

ROOMS WE DON'T RETURN FROM

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Stories Matter
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Dedication



For the souls who bled behind closed doors,
who screamed in silence where no one heard,
who drowned quietly beneath their own thoughts
this story is the echo of everything they could not say.

CHAPTER 1



ANNA

Anna wakes up like someone dragged too early out of water, her body is heavy, her head loud. The pills from last night still sit in her, pulling her eyelids down, but her mind won't let her fall back into sleep. It buzzes and twists, restless. She wishes for a coma, something that would shut everything off, but then she thinks of the people who would cry for her. That thought doesn't comfort her, it just hangs there, sharp.

She tries again to swallow her morning pills, hoping they'll knock her out, but it doesn't work. So she lies there, staring at the ceiling, the sunlight pressing in through the curtains. The light feels too bright, the noise outside too loud, the hours too slow. Everything bothers her. She just wants night to come so she can take her medicine again and disappear for a while.

Finally, she pulls herself out of bed and goes into the one room she loves most, the room no one else enters. She shuts the door, lights a cigarette, and lets the smoke curl around her. Music plays from her phone, the kind of songs that sound like crying without tears. She doesn't sing along. She just sits, listening, while her chest feels hollow and her head feels too full.

The day drags. She watches the clock, hates how the hands move. She thinks about the times she cut herself, the blood that felt like relief. She can't explain it to anyone, not even herself. People ask "why," but there is no why. Maybe it was to test herself. Maybe it was to see if she'd live through it. She doesn't know.

Her parents' faces flicker through her head the way they cry, the way they pray for her. She knows they want her to change, to heal. She also knows she can't give them what they want. Sometimes she feels cruel about it, sometimes just numb. She tells herself: They can focus on my siblings. I'm already gone in their eyes.

The afternoon feels like walking in mud. She smokes again, scrolls her phone, ignores messages, stares at the walls. Small things pouring a glass of water, folding

a shirt feel like mountains. She wonders what she'll ever do with her life. She can't study, can't work, can't even make herself care. The word failure circles in her head like a fly that won't leave.

As evening comes, the light softens. It doesn't make her feel better, but it means she's closer to the time she waits for. Night. The hour she can finally let go again. She lays her pills out on the table like tiny stones, lined up neat. She smokes her last cigarette, watching the ember glow in the dark, and thinks about how her scars are the only proof that she feels anything at all.

When the house is quiet, she swallows her pills, sips water, lies back down. The music keeps playing, soft and low. Her chest still feels heavy, her thoughts still scratch at her, but slowly the medicine pulls her under. It isn't peace. It's only escape. But escape is enough for tonight.

Today was different, the kind of morning that felt like a sentence. She woke early, dread already stamped across her face; every step was slow with the weight of last night. She pinched a match, lit a cigarette, and walked the narrow lanes of her neighbourhood, the smoke steaming up like a small, obstinate flag. Someone would say, Ahh, a girl smoking, bad character, and she imagined their heads turning with the polite scandal of it. She kept walking.

Her phone buzzed. No name, just a number she knew by heart. Her rehab roommate, the girl with the quiet laugh and the bruised past, the only person who had ever watched Anna break without looking away.

Anna hesitated, and then answered.

"Where have you been?" the voice asked. Not accusing. Not angry. Just tired, the kind of tired that only comes from surviving your own mind.

Anna exhaled smoke. "You know how I am. I disappear."

"You don't disappear," the friend murmured. "You vanish. For weeks. And then you reappear acting like you're fine. Loud. Bright. Too bright. Like you're trying to convince the world you're not falling apart."

The words landed like stones in her chest. Her mind flickered back to rehab.

“I remember how you were in there,” the friend continued. “Some mornings you were everywhere. Laughing with everyone. Running to every group session like you were outrunning your own thoughts.”

Anna stared at the wall. “And the other days?”

“The other days,” she whispered, “you couldn’t get out of bed. Except for those two cigarettes they allowed you. You’d smoke them like they were oxygen, like they were the only thing keeping you tethered.”

Anna’s throat tightened. The workouts until her legs shook, the days she slept because existing hurt, the nights she lay awake, praying morning wouldn’t come.

Rehab had been a mystery to everyone, but for her and the girl on the line, it had been survival.

“You had days like that too,” Anna said softly.

“I did,” the friend admitted. “But I wasn’t afraid of myself the way you were. I watched you burn so bright it scared the counselors... and then go silent so deep I thought you’d disappear completely.”

Silence stretched between them. Heavy. Real.

“This time,” the girl asked quietly, “where did you go? And are you actually okay... or are you just wearing the mask again?”

Anna looked at the cigarette trembling between her fingers.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Honestly? I don’t know.”

A long exhale came through the line. Not pity. Not judgment. Just someone who knew the taste of the same fire.

“Do you ever think about that place?” her friend asked.

Anna swallowed. “Every day. More than I admit.”

Rehab, people called it hell, but to Anna, it had been something stranger, twisted between punishment and comfort.

“It wasn’t all bad,” her friend said, almost smiling. “Remember the courtyard? Everyone pretending not to look for someone with an extra cigarette to pass around.”

Anna laughed under her breath. “You always found me one when I was losing it.”

“You looked like that a lot,” the girl said gently. “But people gravitated to you.”

Anna blinked. “Why?”

“Because you walked around with a book like it was armor. Everyone else was crying or detoxing... and you were reading psychological thrillers like you were trying to diagnose the whole place.”

Anna remembered it vividly, she’d sit on the steps with her book, and people would gather.

“You’d tell us the plot,” the friend said. “The theories, the motives. Even the guys who acted tough sat around you like kids waiting for a bedtime story.”

A small smile pulled at Anna’s lips. “They liked distractions.”

“No,” the girl said softly. “They liked you. You made us forget where we were.”

Anna didn’t respond.

“And basketball,” the friend added. “You were terrible.”

“They let me play because they felt bad.”

“No. They let you because you tried. Because you showed up even on days when you hated your own skin.”

Anna’s chest ached as memories rose, the cracked concrete court, the thud of the ball, the cheers from people clinging to life. Guys slipping cigarettes into sleeves, notebooks, shoes with a muttered, *Don’t tell the staff*.

The staff pretending not to see.

Rehab, a warzone and a sanctuary all at once.

“We made real friends there,” the girl whispered. “The kind you don’t meet outside.”

She paused.

“And now you’ve vanished again. Just like before. Silent for days..and then suddenly too bright. Too loud. Like tonight.”

Anna’s fingers trembled.

The friend's voice softened to a whisper.

"Tell me the truth. Are you disappearing again? Or are you about to burn out?"

Anna closed her eyes.

The book.

The steps.

The cigarettes.

The laughter echoing in broken hallways.

The days she couldn't move.

The nights she wished she wouldn't wake up.

"I don't know," she said. "I really don't."

And the girl, the only one who truly understood, replied:

"Then stay with me on the line. Just until your hands stop shaking."

She stayed. She listened. She pretended it helped.

When she finally ended the call, the quiet felt different, like the world had stepped back and was watching her from a distance. She walked to her favorite hiding place, the old room with the chipped vase and the half-dead flowers that somehow kept surviving. The window was open; wind breathed through like something alive. She lit a cigarette. The flame flared, then softened. Smoke curled around her face like a veil. For a heartbeat, the room felt safe. Almost warm. For a moment, something quiet and almost tender brushed her, and then a thought slid in, gray and smooth: What if I died?

The memory of the ICU flashed bright and awful. She remembered the antiseptic smell, the machines' beeping like someone else's heartbeat, the way her sister had found her in time. If not for her, I wouldn't be here, Anna thought, and the fact felt both like grace and like proof of how thin the line had been.

They'd told her the word in the sterile room: bipolar. They'd said she'd need a ward, a plan, people watching. She'd known, even before anyone named it, a whisper of a future she feared: "insane," as if madness were a box she'd been building since school. Maybe I still have time to become that, she thought, and the idea was less frightening than the certainty that it might be true.

Violence coiled slowly inside her, not the sudden movie violence, but a private, patient force. Once, after the hospital, she had looked at her sister and asked the thing she'd been trying not to ask: "Did I try to kill you?" The question landed between them like something heavy and real. She knew she was capable of it, she told herself; she suspected, with a strange, terrible intimacy, that one day she might cross whatever line kept her from acting.

Those dark thoughts were not loud; they were deep, and they layered over everything else until she felt swallowed. She smoked until the cigarette was a small gray nub. She listened to the silences in the room and let them fill her until she was rocking somewhere between memory and fear, lost in the same old tide that always seemed to pull her under.

Anna had spent months in her quiet town, the one her psychiatrist had suggested for her peace. But truth was, she was never really at home there. She was always outside, wandering. Most evenings found her on the beach with her friends, the salt wind in her hair, the waves folding and unfolding like secrets. They'd sit for hours, laughing, smoking, sometimes saying nothing at all. For a while, it had felt like freedom. For a while, it was fun.

But that chapter closed the moment she came back to her city. Back where everything seemed to happen, and where she felt more invisible than ever.

The city wasn't just a place; it was memory pressed into buildings. This was where she'd studied, where the stress had crushed her, where she'd laughed too loud at parties and hidden tears in bathroom stalls. Coming back meant walking into all of that again.

Her house here was hollow, her family rarely around. She was the one who stayed, pacing the empty rooms. Recently she'd quit a job she'd barely started. The pressure, the expectations, they caved in on her even before she had the chance to begin. She liked the kids she worked with, saw pieces of herself in them. But the therapists, she had no love left for them. That was a wound that stretched back too far.

Maybe she cracked because the routines reminded her of rehab, that place had been hell, but it had also kept her alive. Structure, check-ins, someone always watching, it had been suffocating, yet it was the only time she hadn't been completely alone.

And when she left, the world didn't hold her the way rehab did. It dropped her. Hard.

Life after her breakup became a kind of freefall, messages, DMs, empty attention meant to replace real connection. But nothing touched her the way those broken people in rehab did. Nothing stayed. Nothing helped. There was only **one person she truly wanted after the breakup**, Mathew, the one whose warmth had made her feel alive in a way she didn't know how to explain. Before she left for rehab, they'd met a few times, talked about the small things that felt big, the big things that felt unspeakable. There had been a spark, not dramatic or cinematic, but real. Quiet. Certain.

And then she vanished into rehab, and the connection dissolved like it had never existed. He didn't know where she went. She didn't know how to return.

But now, weeks after she'd crawled back into her life, loneliness pressed against her ribs with a familiar ache.

Maybe his presence would soften it and maybe reaching out to him would make her feel less like she was drowning.

Today, she told herself, she would reach out. She thought of him every day anyway, better to act than circle endlessly in her own head. She typed: Hey, what's up? And hit send.

Panic struck instantly. She tossed her phone aside like it had burned her hand. Desperate, that's how it would look. And desperate, that's what she was.

She lit a cigarette, pulled smoke into her lungs, and waited for her chest to calm. The silence of the room steadied her, the familiar ritual grounding her.

Later, as she dug through her clothes, she paused. The mirror reflected someone she didn't quite recognize, a different style, a different edge. I never used to dress this way, she thought. I've come a long way, in directions I never planned and in that moment, cigarette ash falling, she realized: no one stays the same. Not her, not the people she loved, not the people who left. Change wasn't a choice; it was a tide that carried everyone, whether they wanted it or not.

Her phone lit up.

Hey, I'm good. What's up?

Relief washed through her like cool water. He replied. He actually replied.

She didn't answer right away, though. She let it hang. Don't look desperate, she told herself. Don't make it obvious, but inside, her heart was racing. She was scared of being too much, of feeling like an imposition like she always did.

Her mind drifted. Inevitably, it went back to her ex. After the breakup, she'd blurred those memories, erased them in the haze of anger and survival, but now, they returned, vivid, cruelly clear. The way his eyes softened when he looked at her. The way his touch carried warmth that could silence her sadness for a moment.

She remembered their closeness, the way they hesitated, teasing who would lean in first, until she surrendered and kissed him. The first kiss, slow and searching, soon gave way to something deeper, heavier, impossible to stop. She remembered her heartbeat racing, the pull of his body against hers, the way the world had dissolved around them. She had felt claimed, wanted like she belonged somewhere, in someone.

Now, sitting alone with a cigarette burning between her fingers, she realized: she wanted that again. Not necessarily him not the person who left her, who she left behind. But that feeling. That passion, that connection, that fire that burned through the emptiness she lived with every day.

And in that moment, staring at her phone screen glowing in the dark room, she knew the truth: she wasn't just waiting for his reply. She was waiting for proof that she could feel that alive again.

The ash on her cigarette grew long before she even noticed. She tapped it into the tray, eyes flicking back to her phone. The message sat there, ordinary and harmless: Hey, I'm good. What's up?

She stared at it like it was a door she wasn't sure she had the strength to open.

What if she said the wrong thing? What if he read her words and heard the loneliness beneath them? What if he pulled away, like everyone else eventually did?

Her fingers hovered above the screen. She typed Nothing much, just thought of you then deleted it. She typed I'm glad you replied then deleted that too.

Instead, she set the phone down again, forcing herself to wait. Her chest ached with a strange mixture of fear and excitement. She wanted him, yes, but more than that she wanted to be wanted back.

Her mind, unkind as always, dragged her backward again. To nights with her ex when the world felt almost bearable. His laugh, his hands, his presence all of it had been enough to quiet the storm inside her, if only for a while. She longed for that silence again, that kind of escape.

She closed her eyes and whispered to herself, "But he's gone. And he's not coming back."

The phone buzzed again, snapping her out of the spiral. Another message, from the same screen name.

You there?

Her throat tightened. There it was proof he noticed her silence. Proof she hadn't disappeared completely in his world.

She picked up the phone, took a deep drag from her cigarette, and typed slowly, deliberately:

Yeah, I'm here.

She hesitated, then added:

Just been... thinking a lot.

And hit send before she could stop herself.

The message left her phone, tiny and weightless, but in her chest it landed like something heavy. She leaned back against the chair, watching the smoke curl upward, waiting for the reply that might change nothing or everything. **The silence stretched, thick and unmoving, and in it the thoughts she'd tried to drown rose back to the surface. The room felt too still, too loud with the sound of her own breathing.**

She almost did it. Her fingers reached for the blade like something moving on its own, a reflex she'd learned the hard way, an answer before the question. For a beat the world narrowed to the metal and the small bright thought of release. Then the image of her mother's face, wet and broken at the kitchen table, stopped her. The blade slid away like a lie she refused to believe.

"Selfish," her roommate had said once. The word stuck to her like gum; she could taste it in her mouth. It burned in her ears every time she thought of her family's prayers, their folded hands, and the way her father looked at her like someone waiting for a punctuation mark.

She swallowed the night meds, the routine as hollow as a promise, and let sleep take the blunt edge for a little while. It held for a few hours and then slipped, like everything else did.

Around one, she woke angry, Why can't I sleep? She thought, and the question kept knocking like someone who wouldn't leave. She went to the window, lit a cigarette, closed her eyes and tried to breathe the thing calmer. It didn't work. The cigarette burned, the ash fell, the flame went down, and the worry only grew.

She paced the room until her feet ached, the way people pace when there's a storm coming and they have nowhere to hide. The bottles and boxes from the medication pile looked like the props from a life she'd been given to act with. She couldn't get more sleeping pills out of reach, out of budget, or out of whatever thin system had kept her afloat before. That thought made the night feel like a long, thin corridor with no door.

She thought of the accusations: "*You use your phone,*" they'd said. "*That's why you can't sleep.*"

As if blue light could explain the nights that shredded her. She had watched others close their eyes like it was the easiest thing in the world. She had watched them breathe through nights she counted in red. That unfairness sat like a stone behind her teeth. She hated it. She hated that people could sleep without paying for it with panic.

Sometimes, on the worst nights, she wandered through the house barefoot, the tiles cold enough to remind her she was still here. She would stand at her parents'

doorway, watching the rise and fall of their steady breaths. Their peace made something sour bloom in her chest.

Then she moved to her sister's room. Blake and Heather slept curled like a child, unaware of the wars happening in the next room. Anna watched them too, resentment coiling dark and slow in her stomach.

How easily they slept.

How gently the night held them.

How cruelly it turned on her.

They didn't deserve her jealousy, but she felt it anyway, heavy, poisonous, alive. Sometimes she imagined shaking them awake just to say, *Look at me. Look at what you don't see.*

But she never did. She only stood there, breathing in their borrowed peace, hating how much she wanted it, hating that sleep came to them like a gift and to her only like a punishment.

Her hands shook, not always visible, but real. She moved like a woman rehearsing madness, turning ideas over until they gleamed sharp. Maybe she was becoming the mad woman she'd once feared the one who paced and talked to the walls and scared people away. Maybe she already was. No one on the outside could tell. On the outside she was neat, late for nothing, polite when she had to be. Inside, a smaller, louder thing beat against the ribs.

At three she opened the window and let the city inhale her. The street down below was soft with late-night life: a distant scooter, a dog barking, the far hum of a TV. For a moment the noise was a lullaby; for another it was a needle in her skin. She smoked until her throat hurt and the nicotine soothed like a blunt instrument. The cigarette was both anchor and traitor it quieted the shaking enough to think and also left her hollow afterwards.

Her mind kept returning to the message about therapy, her father's worry pressed into the screen like an accusation and a plea. Please attend the session I scheduled for you. The sentence had lit her like a match. She had answered "Okay fine," the only surrender she could afford that still felt like control. Now, awake and electrically raw, she wondered if she'd only said yes to stop someone from crying.

She crouched on the windowsill and watched the night trade places with a smudge of grey in the east.

Sleep was a rumor; dawn was a threat. She knew mornings felt like tests: the first hour could decide the rest of the day. She counted the cigarettes left, the minutes until the sun threw its first small knives through the curtains. In the quiet, a thought slid under everything else small, stubborn: maybe going would be better than staying up alone and sharpening herself against the dark.

Maybe. Or maybe not.

She crushed the butt under her heel and went back to the bed to wait for the sun to decide. The city breathed around her, indifferent and endless, and Anna sat very still in the space between wanting to break and wanting, faintly and foolishly, to be held.

He texts : “Hello! What have you been up to?”

She answers quick on impulse, then slows. “Hey... you? I’ve been job hunting. Thought about you a lot. Wanted to text but figured you might not be around that place anymore.”

That night at the party had felt like a small miracle. Drunk enough to be brave, she felt like someone who could be wanted. Men circled, lights threw color across faces, and then he came calm, steady.

“I thought you were cute, so I came to say hi. I’m Mathew...”

They talked until the music blurred. Shared tastes, shared jokes. He walked her home that night like they’d been doing it forever.

They had a kind of electricity that made ordinary things feel alive. After that, she replayed his smile until she could see it when she closed her eyes.

When he texted back now, “Not gonna lie, I did think about you a lot too. Want to catch up?” She nearly dropped the phone.

“Sure,” she typed. “Same place we met? Call it a date?”

I’ll pick you at seven, he answered.

She jumped around her room like someone keeping a secret. Black dress always black the birthday dress she'd bought feeling hopeful once. She set out lavender shower gel, scrub, hair spray. She was ready to be a version of herself that could be liked.

But her body didn't want to cooperate. Instead of eating, she swallowed sleeping pills so the afternoon would flatten into the date. Sleep, she thought, would be a bridge to that evening.

Sleep didn't come clean. At three she was awake, a ghost of a song drifting through the thin walls. Hallucination? A neighbor? She couldn't tell. She opened the cupboard and poured vodka into a glass. A drink used to knock her soft; now it barely touched the edges. She stared at the television with the screen dark as if it were a window she couldn't look out of. She lit a candle, lit a cigarette, watched the flame and told the room how unfair life was.

Morning happened without ceremony. Her father's voice floated in from the hall. "You up early?"

She smiled, but it was a paper smile. Inside she was hollowing out. She told herself the day wasn't hers; the world had been given to people who could meet it without falling apart.

She slipped in an extra pill like a secret. The room tilted and shut. When she woke it was evening eight o'clock. Panic was immediate. Her phone was a flare of messages: Hey, I'm down here, where are you? Are you there? Aren't you coming? Should I leave? I'll leave, please text me...I'm worried.

She shoved the phone to her ear, hands shaking. She explained: the day swallowed her, she'd been trying to sleep, it took over. She apologized unevenly. His voice was quiet on the line, threaded with concern and something like disappointment.

She listened to him ask if she was okay, to tell her not to be alone tonight. She said she'd get there, she'd come, and then admitted she wasn't sure she could move from the spot.

After she hung up, the silence was louder than before. She thought: no one really knew my stories. If they knew the whole thing the pills, the cuts, the nights awake,

the way she checked doors three times they'd leave. People don't stick around for wreckage.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her reflection. The black dress waited on the chair like a promise she might not keep. Outside the window the streetlights threw long shapes. Her phone buzzed again and again, a little insistence that the world still expected her to show up.

She touched the faint pale line on her skin. I'm not easy to love, she thought. I'm a liability. The thought did not surprise her. It fit. It was another truth she carried like a stone.

CHAPTER 2



“So Anna, how was your childhood like?” her therapist asked, a question Anna dreaded every time.

Her childhood? It was just... normal. Nothing fancy, nothing tragic. Just the usual. She had fun; there was happiness back then. But the more the therapist stared, the more Anna knew she had to talk.

“I shifted schools a lot,” she started slowly. “I wasn’t really good at studies until I moved to a different syllabus.”

“How did you deal with those shifts? Was it easy, or did it take time to adjust?”

“Uhm... it was easy when it was just in the city,” Anna said. “But once I had to shift to my hometown, things got messy. People called me names. They never left an opportunity to make me feel like an outsider. It took time, honestly... but then once I adjusted, it was okay. Trusting people was hard though. I always trusted the wrong people when there were good ones right there.”

She paused. “I struggled in college because I saw everyone through the same lens, not trustworthy. But later, I realised some people are worth trusting. Now... I just trust anyone and everyone. I tell everything as if I don’t care. My life is just open to everyone now.”

“I understand,” the therapist said softly. “Can I ask how you were growing up?”

Another question Anna dreaded. She clenched her hands. “I was a bully,” she admitted. “I used to boss people around. I was jealous... always trying to get attention wherever I could. I loved opportunities, always wanted what others had, but somehow never got it. Teachers were always partial. They never saw me, never. And I hated it. I despised my classmates. I despised my teachers. Even now, I still do. There’s politics everywhere, and I hate every authoritative figure. I find it hard to adjust with them even today.”

The therapist nodded. “Okay, why do you say you hate therapists and the whole system?”

“I just hate them,” Anna said bluntly. “I’ve been to many. I’ve never felt okay with any of them. Rehab was a completely different story. The programme coordinator was such a bitch. The counsellor gave me unsolicited advice. After being through all that, I just despise anyone who studies psychology or the entire system trying to help others.”

“Do you think,” the therapist said gently, “it’s because you were offered help while you were still pushing it away? That it was forced on you, and that’s what made you despise it?”

“Maybe,” Anna muttered. “I never asked for help. I never felt like I needed it. But it was always forced. And I hated every moment of it.”

By then she was tired. She just sat there, listening to the therapist’s voice drone on. Her eyes darted to the clock. Why does she talk so much? It’s already 4. The session has to end now. She’s still talking.

Finally, it ended. Relief washed over her. She cut the call, threw the phone aside, and jumped onto the bed face first.

She fell asleep... without her meds. Was it relief from talking? Maybe. She lay there in peace, as if something had lifted off her. For the first time in a long time, she wasn’t sure what exactly had been bothering her or why she always felt on edge but for that moment, she didn’t care.

Her phone rang.

“Let’s go out... maybe a cup of tea?” Claire said.

She jumped up immediately. She would never miss a chance to meet Claire, not now, not ever. They’d known each other since school, two stubborn girls who found comfort in sharing lunchboxes and secrets on sun-burnt playground steps. Through heartbreaks, exams that felt like war, family storms, and every moment that threatened to break them, Claire had stayed. She was the one constant, the one person who never let go.

Anna moved quickly, almost too quickly, an urgency in her hands, a rush in her heartbeat, as if stepping out the door meant stepping toward something she needed to breathe again. She threw on a jacket, barely checking her reflection, and hurried downstairs.

Claire was already waiting in the car, leaning back with that familiar patient smile, the kind that said *I'm right here, I'm not leaving*.

They drove to the café in a comfortable quiet that only years of friendship could hold. The air smelled of rain and dust, streetlights flickering against the windshield like quiet reminders of time passing. They slipped into their usual corner, ordered tea, and for a moment the world felt gentler, like nothing could go wrong while Claire sat across from her.

"How was your therapy session?" Claire asked gently, stirring her tea though it was already sweet.

"It was okay... just like the others. Nothing much to say." Anna's voice was flat, distant, like she had rehearsed the answer too many times.

"I'm glad you're talking to someone," Claire said, eyes soft with worry. "I just want you to get better."

"Yeah." The word dropped between them like a stone, blunt, heavy, final.

A beat passed. The silence thickened.

"Can I go out for a smoke?" Anna asked suddenly, fingers already brushing the lighter in her pocket.

"No," Claire said, too quickly. "I don't want you smoking."

"Please... pleaase, I really need one right now." Her voice trembled, something desperate under the surface.

Claire hesitated, jaw tight. "Fine. But wait for Aaron. Then we'll go."

Anna nodded, but her knee bounced restlessly, her hands shaking slightly as she gripped her cup. She wasn't listening to anything except the urge clawing at her chest. Aaron arrived a few minutes later, warm and loud and familiar, breaking the tension. They greeted him, and soon Jeremy joined. A wave of laughter and nostalgia filled the table, the messy comfort of old friendships.

Eventually they all stepped outside into the cool air. Everyone except Claire lit a cigarette, orange tips glowing like tiny warnings.

“Only one cigarette, Anna,” Claire said firmly.

But Anna took two.

They joked about how the number of empty boxes between them could build a skyscraper, and everyone laughed, except Claire, whose arms were crossed tight, watching Anna like she might disappear.

“I’m studying medicine, and I’m telling you this out of concern , don’t smoke,” Claire scolded, half serious.

“See, a cigarette is just... an escape,” Aaron said, exhaling. “It makes me feel like I have some control.”

“I agree with that,” Anna said quickly, too quickly, clinging to the thought like a lifeline.

Anna coughed sharply.

“Anna, why are you coughing?” Aaron asked.

“Wheezing and all that... yeah,” she brushed it off, pretending it was nothing.

“Then should you *really* be smoking?” he teased.

“That’s okay. I need it.” She finished her second cigarette with a shaking breath.

Aaron and Jeremy lit another. Aaron held one out for her.

Claire’s voice cut the air. “No!”

She slapped his hand, startling them all. But Anna already reached, fingers closing around the cigarette like instinct.

“I swear I won’t talk to you if you smoke another one. I swear, Anna.” Claire’s voice cracked, furious and breaking at the same time.

Anna lit it anyway.

Something sharp flickered through Claire’s eyes, betrayal, fear, exhaustion all at once. She stepped aside, pacing, her phone buzzing violently in her hand.

When she returned, her face was unreadable. “I need to go. My mother called. Anna, come. I’ll drop you home.”

She walked ahead. Anna followed, heart pounding. “Claire... please talk to me,” she whispered.

Silence.

They got into the car. The drive was suffocating, no music, no words, only the sound of breath and the hum of the engine, thick with everything left unsaid.

When they reached Claire’s house, Anna tried again, voice trembling.

“Bye... I love you.”

But Claire was already stepping out, closing the door without looking back. No reply. No softness. Just the sharp click of finality.

Anna watched her disappear into the house, her throat tight, her chest aching. For the first time all night, she felt truly alone.

Her mom greeted her, but Anna just ignored her. She was clearly upset.

I’ve ruined another friendship... I can’t keep doing this over and over again. She lay on her bed in disappointment. I shouldn’t have done that. I should have considered her feelings. Why? Why do I keep doing this?

She recollected every single time she’d messed up a friendship. Her roommates they had lived together like siblings, laughed together, fought, went out; everyone wished they had a bond like theirs. But at the end, it was always the same.

The ones I wish were dead now. I’d kill them if I got the chance. I don’t have a future anyway. I’d rather do this instead. Josh, her closest friend at one point, who had done meaningful things for her, left when she was too much. He just cut her off one day because she was ruining herself.

Her ex the one who said he’d be there no matter what the day he said, “There’s a limit to how much I can take,” broke her completely. Pushed her into madness. She cut, she bled, she overdosed all because of the people who pushed her away.

She was, indeed, a liability. But she didn’t want that to happen with Claire. Claire was too special to lose. She

was that one friend who stood by her through everything. People said they'd stay through thick and thin, but Claire actually showed it. She proved it multiple times. She's too special to me. I can't lose her. I'm scared.

Anna texted Claire: *I really needed cigarettes. I was deprived of it, so when they offered I just took it. You know how it helps me cut off from reality. Then why are you being so rude and mean about it?? Please understand me...*

She covered her face with the pillow, long enough to almost suffocate herself, then finally took it off.

Claire replied with a string of long messages:

I'm sorry for being mean to you, but it was only because I care. I saw you coughing. You have wheezing. I can't stand the sight of you smoking more and dying. I'm getting scared about the way you're going. If this is how you continue, I'm scared you'll kill yourself. Please you wouldn't like it if I did this, right? Just like that, I can't stand it. It's because I love you so much...

Anna felt something stuck in her throat. She was touched. She knew she would never lose Claire. She wasn't like the others.

I love you, Claire. I'm sorry. I won't put you in such a position again. You mean way too much to me...

She could finally sit in peace.

Anna took her meds and tried to fall asleep.

Not long after, she woke up, ugh, not again! Her body was heavy, but her mind refused to shut down.

She dragged herself to the washroom across the hall. Half-asleep, half-awake, she froze.

There it was, rattling, faint but sharp, like someone prying something open. Her heart thudded. Is this real? Am I imagining it? She was too scared to check, too scared not to. What if it really was an intruder?

"I'm not scared to die," she whispered to herself, "but I'd be terrified to see someone standing there."

Instead of investigating, she curled on the sofa in the hall, her pulse in her ears. She sat, then lay down, then shifted to the floor, spiraling. She tried shutting her eyes, hoping sleep would drown the fear. It didn't.

Frustrated, she stormed into the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and went back to her bed. She pressed the blade against her palm, the sharp edges digging into her skin. The cold metal steadied her, as if holding danger meant she had control.

At some point, exhaustion dragged her under. When she woke, it was still dark. The rattling was gone. Only silence. The knife was still in her hand, a thin line of blood streaked across her palm. She didn't even feel the sting. She drifted off again, numb.

Morning came late. The sun was already harsh by the time she opened her eyes. The weight in her chest told her the night had been a mess. She looked at her palms and panicked, tiny cuts, red marks, an ugly reminder.

Her mother mustn't see. She was too fragile; anything that hurt Anna would tear her apart. Anna rushed to the sink, scrubbing her hands under cold water. The sting made her wince. She had enough scars already. Not another one. Not now.

She slipped to the terrace and lit a cigarette. The smoke burned her throat, but the release, the rise of gray air into the sky, gave her a kind of relief nothing else did.

Back inside, the smell of food lingered. Her mother set a plate in front of her with a quiet smile. Anna ate, silent, hiding her hands under the table. When she was done, her mother placed her morning meds in her palm. Anna swallowed them, wishing they could also wash away the night.

"Hey! I'm coming to pick you up... get ready, I'll be there in a while.," Mathew texted.

Anna's chest did a silly little flip. For a second the night before the knife, the insomnia, the shame fell away. She moved as if she could outrun it: lotion, curl hair, the black dress she kept like armor.

When he hugged her, it felt warm and steady. Not flashy, just right. "There's so many places I want to show you," he said, smiling like he meant it. "And I want to sit and actually talk."

She nodded. Inside, something tightened. Conversation about herself? Not tonight. She wanted the illusion of being ordinary, not the scalpel of questions.

They went to Billy's Club. It smelled of lemon polish and cheap whiskey; the music buzzed under their words instead of swallowing them. He ordered whiskey neat. She reached for a Manhattan because she liked the little burn that said she'd tried.

She lit a cigarette and leaned back on the vinyl seat. Smoke and dim light made the world bearable for a while. It felt like cover. It felt like a dare.

"It's strange," he said, watching her, "I was thinking about you a lot."

She laughed too loud. "You did?"

Inside the dim pub lights, the music throbbed low, the kind that lingered beneath the skin. The air was warm with bodies, laughter, and the smell of spilled whiskey. Anna leaned against the bar beside him, both of them holding cigarettes unlit for the moment, just turning them between their fingers.

"Yeah. You were always curious about everything," Mathew said, watching the smoke coil upward from someone nearby. "You remember that night we argued about cameras and stock prices?" He laughed softly, eyes glowing at the memory. "You made me look twice at small things."

Anna looked at him, unsure how to hold the sudden tenderness pressing against her ribs. She wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe she was still someone worth remembering. His gaze rested on her like a hand, careful, gentle, afraid to break her.

It made her dizzy.

The music shifted to something slow and haunting. The noise grew louder around them, yet it felt like the world had muted, leaving only the two of them suspended in a pocket of silence.

"Do you want to go out for some air?" he asked quietly.

She nodded.

They stepped outside, the door shutting behind them with a dull thud, shutting out the chaos. The night air was crisp, biting gently at their skin. Streetlights stretched

long shadows across the empty road, amber and trembling. The city felt paused, as if holding its breath.

They walked without speaking, their footsteps echoing softly against the pavement. A few turns later, they found themselves in a narrow lane tucked behind the pub, an isolated stretch lined with ivy-covered brick walls and warm yellow lamps. The kind of place that made everything feel softer, slower, beautifully unreal.

He lit his cigarette first, the flame briefly illuminating his face, sharp jaw, tired eyes, something aching beneath the calm. He passed the lighter to her, and she leaned in, shielding the flame with her hands. Their fingers brushed, a spark, a warning.

They smoked in silence, leaning against the chilled stone wall. Their eyes met in those fleeting, stolen glances that said more than words ever could. It wasn't just attraction. It was a quiet war, a pull neither of them wanted to name, but neither could escape.

The wind rustled through the trees, sending loose leaves skittering across the pavement like whispers. Somewhere in the distance, traffic hummed faintly, but here it felt like another world.

The air between them was charged. Electric. Almost dangerous.

Anna exhaled slowly, watching the smoke dissolve into the night sky, disappearing the way she wished her thoughts would.

He stepped closer, just an inch. Close enough to feel the warmth radiating off him, to hear the unsteady rhythm of his breathing.

"Anna..." he said softly, like a secret he wasn't sure he should speak.

And the world held still, waiting.

"You're really beautiful. I hope you know that," he said, watching her with an intensity that almost unsettled her.

She laughed softly, tilting her head, smoke escaping her lips like a secret.

"Thanks," she replied, but her tone carried disbelief. Compliments were never something she truly accepted. She wore them like borrowed clothes awkward, temporary, never hers to keep. Deep down she thought, I don't deserve them.

Still, she smiled. That smile wasn't just polite, it was calculated a little mischievous, a little daring. She knew the effect she had. Anna was complicated like that, a paradox in motion. She craved love and yet pushed it away. She hated being perceived, but she drew people in, daring them to see more. She wanted to be adored, and yet she never believed she could be.

She flicked her cigarette butt, aiming it lazily at a spot on the ground, then turned to him with that look, the one that made silence louder than any words. It was flirtatious, challenging, almost arrogant.

She didn't lean in right away. No, Anna liked the game. She always did. She thrived on that tension, the unspoken who will give in first? In her world, she was the one who ruled. Maybe it was a little narcissistic, the way she carried herself, as though she knew she could pull someone in just by holding back.

He reached out, gently brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. His touch lingered, not rushed, like he was asking permission without saying it. Her smirk deepened teasing, almost taunting.

Finally, she broke the stalemate. One hand slipped around the back of his neck, the other tugging at his shirt as she pulled him closer with a suddenness that stole his breath. Her lips brushed his, just enough to set fire to the moment, before she pulled back slightly, watching him. Testing him. Wanting to see what he'd do.

His eyes darkened, no hesitation now. He took her face in his hands, his grip firm but steady, and kissed her back slow, deliberate, like he wanted to savor every second. His other hand slid to her waist, pulling her against him until there was no space left between them.

It felt like the entire world disappeared that dim corner by the road became theirs, as though no one else existed. When they finally pulled away, both were smiling, not because of the kiss alone, but because the game was over, and neither had lost.

For Anna, it was more than just a kiss. It was a victory, a confession, a reminder that even with all her chaos, she could still make someone want her this way. And for him it was confirmation of what he already knew: he had been waiting for this, for her.

That night etched itself into both their memories, unforgettable, like something they'd carry long after the smoke in the air had faded.

He dropped her home, a soft kiss on her cheek.

"I'll see you soon," she said, excitement bubbling in her voice like a child's.

She couldn't stop blushing on her way inside. She opened the door to find her father sitting in the living room, his face tight with worry.

"Where were you, Anna? I was worried. You could have at least texted," he said.

"Sorry, I was out with a friend... why were you worried?" she asked, her tone laced with annoyance.

Her parents were the sweetest, most supportive people. They stood by her through everything. Maybe they didn't really understand her, but who did? Anna loved them, knew every mile they'd cross for her but lately, everything felt like too much. Questions, concern, accusations, it all annoyed her now. She knew she was wrong for feeling this way, but she didn't care enough to change it.

"You're rarely at home," her father said softly. "As a parent, even I wish to spend some time with my daughters."

"I love being outside, spending time with my friends," she said flatly. "That gives me happiness. Staying at home is just... suffocating. I can't sit with my thoughts. It's not possible for me."

She didn't mean to hurt him; it was just the truth. She couldn't stay at home it reminded her of everything she wanted to forget. Anna was fragile like that; the tiniest matter could trigger harm.

Her father fell silent, upset. She went to her room, also upset but unable to say why.

I'm wrong... but he's also wrong, she thought, spiraling. I'm wrong. He's also wrong. But I didn't do anything wrong. Why is he doing this to me? I'm wrong.

Her head spun faster. Her hand reached for the blade she kept hidden under a vase.

She stared at it. She stared at her arm, already covered in scars some old, some still fresh. In that little space, she slashed her skin. Three cuts in the same place. Warm blood poured out, dripping onto the floor. A bloodbath, a crime scene.

Her eyes went cold. It wasn't her anymore. Something else had taken over.

A knock on the door. She snapped back to her senses.

"Oh my god." Blood was still oozing. She pressed the wound tight with her palm. She slid the blade into her bra, the fastest place to hide it.

"It's Dad."

"I'll come out in a second! I'm changing!" she called.

She grabbed a random cloth and wiped the blood from the floor. Too much blood. Her hands trembled. She lit a cigarette, taking a few rushed puffs while scrubbing at the stains. She bandaged the cut quickly, covering it up, then stepped out as though nothing had happened.

"What happened?" she asked casually.

"Let's go out for dinner. We haven't cooked anything."

"Okay, sure," she said, heading back to her room to grab her phone.

Dinner was awkward. They didn't talk except to order food. The silences grew louder with every passing moment. They came home and went their separate ways to their rooms.

Her room was spotless as always. She shared it with her sister, Blake, who had become an almost absent figure in her life. In reality, her whole family had. Not physically, but emotionally. She distanced herself from them without even meaning to. No one knew why. Not even her.

There was a reason, though. Mornings were harsh for Anna. She tried to sleep through them. The only time she felt alive was in the evening, when she went out to meet friends. At night, she would take her pills and drift off.

Her life was boring, really. Her friends held her together now, but deep down she knew friends were temporary relief, while family was permanent. She also knew she would regret this one day but at the same time, she didn't think she'd live long enough to regret anything.

That night she slept. No disturbances. Nothing at all.

Anna woke up late. Her head heavy, her body sore. She turned her face to the sunlight cutting through the curtains, and immediately pulled the blanket over her. She hated mornings, but today felt worse.

She sat up slowly, still groggy. The bandage on her arm had slipped halfway, sticking to the dried blood beneath. For a second, she froze. The memory of last night slammed back into her the blade, the blood on the floor, her father's knock. Her chest tightened.

She rushed to the washroom and locked the door. She unwrapped the bandage carefully, hands trembling. Three deep red lines stared back at her. The sting hit only when water touched them, but she didn't flinch. She just stood there, watching the blood faintly ooze again. Watching like it wasn't even her body.

She whispered to the mirror, "This is me now. This is what I am."

Her face looked pale. Empty eyes. She leaned closer, pressing her forehead against the mirror, breathing heavily. She could almost hear her father's silence from the night before, echoing in her ears. He saw nothing, but somehow she felt like he knew everything. And that silence hurt worse than if he had shouted.

She walked back to her bed and sat at the edge, staring at her palms. She wanted to cry but the tears wouldn't come. Just dry eyes and a heavier chest.

She lit a cigarette, dragging hard, almost angrily. Smoke filled the room, curling up to the ceiling. She hated the smell, but it also felt like the only thing that belonged to her.

The thoughts kept circling:

I'm wrong. He's wrong. I didn't do anything wrong. But I'm wrong. Always wrong.

She pressed the cigarette butt into an ashtray until it burned out. Then she lit another.

Time passed without her noticing. Hours maybe. The world outside her window was awake, but she was stuck in the loop inside her head.

Anna's phone buzzed again.

Claire: *Did you meet Aaron yesterday?*

Her chest tightened. She hated this. The constant check-ins, the suspicion hiding under Claire's words.

Anna: *Yeah, why? We just talked.*

Claire's reply came quick, sharp:

Claire: *I told you he's not good for you. You smoke twice as much when you're with him. I don't want to see you spiraling like that again.*

Anna rolled her eyes. She lit another cigarette out of pure defiance. Of course she'd say that.

Anna: *Why do you even care who I meet? You're not my keeper, Claire.*

A pause. Then another long message:

Claire: *Because I've seen you collapse. I've seen you bleed. And every time you push me out, it's like you're asking me to watch you die slowly. I can't handle watching you destroy yourself.*

Anna felt the heat rise in her chest. She typed furiously:

Anna: *I'm not a child. If I want to smoke, drink, talk to Aaron, I will. You don't get to control me. I can't live in your rules anymore. I don't care if you think you're protecting me you're suffocating me.*

Her fingers trembled as she sent it. She instantly regretted the harshness, but she couldn't take it back.

Claire's "typing..." bubble appeared, then disappeared. Then again. Then nothing.

Anna crushed her cigarette in the ashtray, her hands shaking. Why does everyone always want to fix me? Can't anyone just let me be the wreck I am?

By then, Anna was done for the day. She'd had enough. Everyone around her had pressed too hard, suffocated her until she couldn't breathe.

She didn't think twice, she pulled on the first clothes she could find, grabbed her keys, and slammed the door behind her. The car roared to life, and she pressed the accelerator as if speed could drown out the voices in her head.

Her parents had always been reluctant about letting her drive. Deep down, they must have known, Anna was reckless, impulsive, and far too self-destructive. But it was too late now.

She headed for the busiest bar in the city, the one place where no one would notice her unraveling. The air inside was thick with smoke, laughter, and bad intentions. She slid onto a stool, dropped her crumpled bills on the counter, and ordered round after round until the edge of her thoughts blurred.

It didn't take long before the drinks pulled her under. Tipsy, her vulnerability painted itself across her face like a beacon. People noticed. Strangers drifted toward her like moths to a flame. She waved most of them off, too tired to care, too numb to protest.

Then he appeared. An attractive man with sharp eyes and a smirk that said he already knew the answer to questions he hadn't asked. Their eyes locked, hers distant and cold, his hungry. He sat down beside her, leaning in close enough for her to smell the faint trace of cologne mixed with smoke.

"I don't think it's safe for you to drive home now," he murmured, his voice low, deliberate. "You can stay with me tonight."

Anna didn't even pause. Hesitation wasn't part of her anymore. She nodded, wordless, surrendering.

He took her keys without asking. Sliding into the driver's seat of her car, he glanced at her in the rearview mirror. She sat slumped, expression unreadable, as neon lights flashed past the windows.

He drove in her car and took her home.

Up the stairs, through a door that closed behind them with a thud that felt final. He was on her almost instantly lips, hands, body pressing her into the sofa. Anna didn't push him away. She let it happen. Not out of desire, but out of exhaustion. She didn't have the energy to say no. She didn't have the will to care.

His touch was rough, urgent, as if he'd been starved for it. Her own movements were automatic, detached, like she was watching someone else live inside her skin. A part of her screamed this wasn't what she wanted, but the louder voice said: just let it be, it doesn't matter.

The night blurred into fragments, kisses too hard, hands pulling fabric away, her body responding because that's what it knew how to do. But her mind was gone, floating somewhere far away, untouched by any of it. It wasn't closeness. It wasn't connection. It was hollow.

Morning came sharp and merciless.

The sunlight bled through half-closed curtains, stinging her eyes. Anna lay still, staring at the ceiling, her chest tight. Her head pounded, her mouth tasted of whiskey and smoke, and shame was already crawling under her skin.

She sat up slowly, scanning the floor, clothes scattered, her purse tipped over, a cigarette butt in an ashtray that wasn't hers.

The man was asleep beside her, turned away, breathing slow and easy, like last night was nothing more than a routine. Maybe it was. Maybe she was just another night in a series he wouldn't even remember properly. Anna pulled on her clothes quickly, avoiding the mirror in the hallway. She didn't want to see herself. Not like this. Not again.

Keys in her hand, she slipped out quietly, the apartment door clicking shut behind

The drive home felt endless. Every stoplight was another reminder, every glimpse in the rear-view mirror a stab of disgust. She kept her eyes forward, jaw clenched, hands trembling on the steering wheel.

When she finally parked, she walked past her parents without a word, avoiding her parents gaze. She could feel the night still clinging to her like smoke, like dirt.

In her room, she locked the door, lit a cigarette with shaking hands, and sat on the cold floor. She dragged the smoke deep into her lungs, exhaled slow.

But this time, it wasn't escape. It wasn't relief.

It was self-punishment. She whispered to herself, voice cracking: I can't keep doing this...

Anna sat on the cold floor of her room, cigarette burning between her fingers, the smoke curling around her face like a slow suffocation. Her hands still trembled, not from alcohol anymore but from the weight of everything.

Her phone buzzed once. Then again. She stared at it for a long time, not wanting to move, afraid of who it might be. Finally, she picked it up.

Claire: *Where were you last night?*

Claire: *Don't tell me you were with Aaron again.*

Claire: *Anna, please. Talk to me. I'm worried.*

Anna stared at the messages, the words blurring. She could almost hear Claire's voice, that soft edge of worry mixed with frustration. It was always like this now. Questions. Warnings. Fear.

Another message came through.

Claire: *You're hurting yourself. You're smoking too much. Drinking too much. I don't recognize you anymore.*

Anna exhaled a harsh stream of smoke, flicking ash onto the floor. She typed, then erased, then typed again. Everything she wanted to say sounded wrong.

Finally, she sent:

I'm fine. Stop asking. Please.

Her phone buzzed almost immediately.

Claire: *You're not fine. I'm your friend, I'm allowed to care.*

Anna threw her phone onto the bed and buried her face in her knees. She wanted to scream. She wanted to disappear. She wanted someone to hold her, but when someone tried, she felt like she was drowning.

The smoke filled the room, and Anna sat there, silent, staring at nothing, feeling both suffocated by Claire's care and terrified of losing it.

Mathew called. *"Hey... what have you been up to? Wanna go for a drive?"*

Anna stared at her phone. Her fingers trembled. She was drowning in guilt, but she couldn't tell him. Not yet. Mathew was the only thread she still had left, the last person she thought might stay. If she told him, that thread would snap.

She forced a reply:

"Yeah... sure."

Within minutes, he was outside. She shuffled to the car wearing a baggy T-shirt and track pants. Her hair was messy, makeup half-smudged. It was like she'd stopped even trying to look like herself, like she'd surrendered that last bit of pretending.

She slid into the passenger seat without a word.

Mathew glanced at her. He knew instantly something was wrong. "Anna, what's going on? You're so quiet."

"Nothing," she said, eyes fixed on the window. "Just a rough night."

He didn't buy it. Something bigger was eating her.

At a stoplight, he reached out and took her hand to comfort her. His thumb brushed over a thin, raised line on her palm, a scar. From a knife. How had he missed it before?

A knot formed in his stomach. He pulled the car over to the side of the road, his voice shaking.

"Anna... I want you to talk to me. We can figure this out."

She looked at him with those cold, distant eyes and forced a small smile.

"I'm okay."

"No. You're not. What are you hiding from me?"

Her throat ached as she whispered, "Mathew, I don't think we should see each other anymore." On the outside she looked calm; inside she was splintering.

"What?" he said, his voice breaking. "Anna, no. Tell me what's wrong."

"There's no point. This isn't going to work. You'll just leave. I'm too much to handle. I should've told you before, but... I'm messed up. I can't do this."

Silence. The kind that pressed down like a weight. But Mathew wasn't going to let her vanish like this. He gripped the steering wheel, then started driving again. She didn't ask where. The roads blurred into places she'd never seen before. Finally he stopped. They got out.

A lake stretched before them, its surface black and glassy. Rocks circled the edges like quiet sentinels. The breeze whipped Anna's hair across her face.

Mathew sat on a rock; Anna sat beside him. They said nothing.

“Do you have cigarettes?” she asked.

He nodded and handed her one. The wind fought the flame, but she managed to light it.

He played music on his phone, low, steady.

It was strangely comforting. For the first time since last night, she felt a flicker of peace. Not forgiveness. Not healing. Just stillness.

After a long time she spoke. Her voice cracked but she covered it with a laugh.

“Mathew... I’m guilty of something. I’ve been having a hard time, insomnia, these vivid memories, feeling unpredictable. The smallest things set me off. I think I’m a danger to myself. Maybe to others, too.”

She inhaled the smoke. Exhaled slowly.

“I passed out drunk in someone else’s apartment. I wasn’t conscious enough to stop what happened. I let him take advantage of me. I’m also at fault for letting it happen...”

Her words drifted into the wind.

Silence again. Not the soft, comfortable kind, but the kind that pressed down on her chest like a coffin lid. Her throat tightened, her stomach turned. It was the kind of silence that could bury her alive. “I don’t completely understand what’s going on with you... how you feel, or why you do things that hurt yourself,” Mathew finally said, his voice trembling but steadying itself as it went. “But I want to. I’m not scared of you, Anna. I’m not angry. I just want to know if you’re willing to get better?”

“Yeah... I am. I’m sorry.”

But she knew it was a lie. “Better” was a foreign country she’d never reach. The truth? She’d already cancelled on her therapist. She couldn’t talk. Talking felt like bleeding in public. Therapy wasn’t what she needed, or so she told herself.

Mathew didn’t see the lie. All he saw was the flicker of hope he needed. He took her hand and held it tight, as if to promise he wouldn’t let go without a fight.

Hours slipped away. They sat there, laughing at small things, the kind of laughter that felt like it belonged to someone else. How could another person's company light her up this much, when on her own she drowned? Strange. By the time it grew dark, they left. He dropped her home.

Her father sat in the living room, TV humming. She collapsed beside him on the couch, leaning against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay, Anna. I understand."

She was dead tired, craving nothing but sleep. She took her meds, the ritual, the only constant in her unraveling days.

Sleep came slowly. Then it came too fast..

CHAPTER 3



Anna grabbed her car keys and started driving. The speed was dangerous, urgent, like her life depended on reaching somewhere unknown. She was dressed in black, her comfort color, her armor, also the shade she'd wear at a funeral where everyone else chose white.

The streets were deserted. Streetlights buzzed. No dogs barking, no cars, no people. The world had emptied itself out, just for her. An isolated road, a girl driving with too much purpose.

She stopped.

A house. Her house. But not the same. The walls cracked, covered in creeping vines. Windows smashed, floors washed out to a sickly grey. It smelled of dust and decay, like no one had lived there for decades.

Inside, a room full of people. All dressed in white. Their eyes followed her like she was the ghost among them. It hit her before she reached the center. A funeral.

A body, covered in white cloth, lay in the middle. The room reeked of lilies and death. Her hands shook as she pulled the cloth back, breath caught in her chest.

A pale face. A baby. Stillborn.

She woke up gasping, drenched in sweat. Her eyes darted to the door, closed, but she checked anyway. Locked. Safe. She scanned the room, expecting black and white shadows, but it was just her room. Just normal. She reached for her phone, scrolled through messages she didn't want to read. Then she searched: stillborn child dream meaning. No answer satisfied her.

The dread sat heavy.

She reached for the vodka bottle. Drank enough to blur the edges. Took four more pills than prescribed. Zolpidem.

Her stomach lurched, nausea clawed its way up her throat. She vomited, then collapsed into unconsciousness.

The sunlight slapped her face awake. A hangover worse than pain, her body sore, her head throbbing like it might split in two. Shame lingered heavier than the ache. She dragged herself up, closed the curtains, and let the darkness swallow her again. She curled back into bed.

Sleep took her like she hadn't rested in weeks

Her phone rang over and over again. She didn't move. She couldn't. The sound was distant, like an alarm in another room, another life. She was too tired to lift her head.

That was how she was now every morning, exhausted before the day even began. Her body heavy, her mind blank, like she'd run a marathon in her sleep. She couldn't even stand without feeling drained.

The door opened. Blake walked in, her voice slicing through the haze.

"Why are you sleeping so much?"

"I'm tired... please, just let me be." Anna's voice was flat. Not even angry. Just done. Blake stood there with that look the one that mixed pity and judgment, like she was staring at a stranger she was related to. Anna didn't want to explain herself again. Not today. Not ever.

Blake, the golden child. Like Heather. Both of them shining examples of what their family loved: religious, disciplined, modest. They didn't drink, didn't smoke, dressed the part, spoke the part. They had names in society, and they lived up to them.

Anna was the opposite. The quiet one. The strange one. The one no one could quite describe except as "different." Her habits smoking, staying out late, drifting were tolerated but never respected. A necessary evil, they thought. A coping mechanism they'd rather not see.

Her father joined Blake at the doorway. His voice came heavy, frustrated.

“What’s making you so tired, Anna? Everyone gets overwhelmed your mother, me, all of us. But what you’re doing now... it’s putting more pressure on us than you realize. It feels like you’re only thinking about yourself.”

There it was. The word. Selfish. The same word they hurled at her every time they didn’t understand her. Every time she didn’t fit their script.

Anna didn’t move. Didn’t even blink. She chose not to listen.

Her mother’s voice joined in, rising like an old rehearsed drama.

You’re out every day, Anna. Every single day. There has to be some limit. We’re not going to check on you anymore, sick or healthy, it’s your choice. Going out occasionally, with the girls, that’s fine. But don’t take our quiet for weakness. I’ve been biting my tongue for days.

Anna’s fists tightened under the blanket. Sick? Her mind screamed the word. Sick?

Her eyes flicked up, anger boiling through her veins like fire. Sure, everyone had a limit. But she’d never asked anyone to carry her. She never asked them to be there.

I don’t care about them anymore. She told herself that, over and over, like a prayer. Or a curse. People who didn’t understand or respect her didn’t deserve her respect either.

Her father left, his footsteps heavy with anger. She stayed lying down, the words circling in her skull.

Sick. Sick. Sick. Hah. Great. Now I’m sick.

Her thoughts spiraled, a tornado she couldn’t stop. The anger inside her was electric, veins tight, eyes twitching. She’d never felt it this strong before.

It was like they knew her deepest wounds and chose to strike right there.

If I had a knife... the thought flashed across her mind before she could stop it. She could almost feel it in her palm, cold and sharp. That’s how angry she was.

She stared at the ceiling. I’m of no use to them anymore. I’m not their daughter. Not their pride. I’m nothing. I don’t care about anyone anymore.

And maybe, just maybe, that was the scariest part.

For the first few days she couldn’t move.

Not laziness, but an exhaustion that felt baked into her bones. Her body was heavy, her chest tight, her head spinning. She stayed in bed, curtains half drawn, phone buzzing on the table ignored.

Her parents hovered. Her mother with bowls of soup she never finished, her father pacing with questions she couldn't answer. Blake came in once or twice, saying, "You're always tired, Anna. What is this?" Anna rolled away, muttering, "Just let me be."

She slept, woke, drifted back under. Every morning started with the same weight she would open her eyes, see the light spilling into the room, and feel nothing but defeat.

On the third day, Claire showed up. She didn't ask, she just came. She slipped into the room quietly, sat on the edge of the bed, and pushed a bowl toward Anna. "Eat at least a little," she said, her tone a mixture of scolding and tenderness. Anna obeyed, a few slow spoonfuls, not because she wanted to but because Claire's eyes were watching.

By the fourth day, the nausea eased. Anna sat up without help, brushed her hair half-heartedly. Her mother sighed like this tiny effort was a miracle. Blake watched with the smug silence of someone who never faltered. Anna wanted to scream, "I'm not you, stop comparing me to you." But she stayed quiet.

The week dragged. The dream of the funeral returned, clinging to her like smoke. Some nights she woke gasping, clutching the sheets. Some nights she woke angry. She craved an anchor.

On the sixth morning, still pale but restless, she dragged herself up to the terrace. The sun was too bright, but she lit a cigarette anyway. The first drag burned her throat harsh after a week of barely eating but the relief came instantly. The smoke filled her lungs and for a moment, she wasn't a patient in bed, or a problem her parents whispered about. She was herself again. Cigarettes were her identity, her stubborn ritual, her constant.

When Claire texted "Hope you're resting", Anna didn't reply. She exhaled a long stream of smoke and thought, Resting is killing me. This is who I am.

By the seventh day she was moving again. She showered, put on clean clothes, and sat with her father in the living room. He didn't say much, just glanced at her bandaged palm once and looked away. They watched TV together in silence, and Anna leaned her head on his shoulder without explaining anything.

Later that night, she sat on the terrace again. Cigarette in hand, she looked at the city spread beneath her, glowing in the dark. For the first time in a week, she didn't feel sick. She still felt broken but at least she felt alive.

Anna leaned against the terrace railing, cigarette glowing between her fingers, the night stretching quiet around them. Aaron stood beside her, not a stranger, not exactly a friend, just someone from school who had drifted back into her life without warning. Talking to him felt strangely natural, too natural, like slipping into a conversation that had started years ago.

Aaron always wore this half-smile, the kind that looked harmless until you realized you didn't know what it meant. He had sharp tastes, music, films, books, and an odd way of making everything sound like an inside joke that only he understood. His voice was soft, almost warm, but every now and then Anna caught a flicker behind it. Something quick. Something that wasn't entirely...safe.

Not dangerous enough to walk away from. Just dangerous enough to keep her curious.

They smoked without speaking at first. Two breaths dissolving into the cold night, two flames burning down too fast.

Aaron glanced at her, watching the way she held her cigarette like it was the only steady thing in her entire life.

"You ever think," he said, voice low, almost careful, "that people don't really want to live... they just don't want to die yet?"

Anna looked at him slowly.

Something in her chest shifted, like a door opening to a darker room.

"Yeah," she said. "I think that all the time."

Aaron let out a soft laugh, the kind that didn't reach his eyes.

"I knew you'd get it. Everyone else pretends. You don't."

“I’m tired of pretending,” she whispered.

He flicked ash to the ground, the ember glowing briefly like a warning.

“When you smoke with someone,” he said, “you see who they really are. No filters. No good versions. Just... the parts that don’t fit anywhere else.”

She exhaled a shaky breath.

“Is that what we’re doing?”

He nodded once.

“Yeah. We’re showing each other our ruin.”

There was no smile, no softness, no attempt at comfort.

Just the quiet truth of two people dissolving slowly in the same darkness.

They stood there like that, side by side, not touching, not looking directly at each other, but the space between them was heavy, charged, intimate in a way that felt almost dangerous.

Anna took another drag. Her hands trembled. This time, she didn’t hide it.

Aaron noticed. He didn’t comment.

He only said, “You don’t have to be okay with me.”

For a moment, that felt like the closest thing to safety she had ever known.

A little later, Claire and the others joined them. The air grew warm with chatter and laughter, jokes flying back and forth. Anna craved this time away from home, just sitting with people who didn’t suffocate her with expectations. Genuine happiness, fleeting but real.

But Claire saw it all, the tremor in Anna’s hands as she lit another cigarette, the small heap of burnt-out filters gathering at her feet like evidence. Her gaze was sharp, almost alarmed. She watched Anna mirror Aaron’s every move, lighting up when he did, inhaling deeper, faster, as if trying to keep up with something she couldn’t name.

“Anna,” Claire whispered when the others drifted into their own conversations. Her voice was low, careful. “This isn’t you. You’re already way past your limit. You don’t ever smoke like this with me.”

Anna forced a smile, but it felt thin, brittle. Something inside her twisted. She could feel the split inside her, the strange quiet she found with Aaron, almost addictive, and the heavy, growing worry in Claire's eyes. Two worlds pulling at her, neither letting go.

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Blake: *When are you coming home?*

Anna didn't even open it. Her jaw tightened as she shoved the phone back into her pocket, like the very thought of home scraped against her skin. Tonight, she didn't want to be found.

Claire edged closer, her voice barely a breath. "You've been smoking a lot more since Aaron came back into the picture."

Anna let out a shaky exhale, smoke curling around her face. "So what?" she muttered. "It's the only thing that shuts everything off. You know that."

The way she said it, flat, tired, almost hollow, made Claire's stomach sink. She recognized the tone. The kind someone uses when they're slipping, and pretending they aren't.

"That's not the point." Claire's tone sharpened. "I've seen you cough, I've seen you wheeze, Anna. You think I don't notice? And now it's like... every time he's around, you just light up one after the other. I don't trust it. I don't trust him." Anna froze for a second, taken aback. "What do you mean you don't trust him?"

Claire glanced toward Aaron, who was laughing with the others, his smile glinting in the terrace lights. "He's charming, sure. Sweet, even. But I've seen people like him. They draw you in, and you can't tell if it's real or just... a game. You don't need another person like that in your life."

Anna forced a laugh, trying to brush it off. "You think too much, Claire. He's just a friend."

"Are you sure?" Claire's voice was almost a whisper, her eyes searching Anna's face. "Because to me, he looks like trouble."

Anna looked back at Aaron then, catching that peculiar smile of his warm and mischievous all at once, the kind that made her feel seen but also slightly on edge.

She inhaled her cigarette deeply, letting the smoke fill her lungs before she answered.

“Maybe trouble’s exactly what I need.”

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. Blake’s text glowed on the screen: When are you coming home?

Anna ignored it. She took another drag, exhaled into the night, and turned back toward Aaron.

Aaron leaned against the railing, the city lights flickering below them like dying stars. He had that peculiar half-smile again the kind that made you wonder if he knew something you didn’t. Anna couldn’t tell if it was reassuring or mocking, but she found herself watching it anyway.

“You ever notice,” he said, flicking the ash from his cigarette, “that smoking feels like holding time still? Just for a few minutes, nothing moves forward. It’s just you, the smoke, and the burn.”

Anna exhaled a heavy cloud, staring into it. “Yeah... maybe that’s why I can’t stop. Feels like my only pause button.”

He nodded, a little too knowingly. “Exactly.” His voice softened, but there was an edge beneath it. “Thing is, pauses can stretch so long you forget to play again.”

She frowned, unsure if he was warning her or himself.

For a moment, silence took over. Then he glanced sideways at her, his eyes sharp, curious. “You know, Anna... you’re not easy to figure out. One second you look like you’re about to cry, the next like you could kill someone. I kinda like that.”

She smirked, half-amused, half-wary. “Maybe you just like chaos.”

“Maybe,” he admitted, dragging on his cigarette. “But maybe I see myself in it too.”

The way he said it so casual, so smooth made her chest tighten. Was this comfort, or was this danger disguised as charm? She couldn’t tell, and maybe she didn’t want to.

Claire’s laughter drifted from the other end of the terrace, her voice cutting through the haze like a tether. Anna turned instinctively, catching sight of her, and felt the

sting of guilt. Claire had always worried that Aaron pulled her into heavier smoking, darker moods. Maybe she wasn't wrong.

Anna looked back at Aaron. He was already watching her, that peculiar smile stretching just enough to unsettle her. "Don't worry," he said quietly, as if he'd read her thoughts. "I'm not the villain Claire thinks I am."

But the way he said it... even Anna couldn't be sure.

Just then, her phone buzzed. Blake: When are you coming home?

And the moment broke.

CHAPTER 4



Anna came home to find her family sitting together in the living room, the TV humming softly in the background. It was the first time in ages she'd seen them all in one place. Not because they avoided each other, but because life had turned them into strangers under the same roof, Heather buried in her studies, Blake always the golden child, her parents drowning in routines. It should have felt like warmth. Instead, to Anna, it felt like watching a family she didn't belong to anymore.

She didn't stop. Just walked past them, straight to her room, her sanctuary, her battlefield. She began rearranging her things, stacking books, folding clothes she hadn't worn in weeks. It was less about order and more about reclaiming a sliver of control. She lit a candle, something she did rarely, either when she was desperate for a break or unexpectedly at peace. The flame flickered gently, too delicate for the chaos she carried inside. She brought it closer, using it to light her cigarette.

Her voice was rough now, husky from smoke and late nights. Sometimes she thought about her college days, when she sang for productions with a voice people called sweet. She used to be admired for it. But that felt like a stranger's life. She didn't even like singing, it was just something that gave her a brief taste of popularity.

Her phone buzzed. Jaison.

"heyy, I'm going for this conference tomorrow, it's close to your place. I'll come meet you?"

Anna felt something loosen inside her chest for the first time in days. A small warmth, fragile and foreign. Tea. Like old times. She almost whispered it to herself.

Jaison had been one of the few who truly noticed her absence. Back when she vanished into rehab, no one knew, except her family and Claire. She had been isolated, spiraling, untethered, her mind a storm with no shore. But Jaison had

searched. Called mutual friends. Tracked her down with persistence she'd never forgotten. He knew her darkness, and he stayed.

Excitement made her almost childlike. Breath quick, eyes bright. "Jaison's coming tomorrow," she said. "I'm going out."

Her father's voice cut through her joy like steel. "Anna, how many times do we have to tell you? Being sick doesn't give you the right to wander in and out. There's a limit. Have some respect."

The room pressed in.

Her mother's silence.

Blake's stare, sharp and accusing.

Heather's folded arms, immovable.

A panel of silent witnesses. One against four. A trial she hadn't signed up for. But she knew the verdict.

"And this isn't the first time I hear that," she shot back, heat rising. "So it means one thing: I don't care."

Her father rose. Slowly. Deliberately. His movement was not just anger, it was a quiet, simmering power. A warning. He stepped toward her; the air between them thickened, each second a collision of storms.

"Tell him to come here," he said low and cold. "I'll deal with him."

Something inside her trembled. She swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. Eyes steady, she muttered, "Fine." The word tasted like ash, bitter and hollow.

The next day, Jaison arrived. Calm. Polite. Answering every question her father fired at him with patience. Anna's legs shook under the weight of it all; her fists clenched so tightly her nails dug into her palms. She hated the injustice of him being interrogated for simply caring. She hated the helplessness curling in her chest.

The moment her mother slipped into the kitchen, she bolted. Purse, keys, coat, gone. She drove fast, recklessly, the streets a blur. Her safe place awaited: the café she had claimed with her friends.

Jeremy leaned against the door, smirking. "What the hell are you doing here at this hour?"

“I ran from home,” Anna said lightly, ordering tea as though it were routine.

The café smelled of burnt coffee and old wood. Low chatter, clinking cups, the hum of people oblivious to her chaos. Jeremy laughed, Aaron appeared at the doorway, that mischievous, dangerous smile tugging at his lips, impossible to resist, impossible to trust.

Her phone buzzed incessantly, Jaison, her father, Claire. Blake: Where are you?

She ignored them all, wrapping herself in the calm mask she’d practiced for years. But beneath it, guilt gnawed. She had dragged Jaison into her family storm. Selfish, reckless, she knew it.

“Absconding? Seriously, Anna?” Aaron smirked.

“Yup. My favorite game.”

Even in rehab, the first thing she did was try to run. Escape was the only thread of salvation she recognized.

Escaping was the only thing she had ever been good at. Confrontation felt like drowning. Running felt like breathing.

Another message from Jaison:

Anna, please tell me where you are. I’ll come pick you up. If not, they’ll file a missing persons case.

Her chest tightened. Missing persons. Control disguised as concern. She sent her location. Minutes later, he appeared.

“Are you mad?” he asked quietly as she climbed in.

“No,” she said flatly. “It was... too much.”

Her parents arrived soon after, mother tear-streaked, voice raw. “We were worried sick! How could you do this?”

Anna said nothing. Silent, arms crossed, she slid into the car. The drive home was quiet. Heavy. Unbearable.

Later, in the dark of her room, she texted: I’m sorry.

Then nothing. No words. No explanations. Silence. Ritual.

One by one, she took her pills, each a small act of routine, each a reminder of the invisible walls around her. Nine bottles lined her shelf, each a soldier, each a warning.

Major depressive disorder. Anxiety. Borderline. Eating disorder. Bipolar.

The labels pressed like stones in her chest. Not medical, nicknames. Judgments. Chains.

In flashes, she saw herself in white, hair unkempt, staring at a stranger in the mirror. A ghost. Not Anna.

Typing bubbles appeared. Then vanished. Then reappeared.

Finally, Jaison texted:

Anna... I can't pretend to understand your world. I don't know what it feels like inside your head, and I won't say false comfort. But you're not invisible. Not those labels. Not your past.

She read it over and over, the words heavy, warm, aching.

You think you're drowning alone, but I see you. I'll stand on the shore, calling your name. I'll keep showing up. That's all I can do. And it's real.

Her throat burned. She didn't reply. Just stared, cigarette burning, smoke blurring her vision.

Then she typed, short, cold: Thanks. Goodnight.

But deep down, she knew it wasn't careless at all. It was the most she could manage without breaking. A part of her chest loosened at his words. Someone was still here. Someone cared enough to see her through the fog. For a moment, it felt like oxygen after being underwater too long. But then another voice rose inside her, colder, sharper. He doesn't get it. No one does. He's just saying what people say when they want to feel like the good guy. He'll leave too, eventually. They always do.

She hated how fast she could destroy any comfort given to her. How fast hope turned into suspicion. His promise to keep calling her name, beautiful, steady, and yet she imagined him growing tired, his voice fading, until she was just another memory he didn't bother to revisit.

The cigarette in her hand had burned low. She crushed it out, staring at the scarred skin of her palm. Jaison's words were there, lingering, but so was the ache of disbelief.

She wanted to trust him. God, she wanted to. But trust felt like a foreign language she'd once known and forgotten how to speak.

Her last thought before the pills pulled her under was simple, blunt, and heavy: What if he's right... and what if I ruin even that?

CHAPTER 5



The following week brought Anna felt a kind of happiness she hadn't felt in a while. Her parents had left for their hometown with Heather, and Blake was caught up with her own plans. For once, the house was empty of responsibility, of watchful eyes. Which meant Anna could spend more time with Mathew, and that was all she wanted.

He was just as eager. "Come as soon as you can," he'd said, his voice bubbling with excitement, as if he couldn't wait another hour to see her. That eagerness wrapped itself around her heart, and she let it carry her through every step of preparation.

She packed carefully, deliberately: her best clothes, perfumes she matched with moods, candles for moments she'd want to remember, cigarettes she'd never part with. Everything that felt like a piece of her.

Then came her "everything shower," the kind where she lingered until the mirror fogged, letting the water rinse away not just the day but the parts of herself she didn't want to carry with her. By the time she stepped out, she felt almost new. She slipped into a soft pink dress, the kind that felt girlish yet daring, paired with heels that gave her walk a subtle sway.

She barely had the patience to check herself in the mirror one last time. Grabbing her bag and keys, she called out, "Blake, I'm leaving!"

Blake, half-distracted, didn't even ask where. She'd learned not to. Anna was fierce, untouchable when she had her mind set on something. You couldn't stop her, not without burning yourself in the process.

"Okay, take care! Let me know once you reach!" Blake's voice trailed behind her as the front door slammed shut.

The drive to Mathew's was longer than she wished, but it didn't matter. The thought of a whole week with him lit something reckless inside her. She turned up the music, choosing not the heavy songs that usually matched her mood, but the ones

that lifted her, that gave her a reason to sing at the top of her lungs. By the time she reached his place, she hadn't even noticed how fast the distance disappeared.

She stepped out of the car, heart pounding, air filling her chest like a promise. Closing her eyes for a second, she whispered to herself, don't mess this up.

The wind caught her hair, tossing it across her face in an almost cinematic sweep. And when she opened her eyes, there he was, Mathew, leaning against the doorway, not moving, just watching her with a look that made her stomach turn over. Admiring her, as though she were the only person that existed in the world. Anna arrived at Mathew's, her heart pounding like she had been holding her breath all week.

The pink dress clung to her in ways that made her feel both powerful and fragile, her perfume still fresh on her wrists.

When Mathew opened the door, he just stood there for a moment, taking her in. The wind caught her hair, the night folding around them. Anna felt his gaze, heavy and wanting, but she didn't give in immediately. She walked slowly toward him, her hand brushing through her hair, her eyes locked on his. A tease, a dare.

Then the distance collapsed. She wrapped her arms around his neck, his hands gripping her waist as if afraid she'd vanish.

"Close the door," she whispered with a smirk.

Anna felt her pulse quicken the second Mathew's hands closed around her waist. The door clicked shut, and suddenly the rest of the world vanished, no family, no friends, no weight of yesterday. Just him. Just now.

He pressed her against the wood, their foreheads touching, his breath shallow and uneven. Anna smiled faintly, dragging her fingers down the line of his shirt, unfastening one button at a time, slow enough to watch the tension build in his jaw. She loved that power, the way she could draw out his impatience until he finally pulled her closer, rougher, as though he couldn't wait another second.

Their mouths met, first soft, then hungry, every kiss deepening until it left her breathless. His hands explored her back, her shoulders, the curve of her hip; hers tangled in his hair, tugging lightly, urging him on. Each touch felt like both a

question and an answer, like he was memorizing her body while at the same time asking if she'd let him.

When his lips trailed to her neck, leaving heat in their wake, she gasped, arching toward him, nails grazing his skin. He smiled against her throat, that mischievous, boyish smile she knew so well, then kissed harder, and she knew tomorrow she'd be left with marks she'd have to explain away. She almost wanted them. Proof that someone had wanted her enough to leave traces.

Clothes slipped away, discarded where they fell, until there was nothing left between them. The air felt heavy, charged, every brush of skin against skin sharper, more electric. Mathew's gaze lingered on her as if he couldn't believe she was real, and for a moment she almost forgot her scars, her past, the shadows that lived inside her.

When he finally entered her, she let out a soft cry that turned into a moan, her hands clutching at him as though he were the only thing tethering her to the world. Their rhythm found its own language, urgent yet tender, rough yet careful, a push and pull between wanting to consume each other and wanting to hold on forever.

Time unraveled. Every sound, every sigh, every heartbeat filled the room, until the only truth that existed was that they were here, together, bodies tangled, lost in each other

They spent hours just curled up in bed, the kind of silence that didn't feel empty but safe. Her phone buzzed against the nightstand. Aaron.

"Come by the terrace tonight. Let's meet. I'll call Claire and the others too."

"Sure," she typed back almost instantly. A part of her wanted her friends to see Mathew. To see that, for once, she was okay. He didn't mind either he actually looked forward to it.

That evening, the terrace was alive with laughter, smoke curling up into the sky, conversations that never made sense but always felt necessary. Anna and Mathew walked in together.

"Heyy Mathew!" everyone greeted, easy and warm, as though they'd known him all along. That was the group's way open, welcoming, never making anyone feel like an outsider.

Anna lit her cigarette, her own pack this time, passing it to Mathew like an unspoken introduction.

Jeremy leaned forward, grinning. “So... how do you even know Anna?”

Mathew chuckled. “Oh, that was a fun night. We met at a party. She was drunk, I told her she was cute, she fell for me, and here we are.”

The group laughed, but Aaron’s voice cut through it. “How often do you get drunk and meet guys?”

The air stilled. Anna froze, she remembered telling Aaron pieces of her past, stories said in trust, never thinking he’d toss them out like that.

“Ayy, shut up Aaron!” she forced a laugh, but her tone was sharp.

The moment passed, but something in her shifted.

Everyone took turns talking with Mathew, easy questions, friendly smiles. Claire especially, Anna wanted her approval most of all. She wanted Claire to like him, to see him as someone good for her.

Meanwhile, Aaron pulled her aside.

“How could you?” she hissed. “You could’ve ruined everything.”

“Relax,” he shrugged, almost amused. “It just slipped.”

His gaze lingered, dropping to the faint marks on her neck. “So... do you love him? Or are you gonna leave him soon?”

Her stomach tightened. It felt like he could see right through her. She instinctively pulled her hair forward, covering the marks.

“I love him,” she said firmly. “I do. I won’t leave him.”

Aaron smirked, almost sadly. “Anna... you and I, we’re similar. Commitment’s a life sentence. You’ll try so hard not to mess it up, but you will. Isn’t that true?”

Her throat burned. “No. That’s not true.”

But even as she said it, a part of her wondered.

She returned to Mathew, forcing a smile, and whispered that it was time to go. He had been enjoying himself, but didn’t question her. He could sense the shift.

Later, at home, they ate dinner together like a normal couple, curled up on the sofa watching TV. For a moment, it was simple.

Then her chest tightened. “My meds” she blurted, scrambling off the couch. She dug through her bag, pulling things out in panic. Nothing.

Her breath quickened, hands shaking. No meds. No sleep. No control.

Her mind began to spin in loops she couldn’t silence.

“My meds... fuck.” Anna’s voice cracked as she rifled through her bag. “I can’t sleep tonight. No, no, no his can’t happen.”

Her chest tightened. Thoughts looped and crashed over each other until she could barely breathe.

Mathew rushed over, pulling her into his arms. “Anna, calm down. I’m here.”

That broke her. The tears came hot, sudden, unstoppable. It wasn’t pain that scared her most, but the thought of another sleepless night.

“I’ll help you,” he whispered, holding her like he could shield her from her own mind. “I’ll be by your side until you fall asleep.”

Her sobs softened. She managed a small, broken thank you.

He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a steaming cup. “I’ve heard warm milk helps.”

Anna let out a shaky laugh. She’d tried that trick before. Never worked. But for his sake, she lifted the cup. “Uhuh. Maybe.”

She sipped while he held her close, his arm wrapped tight around her. It was comforting.

Eventually, Mathew drifted off. His breathing steadied, his body heavy against hers. Anna lay wide-eyed, restless. She slid his arm off gently and slipped out of bed.

In the dim living room, she lit a single candle and sank into the sofa. The flame flickered, and she whispered to herself:

I’m the wax of this candle... melting slowly. She smoked, pacing, staring at his things. The books lined neatly. The showpieces carefully placed. The order she

lacked but admired. Candles, not his, but hers, now scattered among his belongings like traces of her intrusion.

She returned to the bedroom and saw him sleeping peacefully. It filled her with a strange bitterness. She hated when others could sleep while she was awake it made her feel evil.

Hours bled away. By morning, she was slumped on the sofa, hollow-eyed, her body heavy with exhaustion.

Good morning, Anna!” Mathew’s voice was bright. “I see you fell asleep out here.”

Fell asleep? Seriously? The words scraped inside her chest. But she forced a laugh. “Yeah... guess I did.”

She couldn’t meet his eyes. Rage simmered beneath her skin, but she hid it. All day she played along board games, TV, cuddles. Smiling on the outside, bleeding on the inside.

That night, again, he brought her milk. Again, he thought it worked miracles. She pretended to fall asleep, closing her eyes just for his peace of mind. And somehow, against all odds, she did.

Until

A sound. A whisper, faint but sharp in the dark. Her eyes snapped open. Mathew slept on, unbothered.

Her pulse spiked. She slid her hand into her purse and wrapped it around the knife she always kept.

She stepped out of the room. The voices grew clearer near the kitchen. She was ready this time ready to face whatever shadow had been haunting her nights. Or maybe ready to unleash her anger on something, someone.

There it was. A figure. Black. Still. Waiting.

Her breath shallow, she raised the knife high.

“Anna!! What are you doing?”

The voice cracked through her trance. Mathew’s voice.

She spun around, tucking the knife behind her. But it was too late he'd already seen it.

"I thought... I saw an intruder," she stammered.

"There's no one here, Anna," he said gently, but firmly. "I promise you, there's nothing."

Her throat locked. Her thoughts spun like a carousel she couldn't stop.

I'm not wrong. I saw someone. I did. I did.

"Anna," his voice softened, "are you okay?"

"Yeah... yeah, I am. Let's go back to bed."

She forced herself under the sheets, eyes squeezed shut, but sleep refused her. Her mind spun faster, darker.

Who did I stab? Was it an intruder? Did I imagine it?

The questions echoed until they were louder than the silence.

The next morning, the sunlight spilled through the blinds, brushing against Anna's face. She felt heavy, her mind fogged with questions from the night before. But Mathew stood there smiling, keys dangling in his hand.

"Let's go for a drive. Fresh air might help," he said, his tone easy, as if the night hadn't happened.

Anna didn't protest. She needed movement. She needed distraction.

They drove with the windows down, wind in their hair, music playing softly in the background. Mathew drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, humming along, while Anna leaned her head against the window, letting the breeze wash over her.

For a moment, it almost felt like freedom. No family, no questions, no shadows in the dark. Just the open road and Mathew beside her.

Hours later, they stopped at a roadside bar. The place was dimly lit, tucked away, quiet for the afternoon. They slid into a booth.

"Two drinks," Mathew ordered, flashing that casual smile of his.

Anna watched him, the way his grin lingered, that mischievous spark in his eyes. Sweet, charming... but sometimes she wondered if it was all just a mask. She didn't care either way. He was here now, and that was enough.

The drinks came. Anna took a long sip, the warmth spreading through her chest. She felt herself loosen.

"To us," Mathew said, raising his glass.

She mirrored him. "To us."

They clinked glasses, the sound sharp and small, but it lingered between them. She felt comfort in his presence, but also a strange detachment, like she was watching the scene play out from a distance.

He reached for her hand across the table. "You seem quieter today."

She smirked faintly, swirling the liquid in her glass. "Do I? Maybe I'm just... tired."

"Tired," he repeated, watching her carefully. But then he leaned back, let it go, and changed the subject.

They laughed, shared stories, teased each other between sips. For a while, it was almost easy. Almost normal.

But somewhere in the back of her mind, Anna still heard the echo of last night.

The whisper.

The shadow.

The knife.

And no drink could drown that.

Anna leaned back on the couch, cigarette in hand, exhaling smoke like she was trying to bleed out her restlessness.

Mathew frowned from across the room. "You've had, what, five today? Don't you think it's too much?"

Her eyes snapped to him. "There it is. The speech."

"I'm not giving you a speech, Anna. I'm just"

“You’re just like the rest of them,” she cut in, voice sharp. “Always counting, always judging. Do you even know why I smoke?”

He stayed quiet.

She stood now, pacing, smoke trailing behind her. “It’s the only thing that calms me when my brain won’t shut up. I haven’t slept in days, Mathew. Days. Do you know what that does to me?”

“Then let me help you. There are other ways”

“Don’t.” She pointed the cigarette at him like a weapon. “Don’t tell me there are other ways. I’ve tried everything. Pills, teas, warm milk, even your arms around me nothing works. Nothing!” Her voice cracked.

Mathew’s jaw tightened, but his voice stayed soft. “You don’t have to carry this alone, Anna.”

Her laugh was bitter, hollow. “Don’t you see? I am alone. Even when you’re here, even when anyone’s here. You’ll never understand what it feels like to live in this skin.”

The silence that followed was heavier than the smoke in the room. She stubbed out the cigarette with a shaky hand, her eyes burning. For a moment, she looked like she was about to say something else, something truer, something darker but she bit it back.

That night, she grabbed her pillow and blanket, walked to the sofa, and threw them down with finality. “I’m sleeping here tonight,” she muttered.

She curled up tightly under the blanket, facing the wall. The room was quiet except for the faint sound of Mathew breathing in the bedroom. He didn’t call her back, didn’t argue he just let her go.

Anna stared into the dark, her chest heavy. She’d said too much, and not nearly enough

The next morning, Anna woke stiff and heavy on the sofa, her pillow tucked under her chin, blanket twisted around her legs. The air felt colder here, away from Mathew’s bed, but she preferred it. Safer, somehow.

She heard him in the kitchen spoons against ceramic, the quiet thud of cupboard doors. He moved around softly, like he didn't want to disturb her, but it made her feel more exposed, not less.

When he finally appeared with a steaming mug, he smiled like he always did. "Morning, sleepyhead. Brought you coffee."

She sat up, rubbed her face, forced her voice steady. "Thanks. I'm not really in the mood right now."

Mathew lingered, then set it down on the table beside her. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Yeah," she said too quickly. The word tasted like a lie, but she didn't care.

He looked at her a little longer than she liked, as if searching for something in her face. She kept her eyes down, folding her blanket neatly, running her fingers over the fabric again and again until it lay perfectly flat.

"Anna, about last night" he began.

She cut him off before he could continue. "Don't. Please."

The weight in her voice silenced him. He exhaled, nodded, and let it go.

The room chilled. They weren't fighting, but the warmth between them had cracked. She kept herself busy with small, unnecessary movements adjusting a cushion, aligning her phone with the edge of the table anything to avoid stillness. Anything to keep from thinking too much.

When he suggested they take a drive later, grab a couple of drinks, she agreed immediately, her tone bright and false. Too easy. Too rehearsed.

Inside, something clawed at her ribs a dread she couldn't share, not with him, not with anyone. She carried it alone, silent, locked tight inside her.

By evening, they were in Mathew's car, the windows rolled down, wind tangling Anna's hair. The radio played something upbeat, a song she would usually hum along to, but she just stared out at the blur of streetlights and passing trees.

"You're too quiet," Mathew teased lightly, drumming his fingers on the wheel.

"I'm just tired," she replied, her smile quick, polite. It didn't reach her eyes.

At the bar, things were different. She laughed easily, maybe too easily, sipping her drink faster than usual. Mathew cracked jokes, and she leaned into him, almost performing her happiness. Anyone watching would've believed she was glowing.

But every time he looked away, her expression slipped. She'd touch her stomach absentmindedly, then catch herself and fold her arms tightly across her chest.

When he went to order another round, she lit a cigarette outside, staring at the flame longer than she needed to. She dragged the smoke in deep, holding it until her lungs ached. Her hands trembled slightly, but she hid them in her jacket pocket when Mathew returned.

"You okay?" he asked, searching her face.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" Her voice was light, airy almost convincing.

Later, on the drive back, the alcohol softened her edges. She leaned her head against the window, pretending to be half-asleep. But inside, her mind was racing. Her thoughts coiled tight around the thing she couldn't say, the thing pressing down harder with every silent mile.

Mathew reached over and squeezed her hand on the gear shift. She squeezed back automatically, even managed a smile.

But when the headlights of passing cars flickered over her face, the brief shadows revealed something else entirely not peace, not even tiredness. Fear.

That night, Anna couldn't sleep. Not in the bed, not on the sofa. She had dragged her pillow and blanket out earlier, escaping Mathew's warmth like it burned her.

The candle on the coffee table flickered, shadows stretching up the walls. Her cigarette dangled between her fingers, ash spilling onto the rug. Every creak in the apartment, every car door shutting outside, made her flinch. She moved through the living room in slow, restless circles, like she was tracing the edges of a cage she couldn't break.

Her purse sat slouched against the armchair. She glanced at it, again and again, as though it was calling her. Finally, she crouched down and pulled something out a small box she had buried under scarves and receipts.

A pregnancy test.

Her hands trembled, but her face stayed blank. No panic, no tears. Just a sharp inhale, and then the hollow silence of someone too tired to feel. She'd missed her period before, ignored the nausea, convinced herself it was stress, medication, anything else. But she couldn't lie anymore.

In the bathroom, the silence was unbearable. The tiny stick rested on the counter. She leaned against the sink, chain-smoking as though the smoke itself could dissolve the seconds.

Her heart pounded so loudly it felt like the whole apartment could hear it.

And then there it was. Pregnant.

Anna didn't blink. Didn't cry. She just stood there, staring at the word until the letters blurred.

And then it happened the image rushed back with brutal force.

She was standing in a dim, colorless room. The air heavy, her body trembling. In her arms lay a baby swaddled in white. But it was still. Too still. Its skin pale, its lips a faint blue.

She tried rocking it, whispering to it, begging it to breathe. The silence screamed back at her.

The child slipped from her arms not falling, but dissolving, like ash scattering into nothing. She reached out, desperate to hold it again, but her hands met only air.

The walls of the dream bent inward, mirrors surrounding her. Each reflection showed her in a white gown, hair unkempt, face hollow. Her eyes wide with a terror she couldn't name. She didn't recognize herself.

She gasped and stumbled back into the bathroom, clutching the sink with both hands. The test was still there, its word burned into her skull.

Pregnant.

She pressed it flat against the counter with her palm, her chest tightening, her breath ragged.

She knew it. She feared it. And she was completely, devastatingly alone with it.

The bathroom tiles were cold against Anna's legs as she slid down to the floor, her back pressing against the door. She'd locked it without thinking, the soft click swallowed by the hiss of running water from the tap she hadn't turned off.

The pregnancy test lay facedown on the counter, as if turning it over could erase the word she'd already seen.

A cigarette smoldered between her fingers. Two more burned out in the sink. An ashtray overflowed beside her knees the only sound was the faint crackle of paper and ash dying. The small blade she'd taken from her purse lay on the floor within reach, catching the weak yellow light of the bathroom bulb.

She wasn't crying. She wasn't moving. She just stared at the wall opposite her, eyes fixed, smoke curling from her lips like a ghost leaving her body.

Her knees were pulled up to her chest, her head tilted back against the door. The cigarette trembled slightly in her hand but she didn't notice.

Every now and then, she'd drag on it so hard the ember glowed bright red, then fade.

No one knocked. No one called her name.

It was just her, the blade, the smoke, and the walls.

Whatever she was thinking stayed locked inside.

The morning broke heavy and gray, but Anna moved with a strange clarity. Her body ached from another sleepless night, yet her steps were careful, deliberate, like each one had already been decided for her. She folded the blanket she had dragged onto the sofa, smoothed the cushions, erased every sign of her restless hours.

Her shower was long, almost ceremonial. She scrubbed until her skin stung, as though trying to wash away something no one else could see. When she stepped out, she dressed neatly, brushed her hair, and touched perfume to her wrists. Her reflection stared back at her, unreadable.

By mid-day she sat at the bank. The officer slid papers across the desk, and she signed them one by one. Her hand trembled once, but she pressed the pen harder, smudging the ink. When the final stamp came down, it echoed too loudly, like a

verdict. She slipped the envelope of cash into her purse, zipped it shut, and walked out, her pulse racing as though she'd done something criminal.

Back at Mathew's, the silence of the apartment pressed in on her. She retreated to the kitchen, phone clutched tight, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes... I've missed multiple cycles. Yes, I need the earliest appointment. Please, just keep it discreet."

She turned, startled, Mathew stood in the doorway, a glass of water in hand, confusion written on his face. She forced a calm breath.

"Insurance call," she lied, brushing past him with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

The rest of the day she was almost too gentle. She laughed too quickly, clung too long when he touched her hand, kissed his cheek as though memorizing the feel of it. She played his favorite show without complaint, even helped fold his laundry with uncharacteristic patience. Guilt softened her edges; she gave him every kindness she could, as though trying to make up for what was coming.

When he finally dozed off on the sofa, she opened her old diary. Its pages were yellowed, half-filled with broken thoughts from another time. She pressed her pen down hard and wrote:

By the time you read this, I'll be gone. Don't report me missing. Don't look for me. I need to be somewhere else, anywhere else. Please let me be.

She stared at the words for a long time, then closed the book and left it on the desk where she knew it would be found.

That night, she stirred warm milk and set the glass in front of him.

"You're spoiling me," Mathew teased, kissing her cheek before drinking it down.

"I like taking care of you," she whispered, voice catching for just a moment.

Minutes later, his breathing slowed, steady and deep. She sat watching him, her hand brushing his hair back, her throat thick with apology. Then she stood, lifted her packed bag, cigarettes, lighter, clothes, papers, cash and walked quietly to the door.

One last glance. One last hesitation. Her chest ached, but her hand did not falter.

Outside, the taxi idled, headlights casting long shadows. She climbed in, said nothing.

And just like that, Anna was gone. Not missing. Not stolen. Not lost. Gone, because she chose to be.

CHAPTER 6



Mathew woke to the sound of the kettle whistling. For a second, he thought she was still there, that she'd walk in barefoot, hair messy, muttering about how mornings weren't her thing. But the kitchen was empty. The milk glass sat in the sink, rinsed clean. The curtains were drawn halfway, letting in that pale, uncertain light that made everything look like a memory. Her shoes were gone. So were her cigarettes. And the diary, the one she always kept on the desk, was left open, a single page torn out.

He didn't notice it at first. He just stood there, staring at the sofa, the half-folded blanket, the faint trace of her perfume that clung to the air like it refused to let go.

Then he saw the note.

Her handwriting, slanted, rushed, trembling in some places. He read it once. Then again.

"By the time you read this, I'll be gone. Don't report me missing. Don't look for me. Please let me be."

His first thought was that it was a joke. One of her moods. She had her days, quiet, withdrawn, lost somewhere he couldn't follow. But this felt different.

He ran to the bedroom. The closet hung half-empty. The drawer where she kept her passport open. The envelope of cash gone.

His pulse quickened.

He called her. Straight to voicemail.

Called again. Nothing.

Mathew sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. He tried to remember the night before the way she smiled when she gave him the milk, the way she lingered by the door before turning off the lights. There was something in her eyes he couldn't name then, but now it hit him it wasn't peace. It was **goodbye**.

Hours later, her mother called. “Mathew, have you heard from Anna?” Her voice was calm, too calm, which meant she already knew something was wrong.

He lied. “No, she’s probably out with a friend.” But his throat burned when he said it.

When he hung up, the weight of her absence pressed down hard. The walls seemed to hum with silence. Every object, her cup, her book, her scent felt like evidence of something he’d missed.

He walked to the window and stared at the road below. Every passing car made his heart jump. He waited for her. For a message. For anything.

But nothing came.

And for the first time in a long time, Mathew realized, he didn’t know who Anna really was.

Blake

Blake knew something was wrong. She’d known it long before anyone else did, before Mathew’s call, before the silence stretched too long to ignore.

Blake had always been Anna’s closest friend, the one who understood her storms and still stayed. On nights when Anna refused to sleep, Blake would check on her every hour, terrified she might do something irreversible. Protective, obsessive, maybe both. Every secret Anna ever had was safe with her. She was her sister’s quiet therapist, listening without judgment, holding the weight Anna couldn’t share with anyone else. But there was only so much she could hold. After too many nights of panic, after too many scares and self-inflicted wounds, Blake began to pull away. Not because she stopped caring, but because she was scared, of Anna, and for Anna.

“I’ll kill you someday,” Anna had once said, half in jest, half in something darker. Maybe she hadn’t meant it. Maybe she had.

When the overdose happened, Anna wasn’t herself. She’d lashed out, tried to hurt Blake, her eyes vacant, gone somewhere unreachable. From that moment, something between them broke.

Anna's resentment grew quietly. What once felt like care began to sound like control. Every concern felt like a judgment. Every question, a reminder of failure.

She began to despise Blake, her charisma, her ease, her golden light. "The golden child," Anna would say with a bitter smile.

Blake had always drawn people in. Anna had always felt like she was on the outside looking in the quiet one, the strange one, the one everyone called "difficult."

No one saw the signs.

No one wanted to.

They all missed the Anna who used to laugh too hard, who filled rooms with jokes and chaos and warmth. But no one seemed to want *this* Anna, the cold, detached version her father called "heartless."

And maybe he was right. Anna could cut deep when she spoke.

She'd once said about their dying grandfather, "*People who are meant to die will die anyway.*"

She'd cursed Blake's wedding. She'd argued with their parents until her mother cried. And yet, they loved her. God, they still loved her. They prayed every day for the old Anna to return, not realizing she never would.

Anna had warned them.

"If you keep treating me like I'm sick, I'll leave. Just let me live my life."

They hadn't listened and now, she'd kept her word.

When Mathew's name flashed on her phone, Blake's hands shook. She already knew. She didn't need to hear it.

"Anna's gone," Mathew said quietly. "She left a note."

Blake's breath hitched. "Okay," she said, her voice hollow.

She sat in silence for a long time after the call. How could she tell her parents? What story could she invent that would protect them from the truth?

She wanted to say she was shocked, but she wasn't. She'd always known Anna was capable of this and that was the part that hurt the most.

Her parents had returned from their hometown. Blake greeted them with a smile so forced it barely passed as one.

“Where’s Anna?” her mother asked, worry creasing her forehead. “I called Mathew earlier, he said she’d gone to meet her friends.”

Blake went along with the story.

“Yes, she’s with Claire. They have a small event today. She won’t be home for a few days.”

A lie. A lie that could buy her time, time to think, to plan, to maybe even search for Anna herself.

She quickly texted Claire: *Anna has left. Has she talked to you about anything?*

Blake knew Anna was closer to Claire than she herself had ever been. It stung, but she consoled herself: as long as Claire could lean on Anna, it was something.

Claire replied almost instantly: *No, she hasn’t told me anything. Mathew hasn’t told me either. I’m worried , she seemed a little off the past few days.*

Panic laced Claire’s words. She didn’t know what Anna was capable of, and it hurt that she wasn’t the one Anna turned to.

The reality was darker: Anna had been afraid of Claire. “Just another Blake,” she would have called her. *Why does everyone care so much? What do they expect from the old Anna?*

Yet, deep down, she believed: *People shouldn’t stay around for wreckage.*

She had warned Claire before. *Trust me too much, and I’ll break it. Don’t get heartbroken when I do.* But Claire had never been ready to let her go.

The news of Anna leaving spread quietly through her friend circle. Her parents remained unaware of the full truth.

A week passed. Blake knew it was finally time to break the silence. She asked her parents to sit with her in the living room, panic bubbling under her skin.

“Anna has left,” she said slowly. “We don’t know where she is. But she asked us not to report her missing. She’ll be safe and taken care of.”

Her mother broke down in tears. “There’s no way she’s gone. Are you sure about this, Blake?”

Her father said nothing at first. His mind replayed all the warnings Anna had given him over the years, the threats, the desperation, the fear she had carried alone. How she had told him that if they got too possessive, she would leave. How she had once said that when he was gone, she’d want to ensure the family was safe.

Guilt. Fear. Sadness.

It all filled him, breaking him quietly inside.

“We have to find her,” he said finally. “Has she grown so much that she can just leave... and go?”

Heather, their youngest, said little. She had never spoken much, but Anna had always cared for her fiercely. Blake knew that part of Anna’s heart, her desire to protect Heather, had influenced her choices.

“Don’t get hasty,” Blake said. “I’ll try my means to find her, but we won’t report her missing yet. That’s what she wanted.”

Truthfully, though, Blake didn’t know where to even begin.

CHAPTER 7



The café was too bright for the mood they carried in. Blake sat first, eyes darting toward the door every few seconds. She hadn't slept. Her hands trembled against the cup of untouched coffee, steam curling into the space between them like something ghostly.

Mathew arrived next. His face was pale, his eyes hollowed from days of replaying everything, the last words, her laugh, the glass of milk. Claire came too, quiet and shaking, clutching her phone like it might ring any moment with Anna's name.

And then Aaron walked in. Calm. Too calm. He nodded at each of them, slid into the chair beside Claire, his jaw set. For a while, no one spoke. Just the clinking of spoons, the faint hum of conversations around them. The kind of normal sound that feels cruel when your world's collapsing.

Finally, Blake broke.

"She's gone, Aaron. She's actually gone. It's been over a week, and she hasn't called, hasn't texted. You were close to her too, did she tell you anything?"

Aaron's gaze didn't shift. He stirred his coffee once. Twice. "No," he said softly. "Not really."

Mathew's voice cracked through the tension. "You don't *seem* surprised."

Aaron looked up then, eyes dark, unreadable. "Anna always said she'd leave someday. You all just didn't believe her."

Blake slammed her palm on the table. "Don't talk about her like that! You think I don't know her? You think I didn't *try*?"

Her voice broke halfway through the sentence. The café went quieter.

Aaron sighed, leaned back. "Trying isn't the same as understanding, Blake."

Claire whispered, "What's that supposed to mean?"

He tilted his head, almost pitying. “It means some people don’t want to be saved. Sometimes, saving them kills them faster.”

The words hung in the air like smoke.

Mathew pushed his chair back, furious. “You think you know her better than we do? You didn’t see what she went through!”

Aaron looked at him, steady. “Did you?”

The silence after that was sharp enough to cut skin. Blake stared at him, his calmness, the faint twitch of his fingers, the way he avoided her eyes whenever she said Anna’s name. Something inside her twisted.

“You know something,” she whispered. “You *do*.”

Aaron met her gaze finally, and there it was, something flickering behind his eyes. Not guilt. Not fear. Something else.

“If I did,” he said slowly, “would you really want to hear it?”

Blake’s breath caught. The others froze.

Aaron stood, tossed a few coins onto the table. “You’re looking for her in all the wrong places.”

And then he walked out, quiet, unhurried, as if he’d already made peace with something they hadn’t yet discovered.

They sat there, staring after him, the hum of the café suddenly unbearable.

Blake whispered, almost to herself, “What did he mean by that?”

Mathew didn’t answer. Claire’s phone buzzed, lighting up the table for a moment. No name on the screen. Just a message.

Unknown Number: “Stop looking.”

The house didn’t sound like a home anymore. It was too quiet, no laughter spilling from the kitchen, no faint music from Anna’s room. Just silence, heavy and aching.

Blake walked past the living room, her mother praying softly under her breath, her father staring at nothing. Heather sat with her knees drawn to her chest, earphones in, pretending she couldn’t feel the tension that clung to every wall.

Dinner was a routine now. Plates half-filled, food barely touched. They ate because their bodies demanded it, not because they wanted to.

It was strange, Blake thought. When Anna was around, she was almost invisible, quiet, cold, always tucked away. But now that she was gone, her absence screamed through the house.

Blake missed the chaos, the teasing, the laughter that came too loud, the way Anna used to make stupid jokes at the worst times just to break the silence. That version of her felt like a dream she couldn't prove had ever existed.

She sat in Anna's room that night, the smell of her perfume faint in the air. The notebook lay open on the desk, Blake's own attempt at order.

She wrote across the first page:

Anna.

Underneath, she began listing.

Favorite hideouts.

Friends she trusted.

Possible cash she could have saved.

Anyone who might have helped her.

The handwriting grew messy halfway down, her mind racing faster than her hand.

They had been searching wrong. Mathew's face when Aaron said those words wouldn't leave her, *You're looking in all the wrong places.*

What did that mean? What places were *right*?

She pressed the pen to the page until the ink bled through.

Anna couldn't have gone far. Blake could feel it, something almost physical, like a pulse under her skin. Her sister was close. Somewhere just beyond reach.

She closed her eyes for a moment, listening to the faint hum of the night. And then, a sound.

A soft *click*.

Like a door.

From outside.

Blake's head snapped up.

She walked to the window slowly, heart pounding. Nothing. Just the dark street. Empty. Still. But the gate, it was slightly open. It hadn't been before.

Her phone buzzed on the desk. One new message.

Unknown Number: "Stop searching, Blake. She doesn't want to be found."

Days turned into weeks. The house didn't heal; it decayed in silence. Every clock ticked too loudly, every shadow felt like a presence. The only thing that moved freely here was guilt.

Blake barely slept. Every morning, she woke to her mother's whispering prayers and her father's slow collapse into himself. Heather had stopped talking altogether, just watched the door every evening, waiting for a sister who would never walk in.

Blake tried to keep everything from falling apart, grocery lists, bills, the smallest routines, but even those were losing shape.

Sometimes, she'd catch her mother sitting by the window, eyes red, murmuring, *"She'll come home. She promised she'd never leave."*

But Blake knew Anna never made promises. Not ones she could keep.

Blake sat at the dining table, a notebook open, lines of places, names, fragments of Anna's life scribbled like an autopsy report. Every lead went nowhere. Every call ended with pity or confusion.

Her mother prayed louder now, desperate enough to fill the silence. Her father barely left his room. Blake had tried to keep it together, to be the responsible one, but there was nothing left to hold. Anna's absence had become the fifth member of the house.

That's when her phone buzzed. Aaron.

She stared at the name. Her chest tightened. He hadn't texted in days, not since their last argument when he'd said, *"Maybe you're looking in the wrong places."*

Aaron: *You should stop asking questions, Blake.*

Blake: *What do you mean?*

Aaron: *Some things are better left where they are.*

Her pulse spiked. *He knows.*

Blake stood abruptly, knocking over her chair. Heather flinched but said nothing. Her mother's voice trembled from the next room, "Blake? Where are you going?" She didn't answer. The night outside was cold, sharp. She grabbed her car keys.

Aaron's house wasn't far. The porch light was on. He opened the door before she could even knock, like he'd been waiting.

His eyes were dark, unreadable.

"Blake," he said quietly. "You shouldn't be here."

Her voice cracked, "Where is she?"

"I told you"

"Stop lying!" She slammed her hand against the doorframe. "You *know*, don't you? You were the last person she talked to."

Aaron's expression didn't change. "If I tell you," he said, almost whispering, "you'll wish I hadn't."

Blake froze. Her throat went dry. He stepped closer, his voice lower now. "You think Anna needed saving... but what if she didn't want to be found?"

For a moment, the world seemed to tilt. The weight of his words hung between them, heavy and unbearable.

"Where is she, Aaron?"

He looked at her, eyes glinting under the porch light, half sorrow, half guilt. Then he said, barely audible,

"Go back home, Blake. Before she finds *you* first."

The door shut and Blake realized, for the first time, she might not be the one searching anymore.

CHAPTER 8



MATHEW

Mathew never fell in love with Anna. He fell in love with the *idea* of her, the quiet kind of chaos he could study, shape, and eventually control. She fascinated him from the moment he saw her, sitting alone at that smoky bar, the kind of place that reeked of spilled liquor and bad intentions.

She wasn't like the others who tried too hard to be seen. Anna didn't ask for attention. She carried an aura that *demand*ed it. The red of her hair caught the dull light like flame, her pale skin tinted pink from the cold, and her eyes, distant, unreadable, heavy with something broken yet untamed.

He didn't see beauty in her. He saw opportunity. He was good at reading people, too good, maybe. He could tell who wanted to be touched, who wanted to be saved, and who was too damaged to resist the illusion of affection. Anna was the last kind. A heart cracked just enough for someone like him to slip in.

He approached her casually, like he wasn't already rehearsing every word. "Hey there," he said. She turned, eyes half-dazed but sharp. The kind of gaze that measured you before you spoke again. "Hey." That single word. He could already tell she wasn't the kind to play nice.

"I just had to come over," he said, leaning on the counter. "You seem... different. Has anyone told you that?"

She smiled faintly, but there was hesitation. She wasn't used to compliments, not the genuine kind, anyway. "Thank you... I guess."

He offered to buy her a drink. She didn't refuse they never did. Her fingers brushed his as she reached for the glass, and that's when he noticed it, thin, faded scars along her wrist. It didn't bother him. It intrigued him. To most, that would be a red flag.

To Mathew, it was an *invitation*. He knew trauma when he saw it. He knew how to listen, when to go silent, when to laugh at just the right moment to make her feel safe. Within an hour, she was talking about things most people hid behind years of walls. And Mathew, smiling softly, pretended to understand. He didn't understand her, he only understood her weaknesses. They met again.

And again. The kind of meetings that feel accidental but are always calculated. He made her feel like the world had finally stopped spinning against her. And she, in her loneliness, wanted to believe that maybe, just maybe, he was different.

But he wasn't.

Mathew was never different. He'd done this before, the chasing, the pretending, the performing. He liked the control, the power of being the calm center in someone else's chaos. And Anna? She was the perfect stage.

When she spiraled into rehab, he already knew. He'd followed her digital trail like a ghost, quiet, patient, invisible. Didn't call. Didn't text. Just waited. He knew she'd come back. They always did.

And when her message finally arrived "*I've been thinking about you.*" He smiled like a predator hearing the rustle of prey in the dark.

The game was back on. He played the doting boyfriend effortlessly. Brought her food when she forgot to eat. Held her when she cried. Said all the right things, "you're safe now," "I'm proud of you," "you're stronger than you think." It was so easy to mimic care.

He learned her triggers, her fears, her self-loathing, the exact tone of voice that could either soothe her or break her. He tested both.

There were nights she would drink until she slurred confessions she'd regret the next day, about what she'd done, who she'd hurt, what she couldn't forgive herself for. He'd listen, nod, maybe stroke her hair. Inside, he was bored.

To him, her pain was predictable. Her breakdowns, routine. Her apologies, rehearsed. The very things that made her human made her uninteresting to him.

When she talked about leaving, about running away from everyone, he didn't try to stop her. In fact, part of him hoped she would.

And when she did, it felt like release.

He watched her pack, pretending to be asleep on the sofa. He heard the faint zip of the bag, the click of the lighter, the creak of the door. He didn't move.

Only when the taxi's headlights flickered past the curtains did he open his eyes. He exhaled, not grief, not guilt, just relief.

She was gone. Finally.

But he couldn't show it. He had to play the part, the worried boyfriend, the grieving partner, the man desperate for answers. Because if he didn't, people would start to *wonder*.

People like Aaron.

Aaron had always been observant. Too observant. He watched Mathew closely, asked too many questions, looked at him with eyes that seemed to know more than they should.

And lately, Mathew had begun to notice small things, Aaron checking his phone when he entered the room, watching his reactions, pausing a little too long before saying Anna's name.

Mathew didn't know what Aaron knew. But he knew one thing for certain, Aaron wasn't as lost as he pretended to be.

And if Aaron had helped Anna disappear...then the game wasn't over. Not yet.

When Mathew finally walked away, there was no guilt. Just that hollow satisfaction that always came after winning one of his games. He didn't look back. He didn't need to. Anna was already too far gone, the perfect storm he'd quietly created.

When the news of her disappearance spread, Mathew kept his distance. His messages stopped, his voice vanished. But he watched. Always from a distance, like someone observing the aftermath of a fire they'd started.

He showed up once, out of obligation, to see Blake and the family. He stood at their door, eyes low, voice trembling at all the right moments. "I'm so sorry," he said softly. "I should've seen the signs." And just like that, he walked away again, the perfect grieving boyfriend.

But Aaron had seen it. That flicker in Mathew's eyes, not grief, but recognition. The kind of look that said *he knew something*.

Since that day, Blake had been restless. The house was silent, prayers turning into cries, laughter replaced with quiet waiting. The walls seemed to echo Anna's name.

Mathew started showing up more often, offering help, but his silences lingered too long. Every time Blake brought up Anna's old spots, Aaron changed the topic. Every time someone mentioned the night before she vanished, he tensed.

That was when Blake started suspecting something, that maybe they'd been looking for her in all the wrong places.

CHAPTER 9



Life didn't forget Anna suddenly.

It happened in quiet, creeping layers.

At first, her disappearance cracked everything open, fights, blame, sobbing prayers whispered into the walls. Friends haunted old hangouts hoping she'd magically reappear. Blake searched until even her desperation grew tired.

But days blurred. Then the weeks. Then the months, not announced, not acknowledged, just *absorbed* into routine.

Anna's name became an ache people learned to swallow. They didn't erase her; they simply stopped touching the wound.

Leah had always belonged to that outer orbit of their lives.

She went to school with Blake, sat two rows behind her in English class, once partnered with her on a project about dystopian novels. And she used to attend the same after-school tuition as Anna, back when Anna still showed up with messy hair and a shy half-smile.

Not friends, not strangers, just people who recognized each other's faces in a crowd. Their paths hadn't crossed in years.

Leah wasn't thinking of Anna when she walked into the café that evening, she wasn't thinking of much at all, just killing time before her shift. The chime above the door rang, soft and familiar, and she took a seat.

She barely glanced around...until she heard a laugh. Soft. Almost like someone trying not to be heard.

Red hair. Pale skin. Tired eyes that held an entire storm behind them.

Anna.

Leah froze. It took her a moment to place her, she'd changed, thinned out, shadows under her eyes as if sleep had abandoned her long ago. But it was her. No question.

Their eyes met. Recognition flickered across Anna's face, quick, cautious.

"Anna?" Leah whispered.

Anna blinked, then nodded once. Slowly. Carefully.

As if even that acknowledgment cost her something.

They talked. Not deeply, Anna didn't offer much, didn't ask for much. But she mentioned she worked there, said she was "just keeping to herself these days." Her voice thin but steady.

Leah didn't pry. But she left the café with her heart racing, pulse hammering in her wrists.

Two days later, Leah ran into Blake outside a small grocery store. They exchanged the usual polite smiles, the kind shared between old classmates who don't know what to talk about anymore. Then Blake mentioned Anna. Casually. Softly. As if she had trained himself not to sound hopeful.

Leah hesitated. The memory of Anna's tired eyes pressed into her mind.

"You know..." she began slowly, "I... I think I saw her."

Blake went still. Not dramatically .Just... still.

Leah told her about the café. The exact seat. The red hair and how Anna had looked at her without fear, but without relief either.

Blake's breath faltered. Just once.

It was enough.

She didn't thank her properly, her voice broke before he could find the words. But Leah understood.

That night, Blake sat alone in her room, staring at the address scribbled in Leah's handwriting.

For the first time in months, the silence in the house felt charged. Alive.

Anna was out there. Close. Hiding in plain sight.

The morning felt too still, as if the world itself was holding its breath with her. Blake woke before sunrise, a dull ache behind her eyes and a knot sitting heavy in her chest. She dressed quietly, almost ritualistically, cap pulled low, sunglasses hiding the sleeplessness carved into her face. Her fingers trembled as she zipped her jacket.

She didn't tell Claire she was coming early. She didn't tell anyone.

Today felt different. Today felt like *the day*.

Outside, the city was waking up: cars rattling past, a dog shaking rain off its fur, the smell of damp earth rising from last night's drizzle. Blake walked fast, the address Leah gave burning in her mind like a brand.

A café. A simple, ordinary café, and yet, to her, it felt like walking toward the edge of a cliff.

When she reached, the signboard flickered weakly. A warm amber glow spilled from the windows, and the scent of roasted beans curled into the cold air. Blake pushed open the door, a tiny bell chiming above her. Inside, steam hissed from the coffee machine. Cups clinked. People murmured softly. Every time someone stepped out from the staff counter, Blake's pulse shot upward.

But Anna wasn't there. Not at the register. Not by the pastry shelf. Not serving a table.

Her throat tightened. She ordered an Americano to-go just to blend in, fingers cold around the paper cup as she stepped outside.

She waited. And waited.

Hours blurred into each other. Sitting. Standing. Pacing around the building. Peeking inside. Searching faces, footsteps, silhouettes.

Nothing. Not even a glimpse.

By evening her coffee had gone cold, untouched. Her legs felt numb from walking the same block twenty times. When she finally gave up, she walked back home with the hollow taste of disappointment sitting at the back of her tongue.

That night, Blake and Claire sat in their usual café, their comfort place, their safe little corner from the world. The yellow lights were soft, reflecting off the rain-

streaked windows. They looked exhausted, shadows under both their eyes, yet they held each other together with silent understanding.

Two people who loved Anna. Two people willing to look for her every day, every night, forever if they had to.

They traded theories in low voices. Whispers of worry. Whispers of hope.

Claire reminded Blake of Anna's old dreams: "*She always said she wanted to be a barista... or a waitress... or even sing in pubs.*"

Maybe she was doing exactly that. Maybe they were close, painfully close, but just missing her by minutes.

"Or maybe," Claire said gently, "she wasn't working today. We try again tomorrow."

Blake nodded, though her heart felt bruised.

The café door opened and Aaron stepped in. He seemed startled to see just the two of them.

"Where's Jeremy?" he asked, eyes flicking between their tired faces.

"We couldn't sleep," Claire shrugged, playing it cool. Blake kept her expression steady, her secrets tucked behind her teeth.

Aaron didn't push. Instead he ordered a black coffee, though his voice sounded strained... forced. He stepped outside for a call, murmured something like "*I'll call you back later*", then came back with a too-casual smile.

"So what's up? I'm thinking of going out of state for a bit."

His calmness was unreal. While Blake and Claire unraveled night after night, he spoke of trips and escapes like nothing was happening.

Mathew was the opposite, invisible, withdrawn, disappeared from everyone's life. Especially when Aaron was around. They sat for hours, the way they always did, talking, sipping tea, letting time slip through them.

They didn't talk about the café after Leah mentioned it, but something subtle shifted between Blake and Claire after that day. Every time they found themselves near that part of the city, their steps slowed. Neither of them admitted they were looking

for it, but both of them always knew exactly when they were close. It became an unspoken gravity, pulling them down that narrow lane again and again.

The first time they passed it, the sky was dimming into that pale orange that makes everything look softer. The café windows glowed, the warm light spilling across the pavement in gentle squares. Claire walked a little slower, her breath catching on the scent of something sweet. Blake didn't say a word, but she felt her tense beside her, like she was bracing herself without knowing she was doing it.

They kept walking. Neither stopped. Neither looked too long. But both turned back once, pretending they hadn't.

The next time they crossed that street, it felt less like coincidence. Blake looked at the storefronts too carefully. Claire noticed the café door was open, a soft chime every time someone stepped out. She wondered if Anna had ever walked through that door. The thought made her throat tighten.

They still didn't go inside.

Not that day, and not the one after. It simply became a pattern, drifting past, eyes scanning, pretending it wasn't on purpose.

But the feeling didn't fade. If anything, it thickened.

Eventually, they went in.

The moment the door chimed behind them, the warmth hit them in a soft wave. Claire felt her palms sweat. Blake's steps slowed, as though she was afraid of what he might see. They scanned the room too quickly at first, the kind of searching you do when you're scared of finding what you're looking for.

She wasn't there.

Just strangers. Students hunched over laptops. A man stirring sugar into a lukewarm cup. Someone laughing under their breath at something on their phone. Normal life happening quietly. Too quietly.

Claire ordered a drink to give them a reason to stand there. Blake didn't. She just kept glancing at the tables, restless, fingers tapping a silent pattern against the counter. When Claire asked if she wanted to sit, she only shook her head, already looking past her.

They left with nothing but the faint weight of disappointment.

But they kept coming back.

Not in a rushed, obsessive way. Not dramatically. Just a quiet persistence, passing by, stepping in, lingering for a few minutes longer each time. They learned the rhythm of the café without meaning to. When it filled up. When it emptied. Who sat where. Who came alone. Who always ordered the same thing.

And sometimes, the world played tricks on them.

A jacket that looked too much like hers. A soft voice outside that made Claire spin around only to find a stranger. A girl leaving the café, same height, same walk, disappearing into the crowd before they could catch her face.

Every near-miss tightened something inside Blake. Claire saw it. The way her shoulders curled in. The way she went quieter after each visit. The way hope kept flickering in her even when she tried to smother it.

Once, Claire caught a barista looking at them with something like recognition, not of them, but of their fear. Their searching. Their ache. And the barista's eyes softened in a way that made Claire think they knew more than they were saying. Blake brushed it off, but Claire didn't forget the look.

The visits stretched. Morning light. Late afternoons. Evenings when the street lamps hummed and the café lights glowed like a refuge they couldn't enter fully. Time started blending into itself, moments sliding into each other without clear edges. All Claire knew was that each time they left, they felt heavier than when they'd walked in.

One afternoon, when the sky looked bruised, thick with an unfallen rain, the café was quieter than usual. A kind of hush had settled inside, as though the room itself was waiting for something. Claire felt it first, a prickle along her spine, a sense of something shifting just beyond the corner of her eye.

Blake felt it a second later. Her body went still, unnaturally still.

Claire followed the direction of her gaze.

A girl had just stepped inside, not rushing, not hesitant, just moving with a small, practiced silence. Her hair was shorter than Anna's had been. Her face a little

thinner. A softness replaced by something sharper. But the way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear... that was the same.

So was the posture. The way she scanned the room. The way her shoulders lifted slightly, as though bracing for a world she no longer trusted.

Claire's breath faltered.

Blake didn't move at first. She just stared like the air had left his lungs. Her hand gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles went white. Claire could feel her heartbeat even though she wasn't touching her.

The girl, Anna, hadn't seen them. She took a seat by the window, her hand trembling as she placed her order. There was a tiredness in her movements that made Claire's chest ache... and a fear she didn't try to hide. Not anymore.

Blake stood up.

The sound was small, but in the quiet café, it felt too loud. A chair scraping across the floor. A world tipping.

Anna looked up.

Her eyes met Blake's.

Everything froze.

She didn't gasp. She didn't scream. She didn't even reach for her bag. She just stared at her, her face draining of color, breath breaking in her chest, as if the life she had built was collapsing in a single heartbeat.

She knew she wasn't invisible anymore.

Blake took a step toward her.

Anna's lips parted, not to speak, just to breathe, like even that had become too difficult. Claire felt the moment stretch, sharp and fragile, the entire world balancing on a breath that hadn't yet been released.

And that was where everything finally met.

CHAPTER 10



ANNA.

She knew it that night.

Not immediately... but the moment she woke up in that stranger's room, the sheets twisted around her legs, her clothes scattered like discarded pieces of a life she didn't recognise, something inside her went cold. A tiny, trembling instinct in her nerves whispered that she had messed up in a way she couldn't undo.

She wanted to forget it. Pretend it was nothing. Pretend *she* was still the same.

But her body remembered.

Weeks later, when her hands shook over the pregnancy test, she already knew what it would say. The two lines didn't surprise her, it was the confirmation of a fear that had been growing quietly inside her.

She sat on the bathroom floor with her back to the wall, the ceramic tiles cold against her spine. Her hands trembled before she even touched her stomach.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the life inside her, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry... I love you, but I can't do this. I can't be ready right now."

The sentence broke her. She curled into herself and cried, breathless, the kind of crying that comes from somewhere deeper than grief.

She knew she had to tell Mathew.

He was her boyfriend after all. But the truth was she had always been afraid to show him her whole self. He only ever saw the parts of her that behaved. The parts that didn't question him. The parts he approved of.

He never knew the reckless parts. The wild parts. The parts that made mistakes.

And lately... something about him had begun to unsettle her.

His calmness didn't feel like calm anymore, it felt manufactured. Too perfect. Too measured. He reacted to things no normal person would tolerate. He accepted everything without question, even the fact that she let someone take advantage of her. Aaron's voice kept echoing in her head:

"He's not who he pretends to be. I'm telling you. Be careful."

At first she dismissed it. But then she started noticing it too, the way Mathew watched her. The way he pretended not to, but his eyes followed every move she made. The way he controlled her cigarettes. The way arguments became their new normal. The way his affection felt like ownership when she examined it closely.

The love was there, that much was true, but so was the fear.

And worse... the suspicion.

What if he already knew? What if he'd seen the signs long before she admitted them to herself? What if he was waiting? Watching? Planning?

She hated herself for thinking it... but she didn't trust him anymore. Every instinct in her body told her something was wrong, something he wasn't showing.

She couldn't stay. She couldn't raise a child with him. She couldn't let him know anything.

She lit a cigarette, hands shaking, tears still clinging to her lashes. With her free hand she googled clinics far from the city. Not big hospitals, private places. The kind that didn't ask too many questions. Her voice trembled when she called.

"W-when is your earliest appointment?"

A date was set. Too soon. Too real.

She packed a small bag that night, just essentials, and sat on her bed, staring at her silent phone. Her fingers hovered over Jeremy's contact, then Claire's, then Blake's... but she couldn't drag them into this. Not yet. Not when everything inside her felt like collapsing glass.

Only one person came to mind.

Aaron.

She typed: **"Aaron, I need to talk to you. Please meet me on the terrace."**

She didn't know how long she waited before he climbed the stairs. The night was quiet, wind moving through the grill, the city far below them. This terrace had been theirs for years, their hiding place, their comfort zone. They always smoked here. Always talked here. Always understood each other without trying.

They sat side by side, the way they always did. He lit her cigarette before his own, like habit. No words were exchanged. He didn't rush her. He never did.

He knew she had something to say, so he waited.

Time moved slowly. The smoke curled around them. Her heartbeat felt too loud. She leaned against him because she needed to feel something stable, something not slipping away. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders without asking.

When she finally spoke, her voice wasn't even a whisper.

"I messed up, Aaron."

He didn't move.

Her hands shook violently. "I'm pregnant."

A sharp exhale from him, not anger. Shock. Concern.

"It's... it's not Mathew's," she finally said, the words breaking as they left her. "I need money. I need to leave for a few days. I can't tell anyone else. Please... help me."

He didn't hesitate. He pulled her into a tight hug, holding her as if he could shield her from everything she was terrified of.

"You're not going through this alone," he murmured into her hair. "I'm with you. I'll help you figure everything out. You don't deserve to face this by yourself."

Her breath hitched. She had been holding everything inside until this moment.

"I can... I can give you my savings," he continued. "And if you need more, I can help you get a small bank loan. If you want to start over somewhere new, that's okay. But keep me in the loop, okay? Don't disappear on me."

She nodded, wiping her face with trembling fingers. "I'll be leaving soon. I just... I need to make sure Mathew doesn't know anything."

Aaron stiffened for the first time.

“Don’t talk about Mathew,” he said quietly. “He’s not a good person, Anna. I’ve seen him go around with people behind your back. He’s been unfaithful to you. I didn’t want to break your heart, but I tried warning you once.”

Her stomach dropped.

“I knew it,” she whispered. “I knew something about him wasn’t real. I could feel him hiding behind a mask... God, I despise him now.”

Aaron held her tighter.

“He shouldn’t know about any of this,” she murmured, voice hollow.

“Then he won’t,” Aaron promised. “Not from me.”

Anna nodded slowly.

But she didn’t tell him the most important part:

She had a feeling Mathew already knew something. Not everything, but enough to be dangerous.

And that fear... that suspicion... that silence...

Was what pushed her toward the person she eventually became.

She waited until the apartment went quiet. Until Mathew’s nightly routine settled, shower, messages, scrolling, the faint glow of his phone lighting his face. She watched him from the corner of her eye, her pulse thudding beneath her skin.

Her fingers trembled around the two crushed pills she had hidden in her sleeve. Sleeping tablets. Not enough to harm him, just enough to buy her time. She had rehearsed this moment for days, every step timed, every escape route memorized.

When he went to the kitchen for water, she followed with a calmness she didn’t feel, her heartbeat fluttering like a trapped bird. As he turned his back, reaching for a glass, she dropped the powdered pills into the milk carton, stirring lightly. Her hands were steady, but her breath wasn’t.

She returned to the bedroom before him, swallowed by the darkness, sitting at the edge of the bed as though nothing in the world was shifting beneath her feet.

Minutes later, his breathing slowed. Deep... heavy... rhythmic.

The sound hit her like a punch, the undeniable proof that he was slipping under.

She turned toward him.

For a long moment she just watched, her throat tightening. His eyelashes fluttered faintly, his lips parted, chest rising and falling in a slow tide. Vulnerable. Human. So terribly human.

Anna reached out and brushed his hair back from his forehead, a gesture that once meant affection, now only filled with guilt. She didn't hate him in this moment. She hated the version of herself he saw. The one she was forced to be around him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, voice cracking. "I'm so, so sorry."

She stood before her resolve could break.

Her bag was already packed: cigarettes, lighter, a few changes of clothes, her documents, all the money Aaron had scraped together for her. She lifted it with a quiet exhale, her knuckles white around the straps.

At the door, she paused.

One last glance at him.

His face looked peaceful, almost childlike in sleep. For a flicker of a second, she nearly went back. Nearly undid everything. Nearly sank into the bed beside him and pretended she could survive the life she'd been living.

But she couldn't.

She wouldn't.

Two notes sat on the dresser, identical handwriting, different destinations. One placed in the open, easy to find. The second tucked away, meant for later, meant for him to discover only when everything had already changed.

I know you, Mathew. I'm leaving for good. But the day you find this...

She didn't finish the sentence in her head. Too dangerous. Too revealing.

She slipped out of the door.

The hallway was dim, the building quiet, every footstep sounding louder in her own ears. She kept walking, head down, breath shallow, each step pulling her further from him, further from the version of herself she had been suffocating inside.

Outside, the taxi waited. The headlights carved long, lonely shadows across the pavement.

Anna climbed into the back seat. Said nothing.

The door shut with a soft thud that echoed through her bones.

The moment the car began to move, her composure collapsed. Her hands trembled uncontrollably. Her chest felt hollow and burning all at once.

She pressed her palm to her belly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and then again, and again, spiraling into a rhythm she couldn’t stop. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I can’t... I can’t... I want you, my child, my sweet little child, I need you, but I can’t...”

Her voice broke into raw, gasping sobs.

The driver kept glancing at her in the rearview mirror, unsure if he should say something. She was muttering to herself, rocking slightly, tears streaming down her face like she was unraveling right there in his back seat.

He wondered if she was okay. If someone was hurting her. If he should intervene.

But she was beyond reach, lost in an internal storm he could never understand.

She held her stomach tighter, whispering apologies until her voice dissolved into silence.

Outside, the city lights passed in blurred streaks, carrying her toward a future she wasn’t ready for and away from a life she had already destroyed.

CHAPTER 11



The clinic smelled too clean, too bright, the kind of place where silence felt sharpened. Anna sat on the metal chair in the waiting room, fingers locked together so tightly her knuckles were white. She kept telling herself to breathe, but every breath felt too thin, too shaky.

A nurse called her name. Softly. Gently. As if afraid she might break.

Anna stood, but her legs didn't want to cooperate. She walked anyway, following the nurse down a corridor lined with closed doors. Her footsteps echoed, a small hollow sound that made her stomach twist.

Inside the room, she sat on the edge of the exam bed, the paper beneath her crinkling loudly. The sound made her flinch. Everything felt too loud. Too real.

"Are you sure?" the doctor asked, glancing at the chart, then at her. "We can talk through options again."

She nodded. She wished she could speak. She wished she could explain the storm inside her chest, but the words refused to form. She only whispered, "Please... just do it."

Her hands shook uncontrollably. The doctor noticed. "We can stop at any point," he said gently.

No. She couldn't stop. If she stopped she would run back, run home, crumble at Matthew's feet. If she stopped, she would tell him everything and fall apart and then what? She didn't know. She didn't want to know.

She lay back. Cold gel. A screen turned away. Gloves snapping into place. A soft hum of machines she didn't understand. The faint ticking of a clock on the wall.

Her heart beat louder than all of it.

She stared up at the ceiling, at a crack running across the plaster. She focused on it, held it, let it anchor her. The doctor spoke, explaining each step, each moment. Anna didn't hear most of it. Her pulse filled her ears, a dull roar.

She swallowed hard, eyes burning. "I'm sorry," she whispered, to the ceiling, to herself, to someone who couldn't hear her.

The procedure began.

A tightness seized her chest. She grabbed the edges of the bed, fingers digging into the thin mattress. The world blurred. A tear slipped down her temple and disappeared into her hairline.

She tried not to think about the tiny heartbeat she'd heard days ago. She tried not to think about the ultrasound photo folded in her bag, the one she had looked at every night, tracing the little blur with her thumb.

She tried not to think of Matthew's face.

But his voice echoed inside her anyway. Laughing. Arguing. Soft. Sharp. Familiar. Too familiar.

She bit her lip hard to stop the shaking. The taste of iron spread across her tongue.

A nurse touched her arm. "You're doing okay," she murmured.

Anna closed her eyes. She wished she could evaporate. Disappear into a version of her life where she wasn't terrified, where she wasn't running, where she wasn't making decisions that carved pieces out of her soul.

Minutes passed, slow, heavy, surreal.

And then it was over.

The doctor stepped back. The buzzing stopped. Someone adjusted the light. Someone else pulled the blanket up over her legs. A distant voice said she could rest as long as she needed.

Rest. She didn't know how to rest anymore.

Anna curled slightly to her side, arms wrapping around herself, and finally let the sob escape. It was soft, almost soundless, but it tore through her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again, her voice breaking apart. "I'm so sorry..."

Her body trembled with every breath. She felt empty, yet unbearably full, with grief, with guilt, with a loneliness so dense it felt physical.

She stayed like that for a long time, until the world stopped spinning, until she could sit up without collapsing, until she could walk out of the room with her shoulders trembling but her face composed.

Outside, the sun was too bright. The air too warm. People walked past her, unaware, unbothered, carrying on with lives that made sense.

Anna clutched her bag to her chest and stepped toward the waiting taxi, her heartbeat echoing the same broken apology again and again.

She pushed open the bathroom door and slipped inside before anyone could look at her too closely. The moment the lock clicked, her legs gave out. She slid down against the cold tiled wall, knees folding to her chest, breath shattering before she could hold it in.

The room hummed with fluorescent lights, too bright, too quiet, the kind of quiet that made her own heartbeat sound violent. She pressed her palm against her mouth to stop the sob from escaping, but it didn't help, her body shook anyway, thin, ragged breaths scraping out of her chest.

Her hands moved instinctively to her belly. Flat. Empty. Still warm from where life had been minutes ago.

A sound escaped her, small, broken, not even a real word.

She buried her face into her knees. "I didn't mean it... I didn't mean any of this..."

Tears hit the tiles, each one louder than it should've been. Her whole body trembled as if her bones had turned to water. She tried to breathe, but every inhale caught somewhere between her ribs and throat.

Images began slipping into her mind, sharp and uninvited.

The dream. The one that had started weeks ago.

Soft light. A tiny crib. The stillness of a nursery that never existed. And in the center of it, a child. Pale. Silent. Wrapped in a blanket that looked too heavy on such small limbs. A stillborn child she had never met, never held, but somehow already mourned.

She saw its little hand curl around nothing. She saw Matthew standing behind her, expression unreadable. She saw herself reaching for the baby, but her hands passed through it like smoke.

A cold shiver ripped through her. She grabbed fistfuls of her own hair, trying to stop the images from swallowing her whole.

“Please stop... please just stop,” she whispered into the empty room.

But her mind didn’t listen.

It switched to another image, stronger, crueler. Her own hands holding the ultrasound photo. Tracing the blurred outline. Whispering to it at night. I’m here. I’m here. I’m here.

Now she wasn’t. Now she had done the one thing she swore she wouldn’t.

A wave of nausea hit her so hard she leaned forward, gripping the edge of the sink to steady herself. Her breath stuttered in and out, her forehead pressing against the cold porcelain.

Her reflection stared back from the mirror, eyes swollen, face pale, mascara smudged like bruises. She looked haunted. She looked like someone she didn’t recognize.

A hollow laugh slipped out, twisted and shaky. “I’m losing my mind,” she whispered to the mirror, voice a thin thread. “I’m actually losing it.”

Her vision blurred again.

She imagined a tiny heartbeat. Then the absence of it. Then the sound of Matthew’s laugh. Then silence. Empty, crushing silence.

Her nails dug into her palms until pain bloomed. It grounded her, but only a little.

She slid back down to the floor, back hitting the wall again, arms wrapping around herself as if she could hold in what was already gone.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to the child that never was, to the version of her that almost existed. “I didn’t know how to keep you... I didn’t know how to keep myself.”

Her breath hitched.

For a moment her mind played a cruel trick, the faint, phantom weight of a baby in her arms. She almost rocked forward, instinctively, before reality tore through the illusion, leaving her gasping.

The grief was too big for her body. The guilt was too sharp. The fear was too loud. She wasn't just crying, she was unraveling.

Piece by fragile piece.

Alone on the cold bathroom floor, Anna curled into herself, not knowing how to stand up again, not knowing how to face the life she had to return to.

Not knowing that this moment, this exact breaking, was what would push her into running.

Into disappearing.

Into everything that would come next.

Anna stayed on the bathroom floor until her breathing leveled into something that wasn't quite calm but wasn't choking her anymore. Her body felt heavy, limbs sluggish, like she'd been hollowed out.

She wiped her face with trembling fingers and forced herself to stand. Her knees nearly buckled. Even that small motion felt wrong.

She unlocked the door and stepped out, eyes down, avoiding anyone who might look at her too closely. The clinic hallway suddenly felt endless, white, cold, too clean for the mess she carried inside.

Her steps were slow, unsteady. Every footfall felt like she was walking away from something she wasn't supposed to leave.

Outside, the air hit her harshly. It smelled of dust, smoke, city heat, real life, normal life, life that had nothing to do with the ache in her abdomen or the ache in her chest. She wrapped her arms around herself and blinked into the late afternoon light, trying to remember where she'd meant to go.

She didn't know.

All she knew was that she couldn't go home.

The taxi from earlier was still near the curb. The driver recognized her, his worry deepening when he saw her swollen eyes and shaking hands.

“Madam... you okay?” he asked carefully.

She nodded. A lie. Her voice came out flat, barely there.

“Just... take me anywhere.”

He hesitated. “Anywhere?”

“Yes. Just drive.”

And he did.

The city blurred past the window, shops, lights, crowds, but none of it registered. Her forehead leaned against the cold glass as tears dried stiff on her cheeks. Her mind felt distant, drifting somewhere that wasn’t inside her anymore.

Eventually she managed to whisper, “A room... somewhere cheap. Please.”

The driver understood. He drove her to a narrow lane near the edge of town, where small rented rooms sat stacked on top of one another. The kind of place people stayed when they didn’t want to be found.

He helped her with her bag, but she barely noticed him.

She paid the advance, signed the ledger with a hand she could barely steady, and followed the landlord up the stairs. The room was small, one window, one bed, peeling paint, a single bulb buzzing faintly.

It didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered.

She closed the door, dropped her bag onto the floor, and sat on the bed. The mattress dipped under her weight, springs creaking.

Her fingers brushed her lower stomach again, a reflex, a memory, and then she froze, because the emptiness felt too real this time.

A small sound escaped her throat. Not a sob. Not a cry. Just... emptiness made audible.

Hours passed without her realizing it.

She lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, eyes open but unfocused. The room grew darker, then completely dark, but she didn't move to turn on the light. She didn't move at all.

Her mind replayed everything. The clinic. The bathroom floor. The dream-child. The stillness. Matthew's face in flashes. Aaron's voice. The sound of silence inside her own body. Her stomach growled once, but she ignored it. Her throat felt dry, but she didn't reach for water. Sleep didn't come. It hovered somewhere far away, unreachable.

The next morning felt exactly like the night, empty, colorless. She didn't open the curtains. Didn't answer the knock from the landlord checking if she needed food.

Didn't shower.

Didn't smoke.

Didn't speak.

It was as though her body was still present, breathing, existing, but every part of her mind was dissolving. Spiraling inward, deeper, darker, until the world outside her became nothing more than a low hum she couldn't interpret.

By the fourth day, maybe the fifth, her reflection in the mirror felt like a stranger. Hair unwashed. Eyes sunken, ghostlike. Lips cracked. Skin dull, drained.

She touched the mirror with her fingertips as if testing whether the girl reflected there was real.

She didn't look real. The room itself felt sick. Air thick. Curtains unmoved. Sheets cold, untouched except for the shape her body made. A stale heaviness lingered, regret, grief, fear, all of it clinging to the walls like mold. It was a room that reeked of death.

Not the physical death of someone else. But the death of something inside her. A version of her that had existed before. A part of her that would never return.

She curled into herself on the bed, knees drawn tight to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs as if holding the pieces together would stop them from falling apart.

Her breath trembled, uneven, shallow. "I don't know who I am anymore," she whispered into the empty room.

And for the first time, she meant it.

The days blurred into each other until time no longer felt like something that moved forward. It sat with her instead, heavy, unmoving, almost comforting in its stillness.

Somewhere in that suffocating quiet, her mind began to loosen its grip on the spiral. Not heal, no, nowhere close. But inch outward, breath by breath.

The first shift was barely noticeable.

She sat up.

Not for long, not with purpose, but her spine straightened for the first time in days. She stared at the wall across from her, at the peeling paint shaped like a crooked wing, and something inside her whispered that she couldn't remain here forever. The room smelled stale, like unwashed sheets and old fear.

She cracked open the window.

Just a sliver. Enough for a ribbon of air to slip in. It felt cold, almost unfamiliar against her skin.

She inhaled slowly, eyes closing. The world didn't feel as far away anymore.

Her body was weak when she finally stood, legs shaky, but she didn't collapse. She moved to her bag, unzipped it, and pulled out the few clothes she had brought. The fabric felt rough. Real. Grounding.

She changed into a fresh shirt.

Then she drank water.

Then she sat again, breathing deeply, letting the weight on her chest settle into something she could carry instead of choke on.

It wasn't recovery. It was survival. A small, stubborn spark of it.

She needed a name. Not her old one. Not the one layered with guilt, loss, Matthew, Aaron, Blake, too many ghosts.

Something simple. Forgettable. Safe.

She tried whispering different names into the room, but each one felt like a costume she hadn't grown into.

When she whispered the one she finally chose, the word trembled off her tongue .Soft. Almost new.

It fit, not because it meant anything, but because it meant nothing at all.

She tucked her hair behind her ears, staring at her reflection. Her face looked sharper after the days without eating, but her eyes... her eyes looked older and she would need them to look different if she wanted to disappear properly.

The next morning, if it was morning, she wasn't sure, she took the longest shower of her life. The water burned her skin, stinging where grief had left her raw, but she let it. Let it wash the room's sickness off her. Let it wash her old name away.

She found a small salon a few lanes away, the kind with flickering neon lights and clippers that buzzed too loudly. She sat in the chair without speaking.

"Shorter?" the stylist asked.

Anna nodded.

"No," she corrected softly, voice steady for the first time. "Much shorter."

Hair fell around her like shed weight. Dark strands sliding over the plastic sheet and collecting on the tiles at her feet. Each one felt like a part of someone she had already buried.

When she stepped back onto the street, the world seemed to glance past her without recognition.

Good.

She found a cheap mall, walked into a store with no idea what she was looking for, and bought clothes in colors she never wore before, loose shirts, baggy jeans, earthy tones. Clothes that didn't look like Anna's. Clothes that belonged to the ghost she was becoming.

Her old SIM card she snapped between her fingers. The sound was small. But freeing.

By the time she returned to the rented room, there was a strange quiet inside her. Not numbness. Not peace.

Just space.

And in that new space, a thought formed, simple, practical.

She needed work. Something low, small, where nobody asked questions.

Her mind wandered back to the one dream she never admitted out loud. The warm hum of a café. The hiss of milk steaming. The comfort of people who didn't know her name and didn't care.

A barista.

The word felt almost gentle.

She pulled out her phone, her new phone, new number, and searched for cafés hiring nearby. Most required experience. One didn't.

She applied.

Her hands didn't shake this time.

Two days later, she walked into a small café with soft yellow lights and the smell of roasted beans floating like a memory she didn't know she missed.

The manager looked her over, her short hair, simple clothes, quiet voice, and nodded.

"Training starts tomorrow," he said.

Just like that.

She stepped back outside, the evening sun touching her face, warming her in a way she hadn't felt in weeks. Her chest tightened, not with pain, but with something almost like breath.

Her mind wasn't whole. Her heart wasn't healed. Her past wasn't gone.

But she was standing. Working. Living. Invisible.

And for now... that was enough.

Her first week at the café felt unreal, like she was inside someone else's life, someone else's routine. She learned how to pull espresso shots, how to steam milk without burning it, how to smile politely without letting it touch her eyes.

People liked her at first. Quiet girl. Hard-working. Keeps to herself.

But they didn't know the things living behind her ribs.

She tried to be normal. She tried to be this new person she'd created, but the past didn't loosen its grip. It followed her in flashes: bathroom tiles, cold metal, the soft dream of a baby she would never meet, Matthew's sharp silence, Aaron's worried eyes, Blake's warmth.

Some days she walked to work with her jaw clenched so tight it hurt. Some days she didn't speak unless absolutely necessary. Other days, rage simmered beneath her skin, looking for a crack to escape through.

She snapped at customers. Rolled her eyes at coworkers. Banged cups louder than necessary.

By the second week, her manager started watching her more closely.

"Her attitude..." she overheard once, "...I don't know, something's off."

And they were right.

Something was deeply, dangerously off.

After her shifts, she drifted through the streets like someone searching for noise to drown out her thoughts. The City's night life pulled her in, the neon lights, the sweaty music, the shouts, the chaos. She slipped into bars and pubs, always finding herself in the darkest corners first.

She drank to silence the echoes in her head. Whiskey, vodka, beer, she didn't care. Anything to shut the thoughts up.

The drinks made her bold, loose. Sometimes she laughed too loudly. Sometimes she argued with strangers. Sometimes she flirted just to feel wanted, then pushed people away when they got too close.

She was living through extremes, either numb or explosive.

One night, a band performing at a small pub asked if anyone wanted to sing. It was a stupid crowd-pleaser thing. People cheered, laughed, shouted names.

She didn't know why she stepped forward. She didn't even fully remember doing it. But she did.

She stood under the dim lights, gripping the microphone like it was the only solid thing in the room. And when she began to sing, her voice cracked first, shaky, quiet,

but then it stretched into something raw, something wounded, something that made even the drunkest people stop and look up.

Her voice wasn't perfect. But it was honest.

And the room felt it.

After that, bars let her sing sometimes, small gigs, nothing official, but enough to give her money for drinks and cigarettes. Enough to distract her. Enough to keep her floating.

But as she kept singing, something else began to unravel.

She became aggressive in ways she didn't expect.

When people talked too loudly during her song, she snapped. When a man tried to touch her shoulder, she shoved him. When a coworker at the café accidentally bumped into her, she cursed him out.

Her coworkers started avoiding her. The barista on morning shifts refused to work evenings with her. The manager spoke to her twice:

“Whatever's going on... handle it outside this place.”

But she didn't know how.

She seemed softer only with strangers on the street, children selling flowers, old women asking for money, stray dogs sleeping on warm pavements. Something in their fragility mirrored hers, and it softened the sharp edges of her anger.

But inside the café, inside bars, inside her own mind, she was a storm.

One night she stumbled out of a pub after too many drinks, her voice hoarse from singing, her hands shaking from the alcohol and adrenaline. The city lights blurred into streaks, and she laughed, too loud, too broken, because she felt alive and dead at the same time.

She leaned against a wall, lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, and tilted her head up to the sky.

“Who am I now?” she whispered into the night.

She didn't know. Not Anna. Not the stranger she'd become.

Something in between, unfinished, unstable, always seconds away from exploding.
And though no one around her knew her real name, her real story...
Her past still walked beside her every step she took.

CHAPTER 12



Aaron found her where he always did, sitting on the fire escape outside her tiny new apartment, knees pulled to her chest, smoke curling around her like a shield she no longer knew how to put down. The city was loud beneath them, but she felt far away from it, like she was stuck behind glass.

She didn't look up when he climbed out beside her. She just said, quietly, as if finishing a thought she'd been circling for hours, "They won't stop looking for me."

Aaron didn't speak. He'd seen the messages on Blake's status, the missed calls, Claire's indirect pleas, Mathew's spirals. He knew how desperate they were becoming.

He sat down next to her, elbows resting on his knees. "It's because they love you," he said softly.

She scoffed under her breath, a bitter sound. "Love doesn't help me now."

He turned his head slightly, watching her face in the dim orange glow of the streetlights, the hollowness under her eyes, the stiffness in her shoulders, the new hardness that had grown out of weeks of grief and guilt and self-loathing.

"Blake is your sister," he said gently.

"That's why this is worse," Anna whispered.

A long pause settled between them, broken only by the sound of distant traffic and her shaky exhale.

"She'll tear the world apart looking for me," she murmured. "And Claire... Claire won't stop either. I know how they think. They're going to break themselves trying."

Aaron stayed silent. Sometimes silence was the only thing she could lean on.

Then she turned to him, finally, her eyes sharp, exhausted, terrified.

“I need them to stop.”

The words trembled even though her voice didn’t.

Aaron inhaled slowly. “Anna”

“I’m not ready to see them,” she said, cutting him off. “I’m not ready for any of this. I’m not someone they can save right now. I can’t handle their questions. Their hope. Their faces.”

Her voice cracked on that last word.

He softened. “What do you want me to do?”

Anna looked down at her hands. Her fingers were shaking. The cigarette burned dangerously close to her skin, but she didn’t flick the ash away.

“Text them,” she whispered. “Both of them.”

Aaron’s heartbeat stumbled. “Text them what?”

She swallowed hard.

“Tell them to stop looking for me.”

His breath left him in a slow exhale. “That will hurt them,” he said quietly.

“I know.” Another shaky inhale. “But it will save me.”

Her eyes glistened, not a break, not a sob, just that wet shimmer of a person who’s cried herself empty. “I can’t face Blake right now. Not after what I did. Not after what I lost.” She closed her eyes. “If she finds me... I’ll fall apart. And if I fall apart, I won’t survive any of this.” Aaron finally took the cigarette from her hand, crushed it out against the metal railing.

“You’re asking me to lie for you,” he said gently.

“I’m asking you to protect me,” she corrected. “Just until I can breathe again.”

He looked at her then, really looked, and understood the fear underneath the anger, the guilt underneath the silence, the brokenness she’d been hiding under this new life she was trying to construct piece by piece.

He pulled his phone from his pocket.

Anna watched the screen light up against the night sky, her breath held, her body rigid.

“Say it,” Aaron murmured. “Say exactly what you want me to send.”

Her voice wavered.

“Tell them...” A beat. “...tell them to stop looking.”

He typed it out. Simple. Cold. Final. A message with no name, no trace, no softness.

He didn’t press send yet. “You’re sure?”

Anna stared out into the streets below, eyes distant, haunted, barely holding on.

“Yes,” she said. And for the first time, the truth slipped out in her voice: “I’m not ready to be found.”

Aaron pressed send.

Somewhere across the city, Blake’s phone lit up. Then Claire’s.

Anna didn’t see it, but she felt it. A strange, stabbing ache in her chest, like something inside her cracked quietly in the dark.

She didn’t cry. She just whispered into the night, “I’m sorry.”

Aaron didn’t touch her, didn’t speak.

He just stayed beside her while the city sounds swallowed her confession whole.

The apartment felt smaller after Aaron left.

The kind of small that presses against your ribs and sits heavy on your throat. Anna lay on the thin mattress she called a bed, staring at the ceiling where shadows swayed like they were breathing with her. The city outside pulsed with noise, but inside her room there was nothing, just the quiet hum of her own unraveling.

She couldn’t sleep.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her sister’s face, Blake with those wide, trembling eyes that always took too much responsibility for everything, even things that weren’t hers. Blake who always tried to hold the world together with bare hands, even when the world cut her palms open.

Anna felt guilt first. Then something uglier.

Resentment.

It crept in slowly, a thin poisonous thread weaving through the spaces of her heart she thought were too bruised to feel anything new.

Blake... Blake who was always perfect. Blake who people trusted automatically. Blake who never had to fight to be heard, who never had to beg to be understood.

Blake, the golden child.

Anna turned onto her side, tugging the thin blanket over her face like it could smother her thoughts. It didn't.

Why is it always her job to be rescued? Why is it always Blake who gets to be the hero?

Why can't Anna be allowed to drown on her own terms?

Her chest tightened, the resentment biting deeper than she expected. She hated it, hated that she could feel something so sharp toward the person she used to run to. But the truth was simple and cruel:

Blake's love felt like a cage.

Then... Claire.

Anna pressed her palm to her forehead, as if she could push the thoughts back inside.

Claire who always "knew better." Claire with opinions about everything Anna did. Claire who said she was helping but always ended up controlling, directing, steering, tightening strings Anna didn't ask to be tied with.

Claire who smiled sweetly, but whose concern always felt like surveillance.

Anna remembered the times she had to reassure Claire she was okay, even when she wasn't. Claire expected answers, honesty, obedience. Claire wanted her whole, raw truth even on days Anna couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't stand the weight of her own name.

They meant well. She knew they did.

But meaning well didn't save her. Meaning well didn't stop the panic. Meaning well didn't hold her when she had her abortion. Meaning well didn't silence the nightmares, the trembling hands, the hollow ache inside her.

Meaning well wasn't enough.

Tears slipped silently into her pillow, soaking through the fabric. Her breaths came too fast, too shallow. She curled into herself, clutching her knees, whispering to no one, "Stop... just stop..."

She didn't want to resent them. She didn't want to hate the people she loved.

But she was drowning, and every time she imagined them bursting through the door, grabbing her, shaking her, demanding answers, she felt the walls close in around her again.

Their love felt like pressure. Their protection felt like suffocation. Their worry felt like accusation.

And she couldn't breathe under all that.

The clock on the wall ticked through the night, loud and steady, mocking her. She stayed awake, eyes open, hands trembling until dawn splintered through the blinds.

Her resentment, her guilt, her loneliness, they all settled inside her like sediment.

By sunrise, she wasn't sure she recognized herself anymore.

By dawn she was still awake, the resentment sitting in her chest like a stone she didn't want to carry, but couldn't set down.

She showered mechanically, dressed for work, tied her hair up, and walked to the café with a hollow calm. She had learned how to do everything on autopilot, the coffee machine, the trays, the fake half-smile. It was routine. Easy. Disconnected.

When she reached the café, the morning rush was already building. She slipped behind the counter and started working without thinking. Her hands moved faster than her mind.

Sometime around mid-morning, the bell over the door chimed.

A girl walked in , dark green jacket, messy black hair, eyes too observant for someone that young. She had a notebook tucked under her arm and sat at one of the side tables like she belonged there more than any customer ever had.

A few minutes later, the girl approached the counter.

“You’re new here,” she said, voice soft but steady. “Well... new-ish. I’ve seen you around.”

Anna blinked. “I’ve been here a couple months.”

The girl smiled slightly, like she already knew that. “I’m Leah.”

She reached for her wallet, but she wasn’t really looking at the menu. She was looking at Anna, not in the way customers do when they’re trying to place an order, but like she was studying her. Recognizing something familiar.

“Americano,” Leah finally said. “Extra shot. You look like you could use one too.”

Anna stiffened. “I’m fine.”

Leah didn’t apologize or back down. She just tilted her head a little, still watching, still noticing things Anna thought she hid well.

“Rough morning?” Leah asked quietly.

Anna hesitated for a second, long enough for the truth to almost slip out. Then she shook her head.

“It’s just work.”

“Right,” Leah murmured, though it didn’t sound like she believed her. “Work.”

Anna handed her the cup and turned away quickly, pretending to wipe the counter. But Leah didn’t leave. She lingered for a moment, as if searching for something in Anna’s face before finally stepping back to her table.

Anna exhaled slowly, unsure why this stranger’s presence felt like someone had just peeled back a layer she wasn’t ready to expose.

She glanced at Leah again.

Something about her, her stillness, her eyes, the subtle way she observed the world, made Anna feel like she’d been seen.

And she wasn't sure yet whether that comforted her... or terrified her.

Anna didn't show up to work the next day.

No warning, no message. Just absence, the kind that feels heavy even when no one speaks about it.

Her apartment was dim; she hadn't opened the curtains. The air felt stale, thick, as if it had been holding its breath with her. She sat on the cold floor, back against the side of her bed, knees pulled tightly to her chest. She hadn't meant to break down. It crept up on her, the way grief always does, quiet at first, then suffocating.

At first it was just a little pressure behind her eyes. A feeling that something wasn't right. Then the memories started circling again, the same ones she thought she had outrun by changing her name, cutting her hair, becoming unrecognizable.

The clinic bathroom. The metallic smell. The crumpled paper gown sticking to her skin. The silence after. The kind of silence that feels like a scream.

She pressed her forehead to her knees, breathing unevenly. Images flickered behind her eyelids, the dream of the stillborn child, the weight of something she never held, the echo of a life she chose to end because she couldn't survive otherwise. A part of her felt ripped out, quietly, permanently.

And now everything she had built, the new identity, the new routines, felt like thin wallpaper over a collapsing wall.

Her chest tightened. Her fingers shook. She wrapped her arms around herself, but even that didn't help; she couldn't hold herself together.

Resentment twisted inside her, at Blake, for being perfect; at Claire, for controlling; at herself, for running, for feeling everything too deeply, for not being strong enough to stay, or leave cleanly.

Her throat burned as she choked back a sob. But the tears came anyway, slow at first, then relentless, sliding down her face and dripping onto her hands.

She felt... alone. Not the peaceful kind of alone she wanted, but the kind that eats at you, room by room, breath by breath.

The apartment around her felt like a grave, the death of the person she used to be, the death of the part she lost. She could almost smell it, that heaviness, that stillness, as if the walls themselves remembered what she'd done.

Hours passed without her noticing. She didn't eat. She didn't move. She didn't answer her phone. She didn't try to stop crying anymore.

She just sat there, unraveling inch by inch, until she was nothing but a trembling outline of herself, barely holding onto the thought:

Maybe I can't do this anymore.

She had been on edge since morning.

Nothing dramatic, just that tight, crawling feeling under her skin, the kind that told her something was shifting in the air even if she couldn't name it. Sleep had barely touched her. She'd paced her tiny apartment, showered twice, changed clothes three times before settling on the plain black shirt the café required.

Routine. She needed routine. It had held her together these past weeks when her mind tried to tear itself apart.

By the time she tied on her apron and stepped in behind the counter, the café was beginning to fill with its usual quiet. The hiss of the espresso machine, the metallic tap of a milk jug, soft indie music humming low enough to barely exist. Her hands were steady on the surface, but her heart wasn't.

She wiped the counter even though it was already clean. Again. Then again. Something felt off. Wrong. The air seemed heavier today, like the walls were pressing inward.

She tried to ignore it.

"Order up, Anna," the other barista called. "Yeah," she murmured, but her voice sounded far away even to herself.

She turned to hand off a drink, and then, The door chimed. A normal sound. It happened a hundred times a day. But something in her froze.

She didn't look right away. She couldn't. Her fingers tightened around the cup, knuckles whitening. The feeling crawled up her spine like cold hands.

Don't look. Keep working. It's just customers. It's always just customers.

But the café's quiet shifted. A strange hush. The kind she hadn't heard since the day she walked away from her old life.

Eventually, her eyes lifted, and the cup slipped slightly in her grip.

Blake.

Standing only a few steps inside. Shoulders tense. Eyes already scanning. Searching with a desperation she knew too well.

Her lungs forgot how to work.

Claire was beside her, worry softening her face, her phone clutched tightly as always. They both looked... older. Exhausted. Like everything she tried to protect them from had swallowed them anyway.

Anna's throat burned.

No. No, no, not here. Not while she was working. Not while she was pretending to be someone else.

She stepped back instinctively, fingers curling behind the counter, as if the wood could hide her. Her breath stuttered, a sound so small she hoped no one heard it.

God, she hoped Blake wouldn't look up.

But she did.

Her gaze landed on her like a weight she couldn't outrun. Her eyes widened, not with shock, but with recognition so deep it made her chest ache.

Claire froze beside her.

Anna's heartbeat slammed against her ribs. She felt the floor tilt. The air thickened. The room shrank. Her new identity, her new life, the distance she had carved with so much pain, it all crumbled in one instant.

She didn't gasp. Didn't collapse. Didn't cry.

She just stood there, fingers gripping the counter, the world closing in, her breath stuck somewhere deep and unreachable.

Blake took a step toward her.

A small sound escaped her, half inhale, half panic. Her body wanted to run. Her mind wanted to disappear. Her heart... her heart wanted something she wasn't ready to name.

Not yet. Not like this. Please... not like this.

Her second step was slower. Careful. Almost fragile.

Anna couldn't move.

She could only stand behind that counter, her shaky, borrowed life unraveling, knowing she was no longer invisible, no longer hidden, no longer safe.

And as Blake crossed the room toward her, every lie she'd built trembled under the weight of the truth she'd never escaped.

Anna locked eyes with them for a moment, Blake stiffening, Claire's expression tightening with worry, and something inside her jolted violently. She couldn't stay there. Not with their questions pressing against her ribs. The air felt too thin to breathe.

She mumbled something that could pass as "I need a minute" and slipped past the counter, out of the shop, out into the sunlight. Her legs moved fast, shaking beneath her. Claire called after her. Then Blake. Anna didn't turn.

She cut into the narrow lane behind the café, where the buildings leaned in close and the noise of the street faded. Her breath quivered. Her pulse hammered through her ears. She walked until the shadows swallowed her.

Footsteps followed.

"Anna, wait," Claire said, catching up first.

Anna didn't face them.

Claire's voice softened, too gentle, too knowing. "Something's wrong. You've been disappearing, acting strange..."

Anna's shoulders tightened.

But Blake stepped forward.

Anna felt heat flare through her chest, sharp, blinding.

Claire tried to bridge it, but only made it worse. “Anna... you don’t have to hide anymore. Keeping secrets is killing you. Just tell us what happened.”

Blake reached out, her hand closing around her arm. “Anna, you can’t run from this. Not again. If you cared about us”

That was the line.

If you cared about us.

Anna froze. Something in her face changed, subtle, shifting, dark. The alley seemed to tilt around her. Her jaw clenched until it trembled.

Blake didn’t notice. She kept talking, pushing, unaware she had pressed the rawest part of her.

Claire tried to step in, but it was too late.

Anna moved before either of them understood what was happening.

Everything inside her, her grief, her guilt, broke open in one violent, irreversible snap.

And Blake paid for pressing exactly where she shouldn’t have.

Claire’s scream still echoed off the alley walls when Anna stepped back, breath shaking, eyes glassy with something that didn’t look like fear or anger anymore.

It looked like **breaking**.

Blake didn’t move. She was still pressed against the wall, chest rising in short, confused breaths, trying to understand what had just switched inside her.

Anna turned her head slowly, too slowly, like sound was reaching her a second too late.

Something metallic glinted near the trash bin. A rusted, heavy metal rod, maybe part of an old chair frame, maybe a pipe, she couldn’t tell. But the moment she saw it, the alley felt colder. Her footsteps toward it were soft, almost gentle. Claire froze.

“Anna... no. Anna, *no*.” Her voice shook so hard it barely formed words. But Anna didn’t seem to hear her. Her fingers closed around the metal. Cold. Rough. Solid in a way nothing in her chest felt anymore.

For a heartbeat, for a second too long, she just stared at it, her reflection warped on its dented surface. Her breaths were shallow, ragged, like every inhale hurt.

Blake tried to speak again.

“Anna... whatever you think, whatever you’re feeling, just talk to us”

That word again. Talk.

Talk like they always knew better. Talk like she hadn’t been screaming in silence for months. Talk like she hadn’t begged for space only to be smothered by their worry, their control, their self-righteousness.

Something snapped quietly inside her.

Her grip tightened around the rod until her knuckles went white. Claire took a hesitant step forward. “Anna, please, your hands are shaking. Just put it down. Please.”

Anna lifted her eyes.

They were distant. Unfocused. Like she was watching something far behind Blake, far behind the alley, something only she could see.

Then she moved.

Not fast. Not wild. Not screaming.

Just a single, sharp motion, a desperate, instinctive swing.

The metal connected with a sickening, hollow *thud* against Blake’s shoulder, knocking her sideways into the brick wall. she gasped, eyes squeezing shut, pain rippling through her.

Claire screamed, “STOP!” The sound cracked, breaking apart in the cold air.

But Anna didn’t stop.

The world in her head was louder now the clinic tiles, the smell of antiseptic, the emptiness in her womb, the months of fear, the messages she’d made Aaron send, the crushing guilt, the suffocating pressure of being the fragile one they had to save.

Another swing. Blake’s arm came up too late. The metal hit bone. Her knees buckled.

Claire lunged forward, grabbing Anna's arm, voice splintered with terror.

"Anna, please, STOP! You're hurting her!" Her hands shook violently against Anna's skin.

Anna blinked, slowly, like waking up underwater. Her grip slackened. The metal rod slipped from her fingers and clattered against the ground, the ringing spreading through the alley like a shockwave.

Her breath stuttered. Her knees nearly gave out. Her eyes darted between Claire's horrified face and Blake curled on the ground, clutching her arm, trying to breathe through the pain.

Recognition washed over her in a cold, brutal wave. She had done that.

She had actually done it. And for the first time, Anna's face twisted, not in anger, not in fear, but in a raw, devastated realization.

"Claire..." she whispered, voice barely a breath, "I... I didn't mean, I didn't,"

But Claire stepped back from her, eyes wet, mouth trembling, as if even being near Anna suddenly hurt.

And that was the moment Anna truly broke. Anna didn't move.

She just stood there in the middle of the alley, cold concrete beneath her feet, the metallic sting of blood in the air, her hands trembling violently, coated in Blake's blood. Her breathing was shallow, broken, like each inhale cut through her chest. The world around her blurred, sirens screaming somewhere far away, or maybe inside her own skull.

Claire was on her knees beside Blake, voice cracking as she kept pressure against the wound.

"Stay with me, Blake, please, please, just stay" Her hands were shaking almost as badly as Anna's, but she kept going, screaming for help, calling every number she could think of, voice raw and desperate.

Anna couldn't hear the words. She only heard the echo of her own voice in her skull:

I didn't do it. I didn't. I didn't. I didn't.

She stared at Blake's still face, her sister, the golden one, the loved one, and bile burned its way up her throat. She felt like she was drowning from the inside.

Her fingers twitched involuntarily, muscles locking and unlocking. Her heartbeat thundered. Her vision pulsed black at the edges.

Footsteps. Shouting. An ambulance's red lights painted the alley walls like a warning. People rushed forward. Paramedics lifted Blake, voices loud and urgent:

"We're losing her—move, move—"

Claire stood up, shaking, grabbing Anna's shoulders.

"Anna, listen to me, look at me, look at me!"

Anna's eyes were glassy, unfocused, swollen with terror.

"I didn't do it," she whispered, voice barely there, cracking like thin ice. **"I didn't do it. I didn't..."**

Claire turned to the approaching police officers, panic twisting her face.

"Someone, someone attacked us, she tried to stop them, please, she's in shock"

Anna's knees buckled. She sank down, pressing her palms to her ears as if she could silence something inside herself. Everything was spinning.

She hurt her. She hurt Blake. Her hands. Her hands.

She stared at them, blood drying in the creases of her palms.

The officers moved closer.

"Ma'am, we need you to come with us."

Anna didn't resist. She let them guide her, breath hitching in painful bursts, whispering through choked sobs:

"I didn't do it... I didn't..."

Across the city, Matthew stood frozen in Anna's apartment doorway, the second note trembling in his hand. Her handwriting cracked and frantic:

"You were right. Maybe I'm the problem."

His chest tightened, fear pounding through him. He didn't even lock the door, he just ran, heart hammering, sprinting through streets, asking anyone if they'd seen her, desperation growing like fire in his lungs.

Then, a crowd. Sirens. Flashing blue and red lights.

He pushed forward, breathless.

Anna stood near the ambulance now, surrounded but untouched, eyes blank, body rigid, trembling so violently she looked like she might snap in half.

Then she heard it

“Anna!”

Matthew's voice. Her head jerked up. Something inside her **fractured**, a sharp crack like glass under pressure. The world narrowed. His face. The note in his hand. His expression: pity. Concern. **Fear.**

It was enough.

Anna screamed, a raw, animal sound, and grabbed the nearest object, a metal bar leaning against the alley wall.

Before anyone could react, she swung. A sickening thud. Matthew collapsed, blood blooming across his forehead.

Gasps erupted around them, people rushing forward, pulling her back. She thrashed, sobbing, choking on her own breath.

“I DIDN'T DO IT! I DIDN'T—HE MADE ME—STOP—STOP—”

She kicked, clawing at the hands holding her as officers pinned her arms.

The world dissolved into red and sirens and screaming.

Her own voice was the loudest, shaking the air:

“I didn't mean to! I didn't, she wouldn't stop, please, please!”

Handcuffs clicked shut around her wrists. The ambulance carrying Blake disappeared down the street.

Claire followed inside, crying silently. Anna was pushed into the back of a police car, head pressed against the cold glass, breath fogging the window. And for the first time, the silence around her was absolute.

Her voice broke into a whisper, barely existing:

“What did I do?”

The hospital smelled like antiseptic and metal and the faint, hollow echo of footsteps. The fluorescent lights hummed above, too bright, too white, burning into the eyes of everyone who walked through the corridors that night. Claire stood outside the emergency ward, her palms still stained with Blake’s blood, her chest rising in sharp, uneven breaths. She hadn’t stopped shaking since the ambulance doors closed.

Their parents arrived moments later, her mother stumbling forward first, clutching her chest as if her ribs were collapsing inward, her father’s face drained of all color. The moment they saw Blake through the glass window, pale and still under the surgical lights, tubes running from her arms and machines beeping relentlessly, something inside them broke. Her mother pressed her hand to the glass, tears sliding down her face soundlessly at first, then splitting open into ragged sobs. Her father leaned into the wall, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor, head in his hands, shoulders shaking. They had lost one daughter once already when Anna vanished, and now it felt like the world had come back to take the rest of them too, piece by piece.

“How did this happen... how...” her mother whispered, voice thin as paper, barely forming sound.

Claire couldn’t answer. The words jammed in her throat like stones. She could only stare at the red stains on her hands, Blake’s blood drying in uneven patches, and every time she blinked, she saw Anna’s face again... blank, empty, trembling, unrecognizable.

A police officer approached, voice low and cautious, asking them to come for questioning. Her mother wiped her face with shaking hands. Claire followed, numb, her legs barely supporting her. The walk to the interrogation room felt like wading through water, every step dragging, every breath sharp and heavy. Their father walked behind them in silence, eyes hollow.

Inside the small grey room, Anna sat at a metal table, hands cuffed loosely in front of her, knuckles white, fingers twitching. Her hair was falling into her face, and there was blood on her shirt, streaks across her arms where she had tried to wipe them clean. Her eyes were open, but unfocused, staring ahead at nothing, like she was somewhere far away, deep underwater where no sound could reach.

When her parents walked in, they stopped in the doorway, frozen. For a moment, no one breathed. Her mother let out a broken gasp, not loud, but sharp, like a bone snapping. Her father closed his eyes, as though the sight itself hurt.

“Anna?” her mother whispered, voice shaking. Anna didn’t respond. Didn’t even blink.

The officers asked the first question, gentle, careful, waiting:

“Anna, can you tell us what happened tonight?”

Anna’s lips parted. Her voice came out small, trembling, like the sound of paper tearing.

“I didn’t do it.”

Her parents stared, confused, terrified.

Another question. Another attempt.

“Anna, who hurt Blake? Did someone else come into the alley?”

Her breathing hitched. Her shoulders curled inward. Her voice cracked.

“I didn’t do it. I didn’t...”

Then nothing.

Silence swallowed her whole. Like the words themselves exhausted the last piece of her that still existed. Her stare went empty again, her body rigid, jaw locked. The officers asked again, then again, trying to guide her back, but she didn’t hear them anymore. She didn’t hear her mother’s sobs, or Claire’s choked attempts to speak, or her father whispering her name like prayer. She just sat there, eyes unfocused, as if something inside her had slipped loose and disappeared.

Eventually the officers turned to Claire, asking what happened. Claire told them everything she could, voice trembling, breaking. They questioned others, the people

who had pulled Anna off Matthew, the paramedics, the neighbors. A pattern formed in pieces, heavy and terrifying. This wasn't rage. This wasn't intention. This was something fractured, something drowning beneath the surface for far too long.

The psychologist arrived, quiet and steady, reading the situation like a map of cracks. Words like **dissociation**, **trauma response**, **psychotic break** floated in the air, heavy and cold. Papers were signed. Decisions were made. The handcuffs were removed.

Anna didn't react.

Two nurses guided her out gently, their hands on her shoulders, walking slowly so she wouldn't collapse. Her parents followed behind, silent, devastated, watching their daughter disappear down the sterile hallway. Her mother reached out as if to touch her arm, but Anna didn't even see her, eyes still fixed on nothing, lips parted in a faint whisper that barely made sound:

"I didn't do it..."

The doors to the psychiatric ward opened with a soft click, swallowing Anna in white light and the faint echo of footsteps. Her mother collapsed into her father's chest, sobbing so hard she couldn't breathe. Claire stood motionless, staring after her sister, feeling the weight of everything crashing down at once.

In one night, they had lost Blake to blood and silence, and they had lost Anna to a darkness none of them had seen until it was too late.

And the hallway fell quiet, except for the distant, irregular rhythm of a heart monitor beeping somewhere behind the walls, like time itself refusing to stop.

The room was too white. Too bright. The kind of brightness that didn't warm, it just exposed everything.

Anna sat motionless on the rigid chair, her back straight but her hands trembling faintly in her lap. Her hair, cut unevenly and falling across her face, looked almost silver under the harsh hospital lights, washed out of every trace of color. Her hospital gown was loose, hanging off a body that seemed smaller, quieter, like someone had hollowed her out from the inside.

Across from her, the therapist sat with a soft posture, a notebook resting unopened on her knees, pen still. She didn't speak yet. She just watched, waiting like someone waiting for a fragile animal to approach on its own terms.

The clock ticked somewhere beyond them, slow, echoing, too loud in the sterile hush.

Anna didn't look up. Her eyes stayed fixed on her hands, on the pale scars and the faint tremor she couldn't control. She blinked only once in a long stretch of time, like even that movement was exhausting.

The therapist leaned forward slightly, voice gentle, careful.

"Anna... whenever you're ready."

Silence answered. A silence thick enough to feel, one that pressed against the walls, the floor, the air between them.

Anna's lips parted, just barely, like she might speak. But no sound came.

Her eyes lifted slowly, finally meeting the therapist's. They were empty. Not cold, empty, like someone standing in the ruins of a place that once mattered. A single tear slid down her cheek, tracing the sharp line of her jaw. She didn't wipe it. She didn't react at all.

The therapist waited.

Anna inhaled, shaky and shallow, the kind of breath taken by someone learning how to breathe all over again. Her mouth trembled, but she still said nothing. No confession. No explanation. No apology. Just silence.

The clock ticked again.

The therapist closed her notebook softly, not in defeat, but in respect for a story too shattered to be spoken yet. Anna's gaze drifted past her, unfocused, somewhere far beyond the walls, somewhere no one could follow. And in that stillness, that heavy unmoving air, the world held its breath with her. The scene faded on her face, pale, exhausted, unreachable, framed by the blinding white.

She did not speak. She just sat there.

Silent. Unknowable. Gone long before she ever disappeared.

"The mind whispers before it screams. Listen to the whisper because once it becomes a storm, it may be too loud to reach you."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



We lose people long before they disappear.

Sometimes they're right in front of us, laughing, working, living, but silently fighting battles we cannot see. Pain doesn't always look dramatic. Sometimes it looks like exhaustion. Like silence. Like isolation. Like anger. Like a smile that doesn't reach the eyes.

We are quick to judge, slow to notice, and even slower to ask, "*Are you really okay?*"

Mental spirals don't start big. They begin as small cracks: sleepless nights, withdrawal, losing control of thoughts, losing joy in things that once mattered. And if we ignore those cracks, they turn into breaks. When someone falls deep enough, they don't always want help anymore, not because they're stubborn, but because the darkness convinces them they're beyond saving.

That is why getting help early is not weakness. It is survival. Therapy, conversation, vulnerability, these are acts of courage. Saving someone is hardest when they no longer believe they're worth saving. Don't wait until the mind takes over the body. Don't wait until you're drowning in silence.

If you are struggling, reach out. If someone you love is slipping, reach in.

You matter. Your mind matters. And nobody deserves to fight alone.

FROM THE AUTHOR



For everyone who is carrying battles quietly.

For the ones still trying.

For the ones who survived.

And for the ones we lost too soon.