

What We Leave Behind

Chapter 2

1025 Words

The day moved faster than I expected. One moment I was settling into my desk, and the next, the hum of chatter from the office cafeteria reminded me that it was already lunchtime. I blinked at the clock in disbelief — how had half the day slipped away so quietly? Stretching in my chair, I reached for my phone. A small smile played on my lips as I unlocked it, expecting to see Daniel's name lighting up my screen — a few of his usual morning messages waiting for me. But there was nothing. No missed calls, no new texts. Not even one of his silly good-morning memes or his favorite line: "The coffee is bitter without my sugar — which is you." A tiny frown creased my forehead. It wasn't like Daniel to go this long without checking in. He was the kind of husband who couldn't resist texting just to say he missed me, even if we'd left the house only an hour apart. Maybe he's busy, I told myself. His company had been swamped lately — deadlines stacked on deadlines. He'd mentioned a major presentation earlier this week. That had to be it. Still, I opened a new message and typed: "How's your day going, love?" I hit send and stared at the screen for a moment, waiting for the familiar three dots to appear — the ones that meant he was typing back. But the dots never came. That's fine. When Daniel's working, he gets lost in it completely. It's one of the things I admire about him — that focus, that drive. Still, I couldn't help but hope his company wouldn't send him out of state again anytime soon. Last month's sudden trip had thrown me off more than I cared to admit. He'd only been gone a week, but the house had felt empty, the nights too quiet. I sighed softly and pushed the thought aside, focusing on the soft tapping of keyboards and the faint hum of the air conditioner. Just as I started reviewing a report, my phone rang, the sudden sound cutting through the silence of my office. When I saw the name flashing on the screen, I couldn't help but smile.

"Katherine," I said as I answered, already bracing myself for her whirlwind energy. "Hey, Marian! Are we still on for tomorrow's dinner? Your birthday bash?" She asked in a rush, skipping any greeting. "Hello to you too, Katherine," I replied, teasingly. "I'm doing great, thanks for asking." "Sorry!" She said quickly. "I'm drowning in work right now and have, like, three minutes before another meeting." "Oh, well, in that case, yes," I said, laughing. "We're still on for dinner. I already told Daniel about it, so we'll see you there tomorrow." "Perfect! Don't you dare cancel on me. Love you!" She said before hanging up as abruptly as she'd called. I stared at my phone, shaking my head with a fond smile. That was Katherine — like she'd been fueled by five extra shots of espresso since college. Always running, always glowing with chaotic energy. And yet, somehow, she'd been my anchor through everything. My best friend, my sister in all but blood. As I set my phone down, a soft chime echoed — a new message. My heart lifted instinctively. Daniel. I opened the text quickly, already smiling. "Busy today, love. I think I'll be late coming home tonight. We need to finish this project. Don't wait for me, okay? I love

you.” My smile faltered just a little. It wasn’t the message itself — I’d heard those words before, countless times. But there was something about seeing them today, after a quiet morning, that made my chest tighten. Still, we had promised each other before getting married: work came with its demands. We both thrived in fast-paced industries, and the only way to make it work was through understanding. Support, not pressure. So I typed back with steady hands: “It’s okay, love. I understand. Don’t forget tomorrow — we’re meeting Katherine for dinner, remember? Love you.” I waited a moment, but no reply came. The screen stayed dark. For reasons I couldn’t explain, a strange unease rippled through me — faint, almost imperceptible, like the feeling of standing on a beach and realizing the tide is pulling out farther than usual. I shook my head, scolding myself silently. Don’t overthink it. He’s just busy. Turning back to my computer, I threw myself into work. The hours blurred together in a haze of reports, emails, and endless clicks of the mouse. My office window slowly dimmed from bright afternoon light to the soft orange hue of dusk. When I finally looked up again, the clock on my monitor read 6:07 p.m. Where had the day gone? I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes, and powered down my computer. The office was quieter now — most of my coworkers had already left, the fluorescent lights buzzing faintly overhead. I gathered my things and slung my bag over my shoulder, checking my phone one last time. Still no message from Daniel. Only that one text from earlier. “He must be really busy,” I murmured to myself, tucking the phone into my bag. But even as I told myself that, the unease returned — stronger this time, curling low in my stomach. The kind of feeling you can’t explain, but can’t quite ignore either. Outside, the sky had deepened into twilight, streaks of purple and gray melting together as the city lights flickered to life. The evening breeze carried the faint scent of rain and exhaust — familiar, grounding. As I walked toward my car, I couldn’t help but glance up at the sky and whisper quietly, “Don’t work too hard, love. Come home safe.” I smiled to myself, small but genuine, before slipping behind the wheel and driving home — unaware that somewhere across town, the night was already beginning to change everything.