



Chapter 7

The morning light came softly, seeping through the half-drawn curtains like gold dust drifting into the room. It fell over the tangled sheets, over the untouched tray of food, and nally across Marian's face. Her eyes uttered open, dry and heavy, the faint sting of salt on her lashes reminding her of the night before.

For a long moment, she didn't move. She just lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sound of her own breathing. The house was still—eerily so. Even the ticking of the wall clock seemed muted, as if time itself was hesitant to intrude on her fragile calm.

Her throat ached from crying. Her body felt bruised from within, each breath tugging against the soreness that heartbreak left behind.

Down the hall, she could hear faint movement—Katherine, always there, quiet but constant, like an anchor holding her in place.

Marian slowly sat up. The motion made her dizzy for a second, but she steadied herself, resting her palms on the bed. Her ngers brushed against her phone, still lying beside her pillow. The screen was dark, lifeless, but her reection stared back—tired eyes, swollen lids, a face she barely recognized.

She turned the phone on, hesitated, then set it face-down again. She wasn't ready. Not yet.

A gentle knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Marian said, her voice a whisper.

Katherine entered quietly, holding two cups of coffee. Her eyes softened when she saw Marian awake and sitting up. "You're up early," she said, her tone light but careful.

"I didn't really sleep," Marian replied, her gaze distant.

Katherine sat on the edge of the bed and handed her a mug. "Still, it's a start."

For a few moments, they just sat there in silence, the steam from their cups curling into the air. It was a comfortable kind of quiet—the kind that needed no words.

Marian stared at the light spilling through the window. It touched the framed photographs on the dresser—her and Daniel at the beach, a snapshot of her and Katherine at graduation. The sight of them was both a comfort and a wound.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Katherine asked softly.

Marian shook her head. "Not yet. If I start now, I'll never stop."

Katherine nodded. "Then we don't talk. We just breathe. One morning at a time."

A small, almost invisible smile tugged at the corner of Marian's lips. "One morning at a time," she echoed.

The sunlight grew brighter, creeping farther across the room. It touched her skin, warm against the chill that had settled deep within her bones the night before. Slowly, she wrapped her hands around the mug, letting the heat seep into her palms.

"I keep thinking," she began, voice trembling but steadying with each word, "how love can change so suddenly. One day it's your whole world. The next, it's gone—and you're left trying to remember who you were before it."

Katherine reached over and squeezed her hand. "You're still her, Marian. Maybe a little bruised, maybe different—but still you. And someday soon, you'll see that again."

Marian looked down at their joined hands, at the friendship that had weathered years of joy and sorrow alike. For the rst time since last night, her chest loosened a little.

"I'll try," she whispered. "I'll try to nd her again."

Katherine smiled gently. "That's all you need to do today. Just try."

The morning air was cool, lled with the faint scent of coffee and rain-soaked earth drifting in through the open window. Outside, the city stirred to life—cars starting, birds calling, the distant hum of ordinary life moving forward.

And for the rst time in what felt like forever, Marian allowed herself to believe that maybe she could too.

She lifted the cup to her lips and took a slow sip. The warmth spread through her chest, chasing away the cold that had lived there all night.

Somewhere deep inside, a small ame ickered—faint, fragile, but alive.

After nishing their coffee, Katherine reluctantly stood, glancing at the clock. The morning had slipped away unnoticed, the world outside already bright and awake.

"I need to head to work," she said softly, placing a hand on Marian's shoulder. "Call me if you need anything. I mean it."

Marian nodded faintly. Her voice wouldn't come, but her eyes said what her lips couldn't — thank you.

When the door closed behind Katherine, the silence rushed back in. It lled the house like water rising in a glass — heavy, suffocating, absolute. Marian sank into the couch, her cup still half full, the coffee gone cold. She called in sick, her voice at and distant as she spoke to their HR. The moment she hung up, she exhaled shakily, pressing a hand to her chest as if to keep herself from coming apart again.

The hours passed in a blur of stillness. The muted hum of the refrigerator. The soft tick of the wall clock. The occasional sound of footsteps or laughter drifting in from the street below — reminders of a world that was still moving, even when hers felt stuck in place.

By the time the sun hung high in the sky, a shadow passed by the front window. A faint knock came at the door.

Marian's stomach tightened. Even before she opened it, she knew.

Daniel stood there.

He looked different — or maybe it was Marian who had changed. His hair was disheveled, his clothes wrinkled, and dark circles carved hollows beneath his eyes. He looked like a man who hadn't slept, who'd been haunted by the weight of his own choices.

Their eyes met, and the world seemed to still.

In that instant, all the walls she'd tried to build crumbled. Tears welled and spilled down her cheeks before she could stop them.

"Marian..." Daniel's voice cracked as he stepped closer, reaching for her as though drawn by instinct. He cupped her face in both hands, his thumbs trembling as they brushed away her tears.

"I'm so, so sorry, love," he whispered, his voice breaking with every word. "You don't know how sorry I am for hurting you like this. I love you. I love you so much, Marian. Please—please forgive me."

The sound of his apology only deepened the ache in her chest. His touch, once so comforting, now burned.

"How could you do this to me, Daniel?" she whispered, her voice thin and raw, like glass cracking under pressure. "How could you look me in the eyes, say you loved me—and still break me like this?"

Daniel's shoulders sagged, his breath shuddering. "Nothing will change," he said desperately. "You're the one I love. Always. Right now, Elise just... she just needs support. Her pregnancy's delicate—she lost her job. That's why she came to nd me."

Elise.

The name hung in the air like a blade. Suddenly, the woman wasn't just an abstract betrayal — she was real. Flesh and blood. A name. A heartbeat.

Marian's vision blurred again, but this time from something deeper than tears.

"Elise," she repeated quietly, as if tasting the truth would help her understand it. Her gaze lifted to meet Daniel's. "Do you really believe that nothing will change?"

He didn't answer. His silence was answer enough.

"Daniel," she continued, her voice trembling, "you holding me like this—it hurts. Every touch, every breath, every word. How can I let you stay beside me, when all I can feel right now is pain from what you did?"

The moment stretched between them, taut and unbearable.

Daniel's hands dropped away as though he'd been burned. He took a small step back, his eyes pleading, full of guilt and desperation. But Marian couldn't meet that gaze anymore.

She felt... nothing.

The tears had run dry. The anger had hollowed out. What remained was an aching emptiness — quiet, vast, and cold.

Daniel stood there, searching her face for some sign, some crack in her resolve. But Marian's silence spoke louder than any words could.

The house seemed to hold its breath again — two people standing in the ruins of something once beautiful, the air thick with everything left unsaid.

Outside, the afternoon light shifted — slow, golden, indifferent — spilling across the room like a reminder that time would keep moving forward, even if their hearts could not.