



Chapter 3

I woke up with a start.

For a moment, I couldn't tell if I was still dreaming. The air in the room felt heavy, the soft hum of the ceiling fan the only sound breaking the silence. My heart beat faster than it should have — though I couldn't remember why. Whatever dream had startled me slipped away like fog in sunlight, leaving behind only that strange, lingering unease.

I reached across the bed, searching for Daniel's warmth. My hand met cool sheets. The space beside me was empty — the pillow smooth, untouched.

"Daniel?" I murmured, my voice hoarse from sleep.

No answer.

Blinking against the light filtering through the curtains, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. My phone sat on the nightstand, face down. When I picked it up, the screen lit up with a single unread message.

Daniel: "Had to leave early, love. Need to finalize this project. I'll see you later, ok? Love you."

I stared at the message, reading it twice, as if the words might shift into something else.

The clock on the wall read 10:48 a.m.

Late.

I rarely ever slept that long, especially not on a Saturday. Weekends were sacred to me, the one time I allowed myself to silence my alarms and let my body rest. But even then, Daniel usually woke me with coffee and soft kisses, whispering "Happy weekend, sleepyhead" before I could protest.

And today... today of all days, he hadn't.

My birthday.

I sat there for a moment, phone still in hand, confusion and disappointment mixing in the quiet. Daniel never forgot my birthday. Never. He was the kind of man who loved surprises — elaborate plans, handwritten notes, breakfast in bed. One year he even decorated the living room with hundreds of fairy lights just to "outshine the stars" for me.

So why did it feel different this time?

"Maybe he's planning something," I whispered to myself, forcing a small smile. That had to be it. Daniel could be unpredictable when it came to surprises. He probably wanted to make me think he'd forgotten — just to see the look on my face later.

Before I could dwell on it further, my phone chimed again.

Katherine: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY BEST FRIEND!! Are you awake now?? Let's go partayyyyyy!!! 🥳🍰"

I couldn't help but laugh. Even in text, I could hear her voice — fast, loud, and full of caffeine.

Me: "Yes, I'm awake. I'll see you soon!"

We'd planned the whole day out weeks ago. Spa treatments, shopping, gossip, and later, dinner with Daniel — just the three of us celebrating like old times. It was supposed to be simple, easy, full of laughter.

Still, as I set the phone down and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, that small ache in my chest didn't fade. I didn't even know what time Daniel had come home last night. I must've already been asleep. And now, he'd left without waking me.

It wasn't like him.

Shaking my head to clear the thought, I padded to the bathroom, letting the hot water of the shower chase away the strange feeling lingering in my chest. The steam curled around me, warm and comforting. Today wasn't a day to overthink. Today was supposed to be happy.

The hours slipped by quickly once Katherine arrived.

With her around, it was impossible not to laugh. She had a way of filling every space she entered — bright, animated, always talking with her hands.

We spent the afternoon exactly as planned: a full-body massage, a manicure and pedicure, then a long lunch at our favorite café by the boardwalk. The sunlight shimmered across the water outside, and for a moment, everything felt right again. I let myself sink into the ease of it — the chatter, the music, the smell of coffee and sea salt.

It was a good day.

By the time we left the spa, my nails gleamed a pale blush pink, my muscles loose and relaxed. I felt refreshed — renewed, even. Ready to celebrate properly that night.

"Okay, confession time," Katherine said as we strolled back to her car. "I haven't heard your phone ping once since this morning. Has Daniel nally stopped spamming you, or is it the end of the world?"

I laughed softly. "He's working on a big project. Had to leave early."

"On your birthday?" She said, incredulous. "That man needs to learn priorities."

"He'll make it up to me," I said, though even as the words left my mouth, a faint unease rippled through me again. It was the same feeling I'd had when I woke up — subtle, but constant. Like a whisper in the back of my mind that wouldn't quiet down.

"Well," Katherine said, eyeing me. "He better still be coming tonight. I bought new heels just for this dinner."

I smiled, opening my phone to check for messages. Still nothing new. "He didn't say otherwise."

As if on cue, my phone buzzed in my hand — Daniel's name flashing on the screen.

"Speak of the devil," I said, smiling as I swiped to answer. "Hi, love! Didn't hear from you the whole day. Everything okay?"

There was a pause. A faint static hum on the other end. Then his voice came — quiet, steady, but with an edge I couldn't quite place.

"Love, can you come home? I need to speak with you." Something in his tone made my stomach tighten.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

"Yeah," he said quickly. "I just... need to talk to you. It's important."

My pulse quickened. "Okay. Let me just say goodbye to Katherine, and I'll be there soon."

"Okay," he said. "I'll see you soon, love."

The line clicked, leaving only the faint echo of his voice in my ear.

Katherine's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, slipping the phone into my bag. "He just asked me to come home. Said it was important."

Her teasing expression softened into concern. "Want me to come with you?"

I shook my head with a small smile. "No, it's ne. Probably work stuff. Rain check on dinner?"

"Of course," she said, squeezing my hand. "But call me later, okay? And if he forgot your birthday, tell him I'm officially revoking his 'Best Husband' title."

I laughed, but it came out a little thin. "Deal."

As I walked toward my car, the late afternoon sky had shifted — clouds gathering low and gray, the sun slipping behind them. The first drops of rain began to fall, cool against my skin. By the time I started the engine, the city was bathed in that muted, silvery light that always came before a storm. The windshield wipers brushed rhythmically back and forth as I drove, the roads slick and glistening.

But even as the rain began to pour harder, the sound of Daniel's voice echoed in my head — soft, careful, different.

"I just need to talk to you. It's important."

My hands tightened around the wheel. I couldn't explain why, but with every passing mile, that quiet unease grew stronger.

Something was waiting for me at home.

Something that would change everything.