beneath us, glittering with thousands of tiny lights. Cars moved like slow streams of gold through the streets below.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

"It is."

His voice sounded far away.

"You okay?"

He nodded without looking at me.

"Just thinking."

"About work?"

"Mostly."

I reached for his hand. His fingers were cold.

"You work too much."

"I know."

He smiled faintly before leaning down to kiss my forehead.

"I'll make it up to you."

I wanted to believe him. We stood there for another minute before going back inside. He wrapped an arm around me as we climbed into bed. Within minutes, his breathing became slow and steady. Mine didn't.

The next morning, Jake was gone before I woke up. A note sat beside the coffee machine.

Early meeting. Didn't want to wake you. Love you.

I smiled despite myself. Typical Jake.

As I began clearing the breakfast dishes, something caught my eye on the dining table.

His watch. The one he wore every single day. I picked it up. He never forgot it. I turned it over in my hand, smiling.

"I'll surprise him," I murmured.

The drive to his office felt strangely exciting. It had been weeks since I'd gone anywhere by myself. The familiar streets, the traffic lights, and even the frustration of finding parking made me feel a little more like myself again. His office building stood exactly as I remembered.

Busy.

Professional.

People hurried in and out through the revolving doors with takeaway coffees and briefcases tucked beneath their arms.

I walked up to the reception desk. The young woman behind it smiled politely.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Jake."

I lifted the watch slightly.

"He forgot this."

She typed something into her computer. A small crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"I'm sorry..."

She looked at the screen again.

"Mr. Hayes isn't in today."

I blinked.

"Oh."

"He left early this morning."

She frowned again.

"No..."

A moment later she looked back at me.

"It says he's on leave today."

For a second, I simply stared at her.

"I'm sorry?"

"He booked the day off."

She smiled apologetically.

"Perhaps he forgot to mention it."

I forced myself to smile back.

"I'm sure he did."

My voice sounded strangely calm.

"Thank you."

I walked out of the building before my expression could betray me. The afternoon sun felt warmer than it had a few minutes earlier. The watch suddenly seemed much heavier in my hand. There had to be an explanation. Maybe he'd had an appointment. Maybe work had changed his schedule after he left or maybe the receptionist had made a mistake. People made mistakes. I reached for my phone before I could talk myself out of it. Jake answered on the third ring.

"Hey."

His voice sounded cheerful.

"Hi."

A brief silence settled between us.

"I just wanted to check how your meeting was going."

Another pause. Short, almost unnoticeable.

"It's... good."

"I've been running around all morning."

I looked back at the office building behind me. Employees continued walking through the entrance. Jake wasn't one of them.

"I won't keep you," I said softly.

"I just wanted to hear your voice."

His tone warmed immediately.

"I'll call you tonight, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The call ended. I stood on the sidewalk for another minute, staring at my reflection in the dark screen of my phone. He had lied, and the realization settled quietly inside me. Not loudly or dramatically, just... quietly. For the first time since we'd been married, I knew something he didn't know I knew.

When Jake came home that evening, he looked exactly as he always did after work. His shirt was slightly creased, and his tie hung loose around his neck. He smiled the moment he saw me.

"Long day," he sighed.

"I can imagine."

I handed him his watch.

"You forgot this."

He laughed.

"I can't believe I left without it."

"I thought I'd drop it off."

His smile faltered.

"Did you?"

"Mm."

I nodded as I turned back toward the kitchen.

"You weren't there."

The room grew very still only for a heartbeat, then he laughed softly.

"Oh..."

"I must've forgotten to tell you. My morning meeting got cancelled, so I ended up working from another branch."

He said it so naturally, so effortlessly.

I wanted to ask which branch, why he hadn't mentioned it on the phone or why the receptionist had said he was on leave.

Instead... I smiled.

"That makes sense."

And for the rest of the evening, I pretended I believed him. Some lies are loud enough to shatter a marriage. Others are so quiet... they simply make you wonder when the truth stopped living between you. For the next few days, I convinced myself that I had been unfair. Jake had given me an explanation. Maybe it wasn't the whole story, but it was enough. Work was complicated. Meetings changed. People worked from different offices all the time. I hated the person I was becoming, someone who questioned every little thing her husband said.

I didn't want that. I didn't want us to become a couple who doubted each other, so I made another promise to myself. I was going to let it go, almost as though he sensed the distance between us; Jake changed.

He started coming home earlier than he had in weeks. Not every evening, but often enough for me to notice. Instead of opening his laptop after dinner, he'd leave it untouched on the dining table. We ate together. We laughed together. Sometimes we'd sit on the balcony with mugs of tea, talking about nothing important until the city lights blurred into the night.

It felt like we'd found each other again.

One evening, I walked into the nursery to find Jake kneeling on the floor with a screwdriver in one hand and an instruction manual in the other.

"What are you doing?" I laughed.

He looked up with an exaggerated sigh.

"I've been fighting with this crib for forty minutes."

"You mean the crib's been fighting with you."

He grinned.

"It definitely started it."

I sat down beside him, watching him struggle to fit two pieces together that clearly didn't belong.

"You know," I said, trying not to laugh, "the picture's upside down."

He stared at the manual for a moment before turning it around.

"...That explains a lot."

We both burst into laughter.

By the time the crib was finally standing where it belonged, we'd made more jokes than progress. Looking at it together, though, something inside me shifted. For months, the baby had felt like an idea.

Now there was a crib, and soft toys were waiting patiently in the corner.

Our child suddenly felt real.

Jake walked over and slipped his arms around me from behind.

"We're really doing this."

His voice was quiet.

"We're going to be parents."

I leaned back against him.

"We are."

Neither of us spoke for a while. We simply stood there, imagining a future neither of us could see yet. That night, after dinner, Jake insisted on giving me a foot massage.

"I can do it myself."

"I know."

He smiled.

"But let me."

He sat on the floor while I rested my feet on the couch. His hands were gentle, careful not to press too hard.

"Feeling better?"

"A little."

"A little?"

He frowned playfully.

"I expect a much better review than that."

I laughed.

"It was wonderful."

"There."

"That's more like it."

Moments like these reminded me why I'd fallen in love with him. He wasn't perfect, nor was I, but when he chose to be present, he made me feel like I was the only person in the world.

A few days later, we decided to start a pregnancy album. Jake spread printed photographs across the dining table while I wrote little notes beneath each one.

Our first ultrasound. The nursery before we painted it. Margaret holding up tiny baby socks with tears in her eyes. Pictures of us laughing over half-finished furniture.

"This one's my favorite," Jake said, holding up a picture of me standing beside the crib.

"I look exhausted."

"You look beautiful."

I rolled my eyes.

"You have terrible taste."

"I married you, didn't I?"

Before I could answer, his phone buzzed on the table. The sound cut through the room; Jake glanced at the screen, and his smile faded.

Not completely, just enough for me to notice.

He picked up the phone, read the notification for a second, then quietly turned it face down.

"You okay?" I asked.

He looked back at me almost immediately.

"Yeah."

"Just work."

I nodded; there it was again. Work.

A few months ago, I would have asked another question.

Who was it? What happened? Do you need to go?

This time... I said nothing.

Instead, I reached for another photograph and continued arranging them in the album. I could feel his eyes on me for a moment before he did the same. The conversation never returned to the message, nor did I.

That night, we climbed into bed earlier than usual. I rested my head against Jake's shoulder while we talked about names we both knew we'd never actually choose. He suggested ridiculous ones just to make me laugh.

I told him our child deserved better. He pretended to be deeply offended. At some point, the conversation faded into comfortable silence. I wasn't sure when he'd fallen asleep. I only noticed because his breathing had become slow and even. One of his hands rested gently against my stomach, almost instinctively, as though even in his sleep, he wanted to be close to our baby.

I looked at his hand for a long time. Then at his face. Peaceful.

My chest tightened with a quiet kind of love. How could a man who already loved our baby this much... ever hurt me?

By then, I'd been feeling the baby almost every day.

The little flutters had grown stronger over the weeks. They no longer felt like tiny bubbles or faint butterflies. They felt like real movements now, little kicks that caught me by surprise while I was reading, cooking, or simply lying on the couch.

Every time it happened, I called for Jake, every single time, and every single time, by the time he reached me and rested his hand against my stomach, the baby would stop moving.

"You've got terrible timing," I teased one evening.

"I know."

He sighed dramatically.

"I think our child already likes you more."

I laughed.

"I carried the baby for months. I had a head start."

He leaned down, placing both hands gently on my stomach.

"Listen here," he said, speaking directly to the baby. "I would appreciate just one kick. One. That's all I'm asking."

Nothing. He looked up at me.

"I've been ignored."

"I tried to warn you."

For the next few days, it became a game between us. Every kick sent me calling his name. Every time he hurried over with hopeful

excitement, the baby seemed to become perfectly still. Jake insisted the baby was doing it on purpose.

"I swear," he said one night, "our kid is already messing with me."

"I think you're just impatient."

"I am."

He smiled.

"I've waited long enough."

A week later, we were curled up on the couch after dinner. The television was on, though neither of us was paying much attention to it. I was resting against Jake's shoulder when I suddenly felt a firm kick beneath my ribs.

I froze.

Jake looked down immediately.

"What?"

"Wait."

I caught his hand before he could move.

"Don't talk."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I wasn't going to."

"You always do."

He smiled sheepishly.

I carefully guided his hand to the side of my stomach. We both waited.

One second. Two. Three.

Jake looked at me.

"I think I've missed it again."

Before I could answer, Thump. A strong little kick landed directly beneath his palm. Jake's eyes widened. His entire body went still.

"Did..."

He looked at me in complete disbelief.

"...did you feel that?"

I laughed through happy tears.

"I've been feeling it for weeks."

"No..."

He shook his head slowly.

"I mean... I felt it."

He looked back at my stomach as though he'd just witnessed a miracle. For a long moment, neither of us spoke. He left his hand exactly where it was, waiting. The baby kicked again. This time he laughed. A full, unguarded laugh that filled the room.

"Oh my God."

His voice cracked.

"It's real."

I reached up and wiped at the tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

"You're crying."

"I am not."

"You absolutely are."

"It's dust."

"In our apartment?"

He laughed again.

"Very emotional dust."

He leaned down carefully until his forehead rested against my stomach.

"Hi there," he whispered.

"I'm your dad. You've been making your mother worry far too much. So from now on, we're going to look after her together, okay?"

I smiled as I watched him. There was something so gentle about the way he spoke. Something so full of wonder. He spent the rest of the evening talking to the baby as though tiny ears were already listening. He promised to teach them how to ride a bicycle. He promised terrible jokes, bedtime stories, and far too much ice cream when they were older. He even started suggesting ridiculous nicknames, each one worse than the last, until I was laughing so hard my stomach hurt for an entirely different reason.

That night, as we climbed into bed, Jake kissed my forehead before resting his hand against my stomach once again.

"Goodnight," he whispered.

"I'm expecting another kick tomorrow."

Within minutes, he was asleep. I lay awake a little longer, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. The room was quiet and peaceful. I reached over to switch off the bedside lamp. Just then, Jake's phone lit up on the nightstand.

The screen glowed softly in the darkness. Without thinking, I picked it up, intending only to turn it over so the light wouldn't wake him. For the briefest moment, before the screen dimmed, my eyes caught the notification.

I didn't see a message. I didn't see a name, only a small heart beside a contact.

I smiled to myself. It was probably me. I placed the phone back exactly where it had been, switched off the lamp, and curled closer to Jake.

Outside, the city settled into silence. Inside, with one hand resting protectively over our child, Jake slept peacefully beside me. I closed my eyes.

For the first time in a long while...

I believed everything was going to be okay.

The closer my due date crept, the more restless I became. It wasn't fear, not exactly. It was an overwhelming need to prepare.

Every corner of the apartment suddenly seemed unfinished, every cupboard needed reorganizing, and every shelf needed dusting. I wanted everything to be perfect before the baby arrived, even though I knew perfection didn't exist.

Jake laughed when he caught me wiping down the nursery windows for the second time that week.

"You know the baby's not going to inspect your cleaning, right?"

I smiled.

"I know."

"I just want everything ready."

He walked over and kissed the top of my head.

"It already is."

After he left for work the next morning, I decided to tackle the rest of the apartment. The nursery was spotless. The kitchen cupboards had already been reorganized. Even the linen closet had neatly folded towels stacked in perfect rows.

There was only one room I hadn't touched in weeks.

Jake's study. I pushed the door open slowly. The room smelled faintly of coffee and paper.

Morning light spilled across the desk, catching tiny specks of dust floating lazily through the air. His bookshelf stood exactly as it

always had, filled with business books, framed photographs, and files stacked in careful order.

I smiled to myself. For someone who claimed to be organized, Jake certainly knew how to make a mess.

I spent the next hour dusting shelves, wiping down the desk, and sorting through piles of paperwork. Most of it was harmless. Old meeting notes, receipts, business cards, and half-used notebooks. Every now and then I found little reminders of the man I'd married, silly doodles in the corners of legal pads, shopping lists mixed in with work documents, and one crumpled note in my own handwriting reminding him to buy milk.

I laughed quietly and tucked it back where I'd found it.

As I opened the bottom drawer of his desk, I expected more of the same. Instead, I found a small black gift box tucked neatly into the back corner.

I frowned, as I didn't remember seeing it before. Curious, I picked it up. It was surprisingly light. For a moment, I simply turned it over in my hands. Then I lifted the lid.

Inside rested a delicate silver necklace. It was beautiful, simple, and elegant.

A tiny pendant caught the sunlight, scattering small flecks of light across the desk. I couldn't help but smile.

My first thought was that it was for me. Maybe he'd hidden it away because he wanted to surprise me. I carefully closed the box again, a warm feeling spreading through my chest.

Jake had always been terrible at keeping surprises. The thought made me laugh. As I placed the box back into the drawer, another thought quietly slipped into my mind.

My birthday had already passed, so had our anniversary. Neither of those days had included a necklace.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the closed drawer.

Maybe it was for someone else.

A retirement gift. A colleague. Someone at work.

There were dozens of perfectly reasonable explanations. I hated how quickly my mind had chosen the worst one.

With a small sigh, I pushed the drawer shut. I wasn't going to do this again.

I finished cleaning the study and closed the door behind me.

By the time Jake came home that evening, I'd almost forgotten about the necklace.

Almost.

Dinner was peaceful. We talked about the baby's latest kicks, laughed over one of Jake's stories from work, and argued playfully about whether the nursery needed another bookshelf.

Everything felt... easy and comfortable.

After dinner, Jake excused himself.

"I'll just be a minute," he said.

"Work?"

He nodded.

"I forgot something in the study."

I watched him disappear down the hallway. A few minutes later, he returned as though nothing had happened.

The rest of the evening passed quietly. We watched television until I grew sleepy, and before long we were both in bed. I never mentioned the necklace.

I didn't want to.

Mentioning it would mean admitting I'd opened the drawer. It would sound like I'd been searching through his things. I wasn't. At least, I didn't think I was.

The next afternoon, I walked into the study again. I'd forgotten to water the little plant sitting on the windowsill. As I reached for the watering can, my eyes drifted toward the desk.

Without thinking, I pulled open the bottom drawer.

The black gift box was gone. I stared at the empty space. For a long moment, I didn't move. I hadn't imagined it. I knew I hadn't. The necklace had been there, and now it wasn't. I slowly closed the drawer.

My heart was beating faster than it should have been.

There had to be an explanation. There always was.

I repeated that to myself as I left the room. But this time... the explanation didn't come.

The necklace stayed in the back of my mind for the rest of the week. I tried not to think about it.

Every time it surfaced, I pushed it away with another explanation. Maybe it had been for a client. Maybe Jake had returned it. Anyways, it wasn't my business to begin with.

I was tired of questioning everything, tired of turning ordinary moments into mysteries. So I let it go, or at least, I told myself I had.

A few days later, I was walking past my favorite bakery when I noticed the time. It was almost one; Jake usually took his lunch break around then.

I smiled to myself. It had been weeks since we'd spent any time together in the middle of the day.

Maybe I could surprise him. The thought felt simple and innocent.

I stepped inside the bakery and bought two sandwiches, his favorite chocolate croissant, and a coffee exactly the way he liked it.

The woman behind the counter smiled as she packed everything into a paper bag.

"Lucky husband."

I smiled.

"I hope so."

The drive to his office was filled with a quiet excitement I hadn't felt in a long time. I imagined the look on his face when he saw me.

He'd laugh.

Tell me I worried too much; steal half my sandwich. For a little while, we'd just be us again.

I parked across the street from his office building. The paper bag rested on the passenger seat beside me. As I reached for it, movement caught my eye.

Jake.

He had just stepped out of the building. A smile spread across my face. Perfect timing.

I was about to get out of the car when someone approached him.

A woman.

She wasn't anyone I recognized. She looked to be around our age. Dark hair. A beige coat. She smiled the moment she saw him.

Jake smiled back. Not politely or professionally but warmly, it was a kind of smile that belonged to someone familiar.

Before I could make sense of it, she stepped closer.

Jake wrapped his arms around her. The hug wasn't long or passionate, but it wasn't awkward either. It was comfortable and natural.

My fingers tightened around the paper bag. Maybe...

Maybe they were old friends or a colleague.

People hugged and greeted each other like that every day.

I watched as they crossed the street together and disappeared into a small café on the corner. I don't know why I followed them because I wasn't thinking. My feet simply moved.

The café was busy enough that no one noticed me walk in. I stayed near the entrance, half-hidden behind a shelf stacked with pastries.

Jake and the woman sat by the window.

They were laughing, not loudly, just... easily. It was a kind of laughter that comes from knowing someone well.

A waiter brought their drinks, and they continued talking.

Jake reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. That's when my breath caught. He placed a small black box on the table. My heart stopped. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I wondered if I was imagining things again... but no

The woman looked surprised and shook her head at first.

Jake smiled and gently pushed the box toward her. Slowly, she opened it.

Even from where I stood, I recognized the silver pendant. The necklace. She looked up at him, her eyes shining. Then she reached across the table and took his hand.

Not for long, just long enough that there could be no misunderstanding.

I couldn't hear a single word they were saying. I didn't need to. The paper bag slipped from my fingers. It landed softly against my leg, unnoticed by everyone except me.

For a moment, I simply stood there.

The room around me blurred into the sound of clinking cups and quiet conversations. Someone brushed past my shoulder. Someone else laughed near the counter.

Life continued exactly as it always had, but only mine had quietly come undone. I turned before either of them could see me. I walked out of the café.

I crossed the street without remembering whether the traffic light had changed, and by the time I reached my car, my hands were shaking so badly I could barely unlock the door. The coffee had spilled inside the paper bag, the sandwiches were crushed beneath it, and Jake's favorite croissant had broken into pieces.

I stared at the ruined lunch sitting on the passenger seat.

For some reason...

That was what finally made me cry. Not the necklace or the woman. Not even the lie. Just the sight of a lunch I had packed with love... that would never be shared.

The days passed quietly after I found the necklace. I kept waiting for an explanation that never came.

Every morning I told myself I had imagined the significance of it. Every evening I promised myself I wouldn't think about it anymore because some promises are easier to make than they are to keep.

Life continued as though nothing had changed.

Jake still kissed me goodbye before leaving for work. He still called during lunch whenever he had time.

He still rested his hand against my stomach every night before falling asleep, smiling whenever the baby kicked beneath his palm. Looking at him, it was impossible to imagine he was hiding anything and yet... The thought refused to leave me.

One afternoon, I decided to sort through the stack of unopened mail that had been collecting on the dining table.

Most of it was ordinary.

Utility bills. Advertisements. Hospital reminders. Bank statements.

I opened them one by one, making neat little piles as I went. Near the bottom of the stack was our monthly phone bill.

Normally, Jake handled it. Without thinking much about it, I unfolded the pages to check the amount due.

Rows of numbers filled the paper.

Call durations. Dates. Times. Nothing unusual.

I was about to fold it again when one number caught my attention. It appeared again and again, the same number. Sometimes for a few minutes and sometimes for nearly an hour. Most of the calls had been made late at night. Long after Jake had told me he was finishing work in the study. I frowned.

Maybe it belonged to someone at the office. A client, perhaps, or a colleague working on the same project.

I traced the number with my finger. There was no name beside it.

Just a string of digits that meant nothing to me. I folded the bill and placed it back on the table.

The baby shifted gently inside me. I rested my hand against my stomach and let out a slow breath.

No.

I wasn't doing this again. I wasn't going to build stories out of numbers on a piece of paper. That evening, Jake came home looking exhausted. He smiled the moment he saw me.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"It's okay."

He wrapped his arms around me carefully, mindful of my growing stomach. I leaned into the embrace automatically; that's when I noticed it. A perfume.

Soft. Floral. Not mine. I pulled away just enough to look at him.

"You changed your cologne?"

He looked confused.

"No."

For a second, I wondered if I had imagined it.

Maybe it had come from the elevator or someone at work had hugged him goodbye. Maybe it had lingered on his jacket without him noticing. I hated that my mind had started collecting details like this, and I hated it even more because I couldn't stop.

That night, while Jake showered, I stood in the bedroom folding laundry.

His suit jacket was draped over the chair. I picked it up to hang it in the wardrobe. The same perfume lingered faintly in the fabric. It wasn't strong enough to prove anything.

Just enough that I noticed it again. I closed my eyes.

"Stop," I whispered to myself.

"You don't know what you're thinking."

I hung the jacket away and shut the wardrobe door.

When Jake came back into the room, toweling his hair dry, he smiled as though nothing in the world could possibly be wrong. He climbed into bed beside me and kissed my forehead.

"You've been quiet today."

"Just tired."

He brushed a strand of hair behind my ear.

"We'll have a lazy day tomorrow."

I smiled.

"I'd like that."

He switched off the lamp, and within minutes, he was asleep. I lay awake in the darkness, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing. The room was silent, but my mind wasn't.

For the first time... I stopped asking myself whether something was wrong.

Instead... I found myself wondering how many things I had already chosen not to see.

The next morning began like every other. Jake kissed my forehead before leaving for work, reminded me to take my vitamins, and rested his hand against my stomach for a moment longer than usual.

"I'll try to be home early," he said.

"You always say that."

"I mean it this time."

He smiled, picked up his briefcase, and disappeared through the front door. I watched him leave from the kitchen window until his car disappeared around the corner, then the apartment fell quiet again.

I spent most of the morning in the nursery, folding tiny clothes that somehow never seemed to stay folded for very long. The baby kicked every now and then, as though protesting my constant rearranging of the drawers.

Around noon, my phone rang.

Jake.

I smiled before answering.

"Hi."

"Hey." His voice sounded rushed. "I need a favor."

"What happened?"

"I left my laptop at home."

"You never leave your laptop."

"I know."

He laughed softly.

"Can you do something for me?"

"Of course."

"I need you to email a file to one of my clients. It's in the Henderson folder."

"Okay."

"I'll text you the email address."

"Done."

"And Adelaide?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

The call ended.

I walked into his study and found the laptop exactly where he'd left it, sitting closed on the desk beside an empty coffee mug. I pressed the power button, and the screen lit up almost immediately. There was no password. Jake had never hidden anything from me before.

At least... I'd never thought he had.

His desktop appeared.

Work folders covered most of the screen.

I found the folder labeled **Henderson** and opened it.

Several documents appeared. I wasn't sure which one he needed. As I reached for my phone to call him back, a small notification appeared in the corner of the screen.

A message.

I barely noticed it at first. I wasn't trying to read it. It simply appeared.

I miss you already.

My hand froze above the keyboard. The notification disappeared after a few seconds, and I kept staring at the empty corner of the screen.

Someone had sent him a message. That didn't mean anything.

People missed their friends. Their family. Their colleagues. I let out a slow breath and looked back at the Henderson folder. Focus.

I clicked on the first document, but before it could open, another notification slid quietly onto the screen.

Last night felt different.

This time I stopped breathing. The words sat there for only a moment before fading away. I didn't move. The room felt strangely silent so much that even the ticking clock on the bookshelf seemed to disappear. My eyes drifted toward the small messaging icon at the bottom of the screen. A tiny red circle glowed beside it. Three unread messages. I knew all I had to do was click.

One click. Every answer was sitting there. My hand lifted from the desk and then stopped.

No.

Not like this.

I wasn't going to search through his private conversations. I wasn't going to become someone who needed proof hidden inside another person's life.

If there was a truth...

It deserved to meet me in the light, not in secret.

With trembling fingers, I attached the first Henderson document to an email and sent it to the address Jake had texted me. When it was done, I closed the laptop. The screen went black.

For a long time, I remained sitting in his chair. The study looked exactly as it had an hour earlier.

The books were still neatly arranged. His coffee mug still rested beside the keyboard. Sunlight still spilled across the desk; nothing had changed, and yet... Everything had.

I told myself there had to be an explanation. There always had been, but for the first time since all of this had begun... I realized I had stopped believing my own excuses. The messages had only been two sentences.

I hadn't searched for them. I hadn't gone looking for answers. The truth... Had found me.

I didn't call Jake or confront him.

For the rest of the afternoon, I moved through the apartment as though nothing had happened. I watered the plants. Folded laundry that didn't need folding. Rearranged the baby's clothes for what felt like the hundredth time. My hands kept moving, but my mind stayed in the study, staring at those two sentences that had appeared on the screen.

I miss you already.

Last night felt different.

I repeated them over and over until they no longer sounded like words.

By the time Jake came home, I had almost convinced myself they could mean anything. He walked through the front door carrying flowers.

"Daisies," he said, holding them out to me. "They didn't have roses."

I looked at the bouquet for a long moment before taking it.

"They're beautiful."

"I thought they'd make you smile."

"They do."

It wasn't entirely a lie.

While I arranged the flowers in a vase, Jake disappeared into the bedroom to change. I stood at the kitchen sink, trimming the stems one by one. My hands were steady, but my heart wasn't.

Dinner was unusually quiet.

Jake talked about work, about a client whose meeting had gone on far longer than expected, about traffic, and about how excited he was for the baby's next ultrasound. I nodded when I was supposed to, smiled when he joked, and asked questions when the silence grew too long.

It felt as though I was watching someone else's marriage. After dinner, Jake noticed I hadn't finished my food.

"You've hardly eaten."

"I'm just not very hungry."

He frowned.

"Is everything okay?"

The question lingered between us. I looked into his eyes, searching for something. Guilt. Fear. Hesitation, but I found nothing.

"I'm just tired," I said.

He reached across the table and covered my hand with his.

"You've been saying that a lot lately."

His touch was warm and comforting. For a second, I almost told him everything. I almost asked him who had sent those messages. Instead, I smiled.

"I'll be fine."

Later that night, after Jake had fallen asleep, I found myself sitting alone in the nursery. The room was lit only by the small lamp beside the rocking chair. Soft shadows stretched across the

walls, making the tiny stuffed animals look almost alive in the dim light.

I rested a hand over my stomach. The baby shifted gently beneath my palm.

"I don't know what to do," I whispered.

The room, of course, didn't answer. My phone lay beside me on the armrest. I picked it up and scrolled to Margaret's name. My thumb hovered over the call button. She had become the person I turned to whenever I felt lost or needed reassurance.

Whenever I needed someone to tell me everything would be okay.

I stared at her name for a long time, then I locked my phone and set it back down.

No, not this time.

This wasn't something Margaret could fix.

The next morning, I woke before sunrise.

Jake was still asleep beside me. His arm rested protectively across my waist, his face peaceful in the pale morning light. I watched him for several minutes. He looked exactly like the man I'd fallen in love with. The man who had cried the first time he felt our baby kick, who kissed my forehead every morning before leaving for work, and who whispered goodnight to our child before falling asleep and yet... Somewhere between the husband I knew and the messages I'd seen... There was a stranger.

I just didn't know which one was real.

I lasted two days. Two long days of pretending nothing had happened.

I smiled when Jake smiled. I laughed when he made jokes. I let him kiss my forehead before work and ask about the baby every evening. I answered every question as though nothing inside me had changed, but the messages never left me. They followed me into every room. By the third morning, I couldn't bear the silence anymore.

Without really thinking about it, I picked up my car keys and drove to Margaret's house. She opened the front door before I had the chance to knock twice.

"Adelaide?"

The smile on her face disappeared almost immediately.

"Oh, sweetheart..."

"What happened?"

The concern in her voice broke whatever composure I had left.

"I... I just needed to see you."

She didn't ask another question. She simply wrapped her arms around me and guided me inside.

"Come in."

"I'll make some tea."

The familiar smell of cinnamon and fresh bread filled the kitchen. Everything looked exactly as it always had. The polished wooden

table. The lace curtains. The grandfather clock is ticking steadily in the corner. It felt strangely comforting. Margaret placed a steaming mug in front of me before taking the chair opposite mine.

She didn't rush me.

She simply waited. The silence stretched between us until I finally spoke.

"I think Jake is hiding something from me."

Margaret's expression softened.

"What makes you think that?"

I stared into my tea.

"My phone rang a few days ago. It was Jake."

I told her everything. About the laptop. The Henderson file. The messages. The necklace. The perfume. The late-night calls. About everything I had been carrying alone.

Margaret listened without interrupting.

When I finally finished, the kitchen was silent again. She reached across the table and gently took my hand.

"Oh, Adelaide..."

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I'm so sorry you're carrying all of this."

A lump formed in my throat.

"So you believe me?"

She looked at me with the kindest eyes.

"I believe that you're hurting."

The answer caught me off guard.

"But... do you think he's having an affair?"

Margaret lowered her eyes for a moment. Then she sighed.

"I don't know."

I frowned.

"The messages..."

"They were strange."

"They were."

"But did you actually open the conversation?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"So you don't know who sent them."

"No."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"And the necklace? You never asked him about it."

"I couldn't."

"And the perfume..."

She offered a small, sympathetic smile.

"You've told me yourself that Jake works with clients every day."

I felt my certainty slipping.

"He does."

"There could be dozens of innocent explanations."

I looked away.

"I saw the phone bill."

"You saw a number."

She corrected me gently.

"You don't know whose number it is."

Every answer she gave sounded reasonable, painfully reasonable. Margaret squeezed my hand.

"Sweetheart...I know pregnancy has been difficult; I remember what it was like. Everything feels bigger and louder. You start connecting things because your mind is trying to protect you."

Her words were almost identical to the ones she'd spoken weeks earlier.

Back then, they'd comforted me, but now... They unsettled me.

"I saw the messages."

"I know you did."

She smiled sadly.

"But two messages don't tell a whole story."

"They tell enough."

"Do they?"

Her question hung quietly between us. I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. She stood and walked around the table until she was beside me, and then she placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"I don't want you making decisions you'll regret, especially now."

She rested her other hand lightly against my stomach.

"You have to think about this little one too."

Tears blurred my vision.

"I don't know what's real anymore."

Margaret pulled me into a hug. For a long moment, she simply held me.

"You don't have to figure everything out today," she whispered. "Go home. Rest. Talk to Jake when you're calm and if, after that, something still doesn't feel right..."

She paused.

"...then we'll face it together."

I nodded against her shoulder. Her embrace felt warm and safe. It was exactly what I needed. As I drove home, her words echoed through my mind.

There could be innocent explanations. Two messages don't tell a whole story. Pregnancy changes the way you think.

By the time I pulled into the driveway... I was no longer certain of what I had seen.

For the second time in my life... I left Margaret's house trusting her judgment... more than my own.

Margaret's words stayed with me for days.

I wanted to believe her. God, I wanted to.

Every time I thought about the messages, I reminded myself that I hadn't opened the conversation. Every time I remembered the necklace, I found another explanation. Every time doubt crept in, I heard Margaret's voice telling me not to let fear create stories that weren't there, but there was one thing she couldn't explain.

Freiah.

The name refused to leave me alone.

It lingered at the back of my mind like a song I couldn't quite remember. Every time I thought I had moved on, it returned.

A week later, I found myself driving back to Jake's hometown.

I hadn't planned to. I simply got into the car that morning, and before I realized it, the familiar roads were unfolding in front of me.

Mrs. Halston was in her garden when I arrived. She looked up from her roses and smiled.

"I was wondering when I'd see you again. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Never."

She brushed the dirt from her gloves and gestured toward the porch.

"Come. I'll put the kettle on."

We sat together with tea between us. For a while, we spoke about ordinary things.

The weather, the baby, and the old church that was finally getting a new roof. Neither of us mentioned Freiah. At least not at first.

Finally, I reached into my handbag and took out the old photograph.

I placed it carefully on the table between us.

Mrs. Halston looked at it for a long time. Her smile disappeared.

"You knew her," I said quietly.

It wasn't a question. She nodded.

"I did."

"Who was she?"

Mrs. Halston sighed deeply.

"Her name was Freiah."

"I know."

"Margaret told me she was an old family friend."

Mrs. Halston looked up sharply.

"Did she?"

There was something in her expression that made my stomach tighten.

"She wasn't?"

Mrs. Halston was silent for several seconds.

When she finally spoke, her voice had become much softer.

"No."

"She wasn't."

The words hung between us.

"Then who was she?"

Mrs. Halston folded her hands in her lap.

"Freiah came to work for Margaret's family when she was very young. She helped around the house. Cooked, cleaned, and looked after Jake whenever Margaret was busy."

I frowned.

"So... she was the housekeeper?"

Mrs. Halston nodded.

"But she was more than that."

"Margaret treated her almost like family. They were very close."

I thought back to the photograph. The smiles. The white gown. The easy way they stood beside one another. It suddenly made sense.

"What happened?"

Mrs. Halston looked toward the garden instead of answering.

"I've asked myself that question for years."

A breeze stirred the wind chimes hanging from the porch roof. Neither of us spoke until they fell silent again.

"One day," she said quietly, "Freiah left."

"Just... left?"

"That's what everyone believed."

"But you don't."

Mrs. Halston shook her head slowly.

"No."

"Something happened before she disappeared."

My heart began to race.

"What?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know the whole story."

"But I remember the arguments. The shouting. I remember Freiah crying. I remember her saying she couldn't stay in that house anymore."

I leaned forward.

"Why?"

Mrs. Halston looked directly into my eyes.

"She said she knew something she wasn't supposed to know."

A chill crept slowly up my spine.

"What did she know?"

"I was never told."

"Whenever anyone asked, Margaret would simply say Freiah was confused."

"Upset, overwhelmed. The story changed depending on who was asking."

I felt my pulse quicken.

"And people believed her?"

Mrs. Halston gave me a sad smile.

"They believed Margaret. Everyone did. She was respected, kind, and always composed. It was easier to believe that a young housekeeper had become emotional than to imagine something was wrong inside that family."

I couldn't breathe.

Mrs. Halston reached across the table and rested her weathered hand over mine.

"I'll never forget the last time I saw Freiah. She stood right where you're sitting now. She was crying and kept saying the same thing."

Mrs. Halston's eyes filled with tears.

"Why won't anyone believe me?"

The words hit me like a physical blow. For a moment, I couldn't hear anything except the sound of my own heartbeat. Mrs. Halston studied my face carefully. Then, very quietly, she asked,

"Has Margaret been telling you that you're imagining things too?"

I looked down at my trembling hands.

I wanted to answer. I wanted to say no.

Instead... I realized I couldn't.

The drive home felt longer than it ever had before. Mrs. Halston's words refused to leave me.

Why won't anyone believe me?

They echoed through my mind with every passing mile. By the time I reached the apartment, the sun had already disappeared beneath the skyline. The lights inside were on.

Jake was home. For a long moment, I stood outside the front door with my hand resting on the handle. Part of me wanted to turn around, to leave without saying a word, but I was tired.

Tired of doubting myself, tired of pretending, and tired of carrying questions that everyone else expected me to bury.

I opened the door. Jake looked up from the living room.

"There you are."

He smiled.

"I've been worried."

I didn't answer. My silence made the smile slowly disappear from his face.

"Adelaide?"

"I went back to your hometown."

His expression tightened almost imperceptibly.

"You drove all that way by yourself?"

"I saw Mrs. Halston."

The room became very still. Jake stood.

"What did she say?"

I looked directly at him.

"I know you're having an affair."

The words hung between us. He stared at me.

Then, unbelievably...

He laughed. Not cruelly or mockingly, but disbelievingly.

"Adelaide..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"Don't."

His smile faded.

"You're mistaken."

"I've seen enough."

"The messages, the necklace, the lies, I know."

Jake ran a hand through his hair.

"You don't know what you think you know."

"I know you lied. I know you weren't where you said you were. I know that necklace wasn't for me."

His face hardened. For the first time since we'd met, I couldn't read him. Without another word, he walked toward the bedroom. I frowned.

"Jake?"

He disappeared inside. A few moments later, he returned holding something in his hands.

My diary. The old leather notebook I had written in for years. The one I hadn't opened in months. My stomach dropped.

"You remember this?" he asked quietly.

I didn't answer.

He opened it carefully. The pages were worn from months of use.

Little pieces of my life. My fears, my happiest days, and my darkest ones. He turned to a page somewhere near the beginning.

Then he began to read.

"Today I was convinced someone was standing outside my window. I looked three times. Nobody was there."

He looked up. Then turned another page.

"I keep feeling like people are watching me. I know it doesn't make sense, but I can't shake the feeling."

Another page.

"Sometimes I don't even trust my own memories anymore."

Each sentence landed like a stone in my chest. Jake closed the diary gently.

"I'm not reading these to hurt you. I'm reading them because I love you." His voice broke.

"Adelaide... you've struggled before. You told me this diary helped you make sense of your thoughts. Look at what you've written. Look at how frightened you've been for so long."

I looked at the diary. My own handwriting stared back at me. For one terrible moment... Everything around me began to blur.

What if he was right? What if Margaret was right? What if Mrs. Halston was wrong?

What if every clue... Every message... Every doubt... Had come from me?

I felt the room begin to spin.

"No..."

I whispered. Jake stepped closer.

"We can get through this. We'll find you someone to talk to. You don't have to carry this alone anymore."

Someone to talk to. A psychiatrist. Another explanation, another reason not to believe myself. My hands trembled as I stared at the diary. Then... A memory surfaced. Not mine.

Freiah's.

Mrs. Halston's voice.

"She kept saying... Why won't anyone believe me?"

I looked back at the pages.

These weren't the words of a woman losing her mind. They were the words of a woman trying to understand it and trying to survive it. Trying to leave herself a record of what she had felt because she was terrified one day someone would tell her it had never happened.

Slowly, I lifted my head.

"No."

Jake blinked.

"What?"

"You don't get to use my truth against me."

The room fell silent.

"This diary doesn't prove I'm crazy. It proves I trusted myself. I wrote these things because they were real to me. I was frightened. I was lonely. I was confused, and instead of asking why..."

I looked him straight in the eyes. "...you've spent months convincing me not to believe myself."

The front door opened. Margaret hurried inside.

"I came as soon as Jake called."

She looked between us, then immediately walked toward me.

"Oh, sweetheart..."

She reached for my arm, and I stepped back. She froze.

"Adelaide..."

"You've been trying to protect him."

Margaret's face changed.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't."

My voice was calm now.

"So many times I came to you because I thought I was losing my mind."

"You never once asked whether I might be telling the truth."

"You told me I was emotional. You told me pregnancy made me imagine things. You told me to trust him."

Tears filled Margaret's eyes.

"I was trying to keep this family together."

"No."

I shook my head.

"You were trying to protect your son."

Neither of them spoke. I looked at Jake.

"I saw the messages."

Silence.

"I found the necklace."

Silence.

"You lied about work."

His shoulders slowly slumped and eyes closed. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely audible.

"I'm sorry."

Two words. No excuses or explanations.

Just...

"I'm sorry."

The apology should have shattered me. Instead, I felt strangely calm. Months ago, I would have questioned whether I'd heard it correctly. Whether I'd misunderstood or whether I was imagining it.

Not anymore.

I walked into the bedroom and picked up the small suitcase I had packed before leaving for my hometown. Neither of them tried to stop me. As I reached the front door, I turned back one last time.

"I can forgive an affair," I said quietly.

The words surprised even me.

"But I can't forgive being taught to distrust my own mind."

I opened the door.

This time... I didn't look back.

Epilogue

Six months later.

People often imagine healing as a single moment.

A sunrise after a long night. A door closing or weightlifting. It isn't.

Healing is quieter than that. It lives in ordinary mornings, in making your own coffee, in opening the windows because you like the smell of fresh air, in realizing, halfway through the day, that you haven't questioned your own thoughts once.

I learned that slowly. One gentle day at a time.

The little cottage I rented overlooked a narrow lake just outside the city.

It wasn't much. A small porch.

White curtains that danced whenever the wind wandered through the open windows. A rocking chair that creaked every evening without fail. It was enough. Actually, more than enough because for the first time in a very long time... It was peaceful.

My daughter slept beside the window most afternoons.

Sometimes she'd smile in her sleep. Sometimes she'd curl her tiny fingers around mine with surprising strength. I used to wonder whether she dreamed. Now I simply watched her breathe.

That was miracle enough.

Motherhood wasn't what I'd imagined. It wasn't perfect.

There were sleepless nights and endless laundry and mornings when I forgot whether I'd eaten breakfast. There were moments I

cried simply because I was exhausted, but every difficult day ended the same way.

I looked at her and somehow... Everything softened.

One rainy afternoon, a letter arrived.

No return address, just my name written carefully across the envelope. Inside was a single old photograph. The edges had begun to fade. I recognized it immediately.

Jake.

Margaret.

And Freiah.

The same photograph.

Only this time, something else slipped from the envelope. A folded piece of paper. It was written in careful handwriting. Mrs. Halston's.

"I thought this belonged with someone who would understand it."

Beneath her note was another.

Smaller. Older.

The paper had yellowed with age, and the ink had begun to fade. I unfolded it carefully.

It was only one sentence written in handwriting I had never seen before.

Freiah's.

"If they make you question your own heart, write it down. One day, your own words may be the only voice left telling you the truth."

I read it again and again until the words blurred through tears.

Without thinking, I walked to the bookshelf in the corner of the room. For months, my diary had remained untouched. I had

packed it away after leaving. I couldn't bear to look at it, especially not after watching it become evidence against me, but I picked it up carefully. The leather cover was worn beneath my fingertips.

I opened to the very first page.

Then the next and the next. I read about joy.

Fear.

Loneliness.

Hope.

None of it sounded like madness.

It sounded like a woman trying desperately to remain honest with herself. For so long, I had believed that diary was proof of how broken I had been. Now I understood that it was proof that somewhere beneath all the doubt... I had never stopped telling myself the truth.

A soft cry came from the nursery. My daughter was awake.

I wiped my eyes and walked toward her. She reached for me immediately.

Tiny hands. Complete trust. I lifted her into my arms. She rested her head against my shoulder with the unquestioning faith only children possess.

I wondered how many years it would be before the world tried to convince her she was mistaken.

Too emotional. Too sensitive. Too dramatic. Too much.

I kissed the top of her head.

"No," I whispered.

"You won't inherit my silence."

She blinked up at me with sleepy eyes. I smiled.

"If something hurts you...I'll believe you. If you're afraid...I'll listen. If the whole world tells you you're imagining things..."

I held her a little closer.

"...I'll remind you that your voice matters before anyone else's version of you."

Outside, the rain began tapping gently against the windows. The lake rippled beneath the grey sky. Somewhere in the distance, church bells rang the hour. The house felt wonderfully ordinary.

No shadows, whispers, or ghosts.

I looked down at my daughter sleeping peacefully in my arms, and then, almost without thinking, I smiled toward the empty room.

Freiah had been right.

The most dangerous thing anyone ever stole from me... It wasn't my marriage or my home. It wasn't even the future I'd imagined. It was my certainty that I could trust myself and the bravest thing I had ever done... Was taking it back. I switched off the nursery light and quietly closed the door behind me. On the table beside the rocking chair sat two things. An old photograph and an old diary. No longer evidence or wounds.

Just reminders that those memories can be questioned. Voices can be silenced. Truth can be buried. But somewhere, beneath fear and grief and all the stories other people tell about who you are... You remain. Waiting patiently... To believe yourself again.