

What We Leave Behind

Chapter 1

1255 Words

The morning light slipped through the thin curtains like liquid gold, spilling across the bed where Daniel still slept. His face was half-buried in the pillow, hair tousled, one arm stretched across my side of the bed as though searching for me in his dreams. The soft rise and fall of his chest was the most peaceful rhythm I knew. "You need to wake up, love," I whispered, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. "You said you have a meeting today." Daniel's lips curved into a sleepy smile before his eyes even opened. "What time is it?" His voice was husky and rough from sleep, the kind of sound that always sent a pleasant shiver through me. "It's half past six," I said, glancing at the clock. "I have to go. My meeting's at eight, and if I don't leave soon, I'll hit traffic." I leaned down to kiss him goodbye, intending it to be quick—a soft, fleeting thing. But Daniel moved faster than I expected, snaking an arm around my waist and pulling me down against him. "Daniel!" I laughed, half-protesting, half-melting as he buried his face against my neck. "Mmm," he murmured, voice muffled by my skin. "You smell too good to let go. Stay with me, just for a little while. We can call in sick... blame it on the rain or a power outage. Something creative." I tried to push away, but his warmth, the sheets, the sound of his heartbeat—it all felt like gravity pulling me in. "What are we, teenagers?" I said, laughter bubbling in my throat. He tilted his head back, eyes glinting with mischief. "Not teenagers," he said. "Just a married couple still hopelessly in love. And that's a far better excuse to stay in bed." This was us—our ordinary, perfect kind of magic. Every morning played out like this: I would wake first, shower, dress, and then try to rouse him. And every time, he'd pull me back into his orbit with that same teasing charm, that same boyish grin. I'd always scold him, always resist just enough to make him chase me—and somehow, those small moments became the heartbeat of our marriage. "Well," I said, slipping from his arms, "as much as I love you, my boss doesn't love me that much. And neither does yours. So up you go, mister. Meeting's waiting." He groaned dramatically and flopped onto his back, dragging a pillow over his face. "Fine. But later tonight, you're all mine." I smiled over my shoulder. "I'm always yours," I said softly, swaying my hips a little as I walked toward the door, just to hear him laugh. And laugh he did—deep, genuine, the kind of laugh that filled a room and wrapped around you like sunlight. Then suddenly, I heard the rustle of sheets and the quick patter of his feet. Before I could escape, he was chasing me, still completely naked. "Daniel!" I shrieked, half running, half laughing as he caught me by the kitchen doorway. We both doubled over with laughter, breathless and happy, the kind of laughter that leaves warmth in your chest long after it fades. Eventually, I managed to escape long enough to pour my coffee, the rich aroma filling the kitchen. I set another cup aside and programmed the machine to brew his coffee next—just how he liked it, strong and a little sweet. As I sipped mine, I glanced around our kitchen—the half-finished puzzle on the counter, the photo from our wedding day framed by the window, the two mugs we'd

bought on our honeymoon in Santorini. Every detail whispered of our life together, built quietly and lovingly over the past five years. Five years. It still amazed me sometimes—how easily he had become my home. Marrying Daniel was the best decision I'd ever made. He wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for me. His parents, Bryan and Katie, had embraced me as their own from the start, filling a space I'd thought would always stay empty after losing mine. They'd given me back the feeling of belonging—something I hadn't realized I'd been missing until it returned. I looked toward the staircase, hearing the faint sound of Daniel humming upstairs—probably searching for his tie again. That sound, that warmth, that life we'd built together—it made the world outside feel softer somehow. This was the life I'd dreamed of as a little girl. A home filled with laughter. A career that fulfilled me. And most of all, a love that grounded me through everything. We weren't perfect—no couple is. We argued about small things, disagreed about what color to paint the living room, and sometimes worked too late. But we always found our way back to each other. Because that's what love is—not the grand gestures or the perfect moments, but the quiet, everyday choices to stay, to try, to care. We were a team. And that morning, like every morning before it, I walked out the door with a smile that would last me all day—because Daniel was my beginning, my middle, and everything in between. By the time I reached the office, the world outside had fully awakened. The streets buzzed with the sound of traffic, horns, and the faint melody of street vendors calling out their morning specials. The air still smelled faintly of rain from the night before, fresh and cool, the sky a pale wash of silver. I parked my car and sat for a moment, fingers wrapped around my travel mug, letting the warmth seep into my hands. My mind drifted back to Daniel — the way he looked half-asleep and smiling, the way he chased me through the kitchen. The memory made me laugh softly to myself. No matter how long we'd been together, he still had this way of making everything lighter. Inside, the familiar hum of the office greeted me — keyboards clicking, phones ringing, printers whirring. I exchanged polite smiles with a few coworkers before heading to the conference room. My reflection in the glass door caught my eye — hair neatly pinned, lipstick still intact (thankfully smudge-free). Professional, poised, ready. At least on the outside. But inside, something tugged at me — a small, inexplicable ache. Maybe it was just the weight of routine, the feeling that time was moving faster than I could hold onto. Or maybe it was because I'd been having those dreams again — faint flashes of water, of Daniel calling my name, of me running but never reaching him. I shook it off and entered the room, forcing my mind back to the present. "Morning, Marian," my manager greeted with a bright smile. "Ready for the presentation?" "As I'll ever be," I said, taking a deep breath and setting my folder on the table. The meeting went smoothly, but the whole time, my thoughts kept wandering back home. Daniel should be in his meeting by now too. I imagined him charming everyone in the room the way he always did, all easy smiles and quiet confidence. That was Daniel — effortlessly magnetic. The kind of person people wanted to listen to.