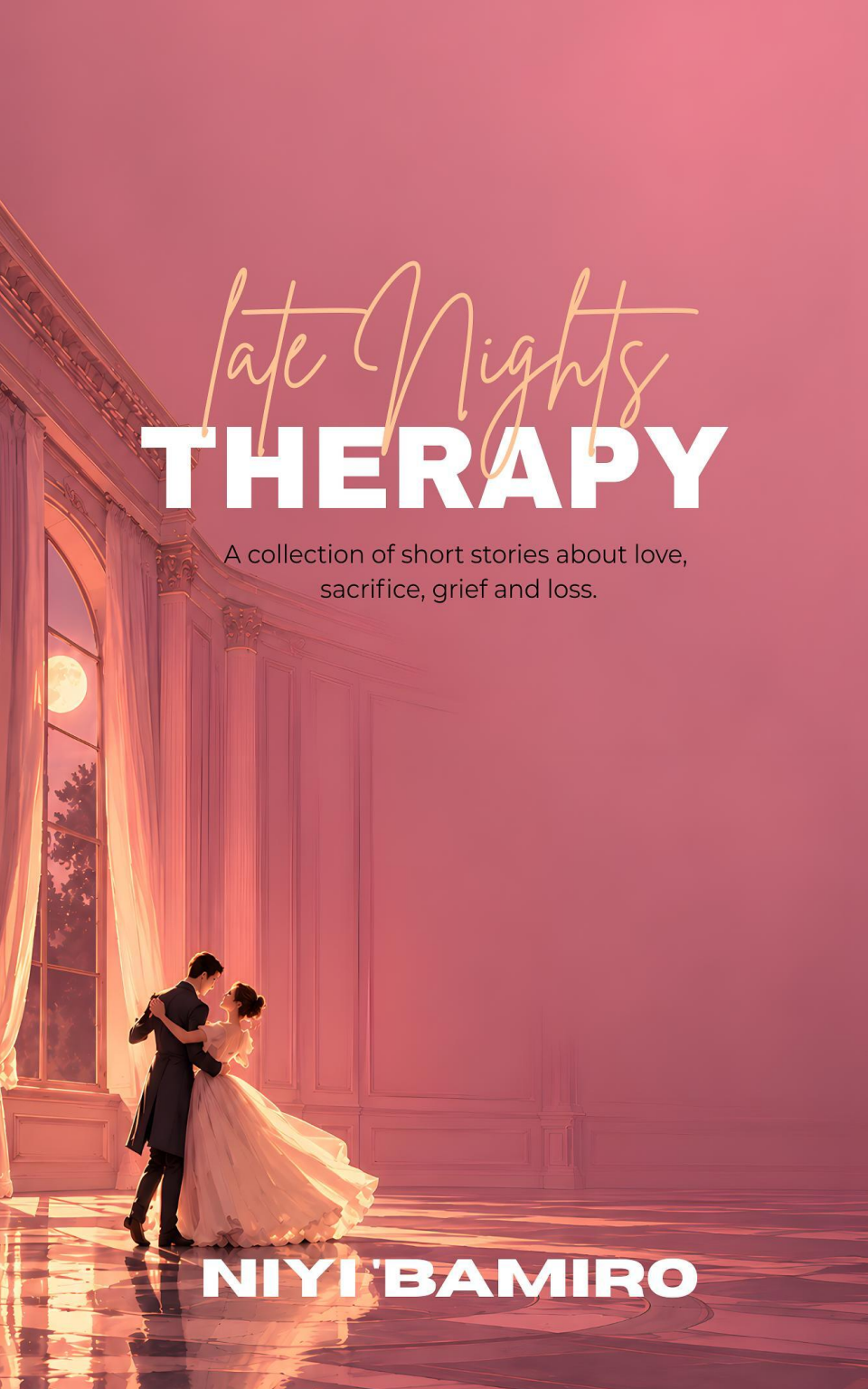
late Nights THERAPY

A collection of short stories about love, sacrifice, grief and loss.



NIYI BAMIRO

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Late Nights Therapy

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To my brother, David, who brought the first romance novel I ever read home.

Introduction

Late Nights Therapy is a collection of short stories exploring the complicated ways love, loss, sacrifice and grief shape our lives and relationships.

Across these stories are people making difficult choices for the people they love, lovers struggling with heartbreak and forgiveness, families dealing with absence, and individuals learning to live with losses they cannot undo. Some stories explore the beauty of choosing someone despite the cost; others look at what happens when love is no longer enough. There are stories about regret, second chances, difficult goodbyes, unexpected kindness, healing and the small moments that change how we see the people around us.

Each story stands on its own, but together they explore a simple question: what do we do with everything love leaves behind?

Late Nights Therapy is for anyone who has loved, lost, sacrificed, grieved, forgiven, or simply wondered what comes next.

Happy reading!

1

EXACTLY AS YOU WERE

Miriam first heard the women at work talking about her body while she stood by the office printer. She was waiting for a report that felt like it was taking ages. She had almost forgotten about them when she heard her name behind her, followed by a low laugh that made her pause.

"Have you seen Miriam lately?"

"Of course. We work together."

"I mean, have you really looked at her?"

There was another laugh.

"She has added so much weight."

"She has three children now."

"I know, but still. Look at her body."

Miriam kept her eyes on the printer, pretending she could not hear them.

Then one of the women lowered her voice.

"I wonder how her husband is still able to cope with her new body."

The other woman laughed.

"That's what I was thinking. Men are very particular about

these things."

"Maybe he has become used to her."

"Or maybe he really loves her."

"Love is one thing. Attraction is another."

The printer finally released her document.

Miriam picked it up without looking back and went to her desk. She carried the conversation with her, like a heavy load she didn't know how to place.

She tried to focus on her work, but the words returned. The question she wished she'd never heard kept haunting her.

How is her husband still able to cope with her?

The cruelest part was that she had asked herself the same question many times.

Miriam knew her body had changed. She saw it happen during three pregnancies, three deliveries, and the tiring years after. Her stomach was softer, her hips wider, and her breasts had changed. The stretch marks that first showed up during her pregnancy with Lily. Now, they covered parts of her stomach like faded lines on an old map.

She knew all this.

What she had not realized was how much she had begun to hate herself for it.

She thought of the woman she used to be before the kids. The woman who could stroll into a shop and pick a dress because she liked it, not to hide her stomach. The woman who took photos without worrying about her body first. The woman who swam without stressing over what others might think.

She missed that woman.

She missed her confidence the most.

That evening, when she got home, Daniel was in the living room with Noah asleep against his chest. He looked up and

smiled at her, but the smile faded slightly when he noticed the expression on her face.

"You're quiet."

"I'm tired."

He studied her for a moment but said nothing.

Miriam entered the kitchen to prepare dinner. Meanwhile, Lily talked about school, and Sam complained about the food.

After dinner, once Lily fell asleep and Noah settled in his cot, Miriam went into the bathroom and shut the door.

For several minutes, she simply stood there.

Then she looked into the mirror.

She lifted her shirt slowly.

The bathroom light revealed all she had avoided for months. Her eyes traced her stomach. She noticed each stretch mark, the new shape of her waist, and every spot where her skin had changed and didn't fully return to how it was before.

She turned sideways.

She looked at herself from another angle.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

She wiped it away, but another followed.

"I don't recognize you anymore," she whispered to her reflection.

The door opened behind her.

Daniel stood there.

He did not say anything at first. He watched her for a moment. Then he walked over and stopped behind her. He stood close enough that she felt his warmth without turning around.

"Don't," she said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't say I'm beautiful."

Daniel looked at her reflection.

He could see that she was trying very hard not to cry.

"I wasn't going to."

She turned slightly.

"Then what were you going to say?"

He took her hand.

"I was going to ask why you're looking at yourself as though you've done something wrong."

Miriam's face tightened.

"Look at me."

"I am."

"No, really, look at me."

"I am looking at you."

"I'm not the woman you married."

Daniel was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said gently. "You're not."

She looked away, expecting the answer to hurt.

Instead, he continued.

"You're more."

She looked back at him.

Daniel rested his hands on her shoulders and met her eyes in the mirror.

"That body grew Lily. It grew Sam. It grew Noah. Three beautiful children didn't come from nowhere, Miriam. They came from you."

Her lips trembled.

"You think I don't see the changes?" he asked. "I see them. I have watched your body change, as you have. But I don't look at those changes and see a woman who has become less beautiful. I see my wife, the woman I love. She carried our children and gave more of herself to them than I can ever give.

Miriam looked down at her hands.

"I do not feel beautiful anymore."

"I know."

She looked at him.

"I do not want you to tell me something because you think I need to hear it."

"I wouldn't."

Daniel gently lifted her chin.

"Remember this: you, exactly as you are, are always enough for me to love."

Her eyes filled again.

He held her gaze.

"Look into my eyes and see for yourself how beautiful you are."

For a moment, she could not speak.

Then she looked directly into his eyes.

He showed no pity. He didn't try to comfort her, thinking she was fragile. There was also no hesitation. She felt the familiar warmth she had known since their first meeting. It was the same look that once made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, even before she had given birth.

She reached up and held his hand where it rested on her shoulder.

That night, something shifted inside her.

It was not a miracle, and she did not suddenly wake up the next morning loving every part of her body.

But his words had given her something she had been missing.

Permission to stop fighting herself, to believe in herself and to stop seeing herself through strangers' eyes.

2

COST OF THAT NIGHT

Two years earlier, doctors diagnosed my husband with an eye condition. And since then I had been the one driving.

The doctor explained everything clearly. He warned that ignoring signs could worsen his eyesight. He also said he needed to be extra careful at night. Headlights, streetlights, and sudden brightness could make it hard to see. So, he was advised not to drive after dark and to avoid staring at bright lights for too long.

He listened.

At least, most of the time.

He became careful about things he used to take for granted. Some evenings, I saw him squinting at a bright sign or turning away from cars with full headlights. He never complained, though. When I asked if his eyes were bothering him, he smiled and said he was fine.

Sometimes, he refused to travel at night completely.

"I'll go tomorrow," he would say.

"Why don't we go now? It's only twenty minutes."

"It's dark."

"I'll drive."

"I know."

And that was how it became our routine.

I drove.

He sat beside me.

We made jokes about it.

We listened to music.

We talked about our daughter, who was still growing inside me. We also discussed the little room we were preparing for her and all the things we would teach her when she arrived.

Those drives felt peaceful. Some of my best memories from those two years aren't from holidays or fancy dinners. Instead, they came from sitting in the car with him, while he rested his hand on my thigh sharing stories about his childhood.

Then came the night everything changed.

I was thirty-eight weeks pregnant.

It was 11 p.m.

I went to bed early because I felt uncomfortable all evening. I had enough false alarms during the pregnancy to know not every pain meant labor. But that night felt different. Then I suddenly felt warm water beneath me and realized what was happening.

My water had broken.

For a few seconds, I simply sat there.

Then fear hit me.

"My water broke."

My husband woke immediately.

"What?"

"The baby is coming."

He sat up so quickly that he nearly fell out of bed.

"Now?"

I nodded.

He switched on the bedside lamp, grabbed his phone, and moved around the room. He tried to remember everything we were told to do when labor started. Meanwhile, I sat there, breathing through the pain and trying not to panic.

"We need to go to the hospital."

"I know."

He grabbed the hospital bag.

I tried to stand.

Another contraction came.

I held onto the bed and closed my eyes.

"Honey."

"I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

"I'm in labor."

He stared at me for half a second.

He was scared.

I could see it.

But he was trying to remain calm because he knew that if he panicked, I would panic too.

He helped me downstairs.

When we reached the car, he opened the passenger door for me and helped me inside.

Then he walked around to the driver's side.

I stared at him.

"What are you doing?"

He opened the door.

"I'm driving."

I shook my head immediately.

"No."

He looked at me.

"Honey."

"Call an Uber."

He didn't answer.

"Please," I said. "Your eyes."

He looked toward the dark road ahead.

Then back at me.

"I know."

"You can't drive at night."

"I know."

"The doctor specifically told you not to."

"I know."

"Then call someone."

He stood there for a moment. I saw fear on his face, but there was also something else. I didn't understand it then.

Determination.

He closed the driver's door.

"Honey, no."

He started the engine.

"Your eyes."

He looked at me through the rear-view mirror.

"Hold on."

Those were the only words he said.

Then he drove.

The first few minutes were terrifying.

Each time a car came close, I watched him closely. I wondered if he could see well enough. I thought about whether the headlights hurt his eyes. Should I make him stop and call an ambulance?

But he kept driving.

His hands remained firmly on the steering wheel.

His eyes stayed fixed on the road.

I noticed him blinking more than usual. When bright headlights shone ahead, his face tensed briefly before relaxing again.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine."

"You don't have to be brave."

"I'm not being brave."

"Then what are you doing?"

He looked at me briefly.

"Getting you to the hospital."

Another contraction came before I could answer.

I grabbed the door and breathed through the pain.

"Hold on," he kept saying.

"I am holding on."

"A little longer."

He drove through the dark. He passed traffic lights, petrol stations, and rows of closed shops. Headlights seemed painful for him. He ignored every warning from his doctor. Throughout the journey, he never complained about his eyes or said he couldn't see properly.

He simply kept driving.

When we got to the hospital, he drove up to the emergency entrance and hopped out.

A nurse came running with a wheelchair.

I can hardly recall what happened next. Everything turned into a blur of voices, footsteps, and bright hospital lights.

They rushed me inside.

My husband followed.

Then someone told him to wait outside.

I remember looking back at him as they wheeled me away.

He stood in the middle of the hospital corridor. One hand pressed against the wall, while the other covered his eyes for a

moment.

I thought he was praying.

I didn't know he was struggling to see.

Hours later, our daughter was born.

A beautiful baby girl, with tiny fingers.

When they placed her in my arms, I cried so hard that the nurse had to stop me.

My husband stood beside the bed, staring at her with tears in his eyes.

"She's perfect," he whispered.

I smiled.

"She has your nose."

He laughed.

For a while, everything was perfect.

Until the doctor came to speak with us.

Then he said something that stayed with me.

"If you'd arrived even a little later, things could have been very different."

I looked at my daughter.

Then my husband.

He didn't say anything.

He simply reached for my hand.

At the time, I thought he was just relieved.

I didn't know what he had risked to get us there.

The following months were full of the lovely tiredness that comes with a newborn.

Sleepless nights and endless doctor's appointments filled our days. Laundry seemed to multiply overnight. Some mornings, we couldn't recall the last time we slept more than three hours.

But we were happy.

Our daughter grew up.

She learned to crawl.

Then she learned to walk.

My husband turned into a dad who could spend all Saturday morning on the floor, playing with her toys, without checking the time at all.

His eyesight, however, seemed to become a subject we talked about less and less.

He continued with his appointments.

He continued taking precautions.

And whenever I asked how his eyes were doing, he would say, "They're okay."

Until yesterday.

My husband came home wearing new glasses.

I noticed immediately.

"You got glasses?"

He smiled.

"Yeah."

"They look good."

"Thanks."

He kissed me and went upstairs.

Later, while he was in the shower, I saw his bag sitting beside the bed.

Something made me open it.

Inside was a medical report.

I almost put it back without reading it.

Then I saw his name.

I pulled out the paper.

I read it once.

Then again.

His eyesight had gotten worse.

There were things he could no longer see clearly without his

glasses.

I sat on the edge of the bed.

For several seconds, I couldn't move.

Then I remembered that night.

And suddenly, I understood.

He had known that driving that night could make his eyesight worse.

He had known that the headlights could hurt his eyes.

He had known exactly what the doctor had warned him about.

And he drove anyway.

Because he cared about us more.

I held the report against my chest and started crying.

I finally understood the price he had paid without ever asking me to know about it.

When he came out of the shower, he found me sitting on the edge of the bed with tears running down my face.

He stopped.

"What happened?"

I held up the report.

He looked at it.

Then at me.

"You were not meant to see that."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He sat beside me.

"I didn't want you to worry."

"You could have told me."

"I knew what you'd do."

"What?"

"You'd blame yourself."

I looked at him through my tears.

"I would have helped you."

"I know."

"Then why?"

He looked down at his hands.

"Because that night, there wasn't time to think about anything else."

I reached for his face.

"Your eyes."

He smiled sadly.

He pulled me into his arms.

For a long time, neither of us said anything.

Our daughter was asleep in the next room.

The house was peaceful.

As I held my husband, I realized that love isn't just in grand declarations made when things are easy. Sometimes, it hides in quiet moments. It's in sacrifices made without applause and in tough decisions made because our loved ones need them.

My husband never told me that he had risked the little sight he had left that night.

He never used it to make me feel guilty.

He never reminded me of what he had done.

And when I think about it now, I knew that he wasn't trying to be a hero.

He was just a husband who heard his wife say she was scared and decided that, for that one night, nothing else mattered.

Some people say they would give the world.

My husband gave me something far more precious.

He gave himself simply because he couldn't bear the thought of losing me and our daughter.

And that night, while I was holding his hand, I could see he had been carrying the cost of that night ever since.

Alone.

3

DON'T BREAK YOUR CIRCLE

She noticed he had stopped seeing his friends.

At first, she didn't think much of it. They had been spending more time together lately, and it felt good to have him around most evenings. After months of busy schedules and missed dinners, this was comforting. When his friends invited him out and he said no, she thought it was simply because they liked spending time together.

It started with small things.

Marcus, his closest friend, would call on Friday afternoons. He'd ask if He wanted to go out for drinks. Ryan would look at Amelia, who often sat beside him on the sofa, reading or watching TV.

Then he'd say, "Next time."

The next time came, and he still didn't go.

Amelia hadn't asked him to stay.

That was the part she didn't understand.

She would never have complained if he went.

Ryan began to sync his schedule with hers. They often found themselves free at the same time. Soon, their calendars matched

up, with his free time lining up perfectly with hers.

At first, she loved it.

She loved knowing he wanted to be with her.

She loved waking up on Saturday morning without a rush. She loved their little routines. They would order food late at night and playfully argue about films. It was lovely to see how relaxed they got when they stopped trying to impress one another.

But slowly, something changed.

Ryan stopped attending family dinners.

His younger brother would message him.

His friends would send invitations.

Someone was always asking where he had disappeared to.

And Ryan always had a reason.

"I'm exhausted."

"I've got work."

"I'll come next weekend."

Amelia listened quietly. She didn't want to be the girlfriend who complained about her boyfriend spending time with her. When she suggested he go out, he smiled and said he preferred staying with her.

"Don't you miss them?" she asked one evening.

Ryan looked at her from the other side of the sofa.

"I do."

"Then go and see them."

"I can see them another time."

"You've been saying that for weeks."

He laughed.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

She smiled.

He pulled her closer.

She laughed with him, but something about their chat lingered

long after it was over.

Because she realized that Ryan wasn't only choosing to spend time with her anymore. He was slowly giving up everything else.

And she didn't want to become the reason. She knew how easy it could happen.

Some people slip into relationships without realizing it. Being together often feels safer. Before they know it, they've changed and the person they used to be can seem like a distant memory.

Amelia had seen it happen before.

She saw friends ignore messages because their partners disliked certain people. She watched people give up hobbies because their relationships took over their free time. She noticed couples became so reliant on each other that a few hours apart felt like punishment.

She didn't want that for them.

One Friday evening, Ryan received another message from Marcus.

He looked at his phone, sighed and typed something.

Amelia was sitting beside him, and she noticed the familiar expression on his face.

"Another invitation?"

"Yeah."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I can't make it."

"Why?"

Ryan shrugged.

"I don't feel like going."

Amelia looked at him.

"What were you going to do tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Exactly."

He looked confused.

"What?"

"You cancelled plans to sit here and do nothing."

"I wanted to spend time with you."

"I know."

She smiled at him.

"And I love having you here."

"Then what's the problem?"

She didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she watched him put his phone down and lean back against the sofa.

The issue was simple: wanting to spend time together should have been easy. But there's a difference between choosing each other and drifting away from everyone else. Amelia started to realize that Ryan had crossed that line without even realizing it.

A few days later, it became even clearer.

Ryan had planned to meet some friends after work, but by seven o'clock, he was already home.

He had cancelled again.

Amelia saw him sitting alone in the living room. The TV was on but muted. His phone lay next to him, and he still had his shoes on, as if he hadn't decided whether to stay or go.

She stood in the doorway.

"What happened?"

He looked up.

"Nothing."

"You cancelled."

He sighed.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to go anymore."

She walked over and sat beside him.

"Did something happen?"

"No."

"Are you upset with them?"

"No."

"Do they not want you there?"

Ryan looked at her as if the question was ridiculous.

"They want me there."

"Then why aren't you there?"

He didn't answer.

Amelia looked at his phone.

Then she looked at him.

"Give me that."

He frowned.

"Why?"

"Give it to me."

He handed it over.

She opened his messages and found Marcus's conversation.

There were several unanswered messages.

Bro, where are you?

We're already here.

Are you coming?

You disappeared, man.

Amelia stared at the screen for a moment before locking the phone.

Ryan watched her.

"What?"

She stood up.

"What's Marcus's number?"

He looked confused.

"I want you to give it to me."

"Why?"
"Because I'm calling him."
Ryan laughed.
"Amelia."
She was already scrolling through his contacts.
"What are you doing?"
She pressed Marcus's name.
Ryan sat upright.
"Wait."
The call connected.
"Hello?"
"Hi, Marcus, it's Amelia."
There was a brief silence.
"Hey, Amelia. Everything okay?"
"Everything is fine."
She looked at Ryan.
"Tell the others Ryan is coming out with you tonight."
Ryan's eyes widened.
"What?"
Marcus laughed through the phone.
"Seriously?"
"Yeah."
Ryan shook his head.
"Amelia."
She held up one finger, asking him to wait.
"Yes, he's coming."
Then she ended the call.
Ryan stared at her.
"What are you doing?"
She handed his phone back.
"Giving you your life back."

He frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're going out tonight."

"I don't want to."

That's fine."

He looked relieved.

"Good."

She smiled.

"But you're still going."

He laughed in disbelief.

"You can't force me to go."

"I'm not forcing you."

"Then what are you doing?"

"I'm reminding you that you have a life outside this relationship."

He became quiet.

Amelia sat beside him again.

"I love having you here," she whispered. "I love waking up next to you. I cherish our weekends and our silly routines. I also love that when your day is tough, you want to come home to me. But I don't want to be the reason you stop being yourself."

Ryan looked down. Then looked at her.

She continued.

"I've seen you stop seeing friends and skip family dinners. You've cancelled plans you once looked forward to and turned down invites because I'm here. I don't want you to wake up in six months and find you've built your whole world around one person."

"You."

"Yes, me."

She smiled gently.

"I want to be part of your life, Ryan, not a dictator to your whole life."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"I thought you wanted me around."

"I do."

"Then why are you sending me away?"

"I'm not sending you away."

She reached for his hand.

"I'm asking you to remember that you were someone before you met me, and I fell in love with that person too."

His expression softened.

"You don't feel like I'm choosing you enough?"

"That's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't need you to prove that you love me by giving up everyone else."

He looked down at their hands.

She squeezed his fingers.

"Go out tonight."

He smiled slightly.

"You're serious?"

He finally stood.

He changed his shirt, found his shoes, and grabbed his keys. Then, he paused at the door and looked back at her before leaving.

"Are you sure?"

Amelia smiled.

"Go."

He walked over and kissed her forehead.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Then he left.

For a few minutes, Amelia sat alone in the living room and listened to the silence that followed.

She expected to feel lonely.

Instead, she felt strangely happy.

An hour later, her phone buzzed.

It was Ryan.

She opened the message and saw a photo of him at a table with Marcus and their other friends.

Everyone was laughing.

Ryan was laughing too.

Underneath the photograph, he had written:

I forgot how much I missed these idiots.

Amelia smiled.

She stared at the picture for a few seconds before replying.

I told you.

He responded almost immediately.

Thank you.

She frowned at the message.

For what?

His reply came a moment later.

For reminding me that loving you doesn't mean I have to disappear from everyone else.

Amelia smiled.

She put the phone down and leaned back against the sofa.

That was the kind of love she wanted.

The kind that didn't build walls around two people and call them intimacy.

The kind that didn't demand constant attention to prove devotion.

The kind that lets two people stay themselves while choosing

each other daily.

And loving someone should never need you to become smaller.

You should be able to love them and still call your friends.

You should be able to love them and still have dinner with your family.

You can love them and still keep your own interests, dreams, friendships, and parts of yourself.

When the relationship is healthy, these things won't harm your love for each other.

And maybe it's true or not, but loving someone deeply means knowing when to hold them close and when to let them go.

4

THE PERFECT GIFT

They had been friends since elementary school. Their friendship shifted in small ways as school gave way to work, and childhood turned into adulthood. Still, he always noticed things about her that others seemed to overlook.

He remembered the girl who used to laugh without covering her mouth.

Back then, she didn't care who was watching.

She would laugh until her stomach hurt. She threw her head back when something was funny and smiled so widely in photos that her front teeth stood out. When teased about them, she just laughed harder. She hadn't yet realized that something as simple as a smile could become something to hide.

Then she grew older.

Between adolescence and adulthood, she noticed how people looked at her teeth. What began as a small insecurity grew until it affected her daily life. Now, taking photos meant she had to keep her mouth shut, laugh with her lips closed, and turn her face a bit whenever a camera appeared.

He noticed.

Of course he noticed.

He had known her for too long not to.

If someone caught her laughing naturally, she often covered her mouth before a photo could be taken. It was as if she suddenly remembered that what she loved most about herself was also what she feared showing.

He never made fun of her.

He never told her that she looked better when she smiled.

He never tried to convince her that her insecurity was silly.

Instead, he simply remembered.

He recalled the old school photos. Back then, she smiled freely, not worrying about her teeth. He thought about how much she had changed since then.

So on her birthday, when he told her he had a surprise planned, she assumed they were going somewhere for lunch.

She arrived expecting a restaurant.

Instead, he drove her to a dental clinic.

She stared at the building through the passenger-side window.

"Why are we here?"

He turned off the engine.

"You'll see."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"You know this isn't exactly where people expect to spend their birthday."

"I know."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

He laughed.

"Come inside."

She followed him through the doors, still confused. When the receptionist greeted him by name, she stopped.

"You've been here before?"

He smiled.

She looked at him.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"You're lying."

"Probably."

She laughed nervously in the waiting area. She joked about the strange birthday surprise, but he saw she was getting more uncomfortable.

Then the dentist called her name.

She looked at him.

Inside the room, the dentist examined her teeth and explained the possible treatment. This problem had bothered her for years. As they talked, she grew quieter. Suddenly, the change she had longed for was right in front of her.

She looked at him.

"How much?"

He answered casually.

"Don't worry. It's a small fee."

She frowned.

"How small?"

"Small enough that you don't need to worry about it."

She didn't believe him.

She knew his finances.

She knew what he earned.

She knew he wasn't the type to waste money. If he planned something costly for her, it likely meant he had been saving.

"This is too much."

"It's your birthday."

"That doesn't mean you should spend all this money."

"I'm not."

She looked at him.

He smiled.

"Let them do what they need to do."

She hesitated.

Part of her wanted to say no. She had spent years believing the problem wasn't worth the money. Another part of her wanted to know how it felt to smile freely, without hiding her teeth.

She eventually agreed.

The treatment went perfectly.

Afterwards, when she looked in the mirror, she didn't recognize the woman staring back. It wasn't that her appearance had changed. For the first time in years, she didn't feel the urge to close her mouth when she smiled.

She smiled.

Then she smiled again.

He watched her from behind.

"Well?"

She turned towards him.

"I don't know."

"You don't know what?"

"Strange."

He laughed.

"Good strange?"

She touched her teeth gently.

"Good strange."

He smiled.

"Happy birthday."

She looked at him.

"Thank you."

He shrugged.

"It was nothing."

She didn't know then how far from nothing it had been.

She went home that afternoon and spent nearly an hour in front of the mirror. She took photos from different angles and laughed. She had forgotten how nice it felt to smile without checking if her teeth were showing.

For the first time in years, she took a photograph of herself with a full smile.

Then another.

Then another.

She sent one to him.

Look at me.

He replied almost immediately.

"Finally."

She laughed.

"Shut up."

"I'm serious. You look happy."

She stared at the message for a while.

Then she put her phone down.

That evening, a friend visited her. While they chatted in the living room, the talk shifted to dental treatment.

Her friend looked at her smile.

"They look really good."

"Thank you."

"How much did you pay?"

She told her.

Her friend immediately looked surprised.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Are you sure?"

She frowned.

"Yes."

Her friend looked at her.

"That's not what that treatment costs."

"What do you mean?"

"I know someone who had the same thing done."

She told her the actual amount.

The room suddenly felt very quiet.

She stared at her friend.

"That's not what he told me."

"Who?"

She didn't answer.

Her mind was already racing.

She knew exactly what the actual amount meant.

She knew how much he earned.

She knew his rent was due soon.

She knew he wanted to replace his old laptop. He had put it off to save money.

She knew there were things he had been putting off because he couldn't afford them yet.

And suddenly, the words he had said at the clinic came back to her.

It's a small fee.

She picked up her phone and called him.

He answered after two rings.

"Hey."

"You lied to me."

There was silence.

Then he sighed.

"I know."

"Do you know how much you spent?"

"Yes."

"And you told me it was a small fee."

"I know."

She stood up and walked towards the window.

"Why would you do that?"

He didn't answer immediately.

When he finally spoke, his voice was softer.

"Because if I told you the truth, you would have rejected it."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"You should have let me decide."

"I know."

"You knew I wouldn't accept it."

"I did."

"So you lied."

"Yes."

She wiped her cheek.

"You spent that much money on me when I know you can't afford to spend that kind of money."

"I didn't say I could afford it easily."

"Then why?"

He was quiet.

She waited.

"Because I wanted to see you smile more."

She closed her eyes.

He continued.

"I've seen you hide your smile for years. You might think I haven't noticed, but I have. I've known you since childhood, and I remember when you didn't care what others thought. I want you to feel that way again."

She covered her mouth.

Her tears were falling now.

"I know what I did wasn't right. It wasn't fair to make that

choice for you, and I'm sorry. But I also realized that if I told you the cost, you'd just worry about my money. I wanted you to enjoy something you'd wanted for years."

She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You could have used that money for yourself."

"I could have."

He paused before saying, "That smile means more to me than any other things I might miss this week."

She laughed through her tears.

"You're so stupid."

"I've been told."

She wiped her face.

"You really thought this was worth it?"

"You being able to smile without hiding your mouth is worth a lot."

She looked at herself in the mirror across the room.

For years, she thought her teeth were what people noticed first. She focused so much on others' views that she forgot how she saw herself. Now, with tears on her cheeks and a genuine smile, she realized the treatment had changed more than her teeth.

It had changed the way she looked at herself.

She thought of the little girl she used to be. The one who smiled in every photo, not caring about perfect teeth. For the first time in years, she felt close to that girl again.

She picked up her phone.

Opened the camera.

Looked at herself.

And smiled.

A real smile.

Then she took the picture and sent it to him.

He replied almost immediately.

There she is.

She didn't turn away from the camera.

She didn't worry about her teeth looking perfect or if someone would judge her for smiling too much.

She simply smiled because she could.

And that was his true gift to her. It wasn't

perfect teeth, a beautiful photo, or an expensive birthday present. It was the chance to face what she had hidden for years. She finally realized she never needed to hide her happiness at all.

He had known about her insecurity long before she admitted it. He couldn't change the years she felt self-conscious, but he gave her something special.

And it's always being told that the people who love us see the pain we hide no matter how we tried.

5

DON'T HATE HIM

She sat in her mother's living room, curled up on the sofa with her knees to her chest. She kept talking about the man she had spent months trying to stop loving.

"I hate him."

Her mother, sitting quietly in the armchair, looked up from her cup of tea.

"Do you hate him?"

She frowned.

"I do."

Her mother didn't answer immediately, and that silence made her daughter look up again.

She struggled to grasp how someone she had loved so deeply had become someone she could hardly mention without feeling anger.

Her mother finally asked, "Or do you hate that you loved him so much?"

She went quiet.

The question found the part of her that she had been avoiding.

She looked down at her hands.

"I gave him everything."

"I know."

"I trusted him."

"I know."

"I defended him when everyone told me to leave."

Her voice shook, and she pressed her lips together. It was as if holding her breath could stop the tears.

"And he still hurt me."

Her mother set down her cup and reached across to grasp her daughter's hand gently.

"You do not hate him as much as you hate what loving him has cost you."

The tears came then.

She looked away, feeling embarrassed by their sudden arrival. Her mother held her hand and waited.

For months, she told herself that anger was the opposite of love. She thought if she stayed angry enough, she would stop missing him. She wanted to forget the good days and stop wondering if he thought about her. She also wanted to ease the painful tug she felt when she passed spots they had once visited together.

But her mother was right.

She wasn't only angry with him.

She was angry with herself for believing him.

She felt angry about the warnings she ignored. She felt upset with every friend to whom she defended him and each time she excused his behavior that made her uneasy. She loved him and wanted to believe the relationship was worth saving.

She felt frustrated with who she had become while trying to hold on to someone who was already letting her go.

"I should have listened," she whispered.

Her mother squeezed her hand.

"You listened to yourself at the time."

"But I was wrong."

"You decided with the information and feelings you had at that time."

She looked at her mother.

"That doesn't mean you were foolish."

"But I stayed."

"Yes."

"I stayed even when it hurt."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Her mother smiled sadly.

"Because you loved him."

She wiped her cheek.

"That doesn't make it okay."

"It doesn't make his actions okay, but it shows why you struggled to leave someone you pictured a future with."

She looked down again.

"I feel stupid."

Her mother's expression softened.

"You shouldn't."

"I gave him everything."

"I know."

"And now I have nothing."

Her mother shook her head.

"You have got yourself."

She laughed bitterly.

"That doesn't feel like much right now."

"I know."

Her mother moved closer and sat beside her.

"But one day it will."

She rested her head on her mother's shoulder, like when she was younger and scared of things she didn't understand. For a while, they both stayed quiet.

Her mother knew no words could fix what heartbreak had shattered.

No advice could stop the pain of betrayal. No reminder that she deserved better could erase the nights spent questioning her mistakes. No promise of a better future could stop her from missing someone she once thought was meant for her.

Healing did not work that way.

Sometimes, you need to sit with the loss until it feels lighter. This way, you can carry it without feeling overwhelmed.

Eventually, she whispered, "I wish I had known he wasn't worth it."

Her mother turned towards her.

"You do not need to decide whether he was worth it anymore."

She looked confused.

"What do you mean?"

You keep wondering if all the years, love, sacrifices, and pain were worth it for him. But this question will hold you back. Your healing shouldn't rely on deciding his worth.

She listened.

"You don't have to decide whether he was worth it," her mother continued. "You loved him. You gave him what you knew how to give. He made choices that hurt you. The relationship ended. You can trust all that without worrying whether you wasted your love.

Her eyes filled again.

"But it feels wasted."

"I know."

"What do I do with all it?"

Her mother took her hand again.

"You take the love you gave him and slowly learn how to give some of it back to yourself."

She stared at her mother.

"You loved him with everything you had," her mother muttered. "There is nothing shameful about that."

She looked away as the tears slipped down her face.

"I do not know how to love myself without him."

Her mother smiled gently.

"You do not have to know tonight."

She leaned her head against her daughter's.

"You only have to start."

For the first time that evening, she stopped talking about him.

She stopped listing his actions. She stopped replaying their arguments. She stopped explaining why she stayed. She also stopped wondering why she hadn't seen the end coming. Instead, she sat quietly next to the woman who had known her before heartbreak had ever touched her.

She would still hate him tomorrow.

She would miss him.

Healing did not begin with forgetting him.

She finally understood she didn't need another year to decide if he was worth all she had given.

She had loved him.

That was the truth.

She had loved him deeply and fully. That love cost her more than she expected. But it didn't make her foolish or weak, and it didn't mean she had lost everything.

She was still there, beneath the heartbreak, the anger, and all the parts of herself she thought she had lost.

That night, with her mother's hand in hers, she started to see things differently. The next chapter of her life didn't have to be about replacing him or proving she could live without him. Instead, it would be about returning to herself. She would learn to trust herself, enjoy being alone, and forgive herself; the one who had lingered too long due to deep love. In time, she would discover that the love she had longed to give could be directed inwards.

6

THE REUNION

They met again nearly a year after the breakup. It was in a small café they had never been to before. Yet, it felt familiar. It sat between an old bookshop and a bakery, like the ones they visited on weekends when they were in love. For a moment, when she looked up and saw him by the door searching for her, neither knew what to say.

The last time they saw each other, she stood in her flat's doorway, tears streaming down her face. He stood outside, pretending he wasn't breaking too. They clung to the last bits of an argument they had repeated so often that they couldn't remember where it began. Now, nearly a year later, they sat across from each other with coffee cups between them. They seemed older, not from time passing, but because life had changed them during their months apart.

He smiled first.

She smiled back.

"Hi."

"Hi."

He pulled out the chair across from her and sat down. For a

moment, they stared at each other. It felt odd, like two people who used to know everything but found that distance can change things.

"How have you been?" he asked.

She wrapped both hands around her coffee cup even though it had already gone cold.

"Good."

He smiled slightly.

"Good?"

She laughed.

"Mostly good."

"That's better."

"And you?"

He looked down at the table before answering.

"Getting there."

She looked at his face for a moment. Something in his tone made her see he wasn't trying to impress her any more. The man she remembered would have joked or given a simple answer. He would avoid admitting he struggled after they separated.

"I thought you would say you were doing great," she said.

"I almost did."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because you would have known I was lying."

She smiled, and for the first time that afternoon, the smile reached her eyes.

Once, they could read each other without words. She could tell from how he placed his keys whether his day was tough. He knew from how she shut a cupboard if something had bothered her. But over time, that easy understanding turned into a strain. They began to expect each other to read thoughts that should have been spoken.

They had loved each other deeply, but they had also hurt each other in ways that love alone could not repair.

"I wasn't sure you would come," he admitted.

"I almost didn't."

"Why did you?"

She looked out of the window for a moment before answering.

"Because I wanted to know if seeing you would still hurt."

He looked at her carefully.

"And?"

She smiled.

"It doesn't."

He nodded slowly. She could see he hoped for a different answer, but he didn't argue.

"I missed you," he said eventually.

She looked at him.

"I missed you too."

The words felt different from what they did a year ago. There was no hidden request, no chance to start fresh, and no hope that saying they missed each other could change the past.

They simply missed each other.

That was all.

They spent two hours talking about their separate lives. Slowly, the conversation shifted from safe topics like work and family to more personal matters. They began laughing about their shared memories.

At one point, she looked at him and realized something that would have frightened her a year earlier.

She could remember the good parts without wanting them back.

"I used to think I had to hate you before I could move on," she said.

He looked at her.

"I thought I had to hate you too."

"Did you?"

"For a while."

She nodded.

"Me too."

"But eventually?"

She took a breath.

"Eventually I got tired."

He smiled faintly.

"Of hating me?"

"Of carrying it."

That answer stayed with him.

She looked down at her hands.

I realized the relationship still controlled me, even after it ended. Every time I thought of you, I felt anger. When someone mentioned your name, I remembered the problems. Seeing an old photograph only reminded me of the end, not the good times before.

He listened without interrupting.

"I don't think we were bad people," she continued. "I think we were two people who loved each other but didn't know how to love each other properly."

He nodded.

"I agree."

"We expected too much without saying enough."

"And we said sorry without actually changing enough."

She laughed softly.

"That too."

For the first time, there was no bitterness in the conversation.

They weren't trying to decide who had been right.

They weren't reopening old wounds to prove that one of them had suffered more.

They were looking back at younger versions of themselves. They recognized that those people had done their best with what they knew then.

When they finally left the café, they stood outside for a moment, unsure of how to say goodbye.

A handshake would have been ridiculous.

A hug felt complicated.

He opened his arms anyway.

She stepped forward.

They hugged for a few seconds. Unlike their past hugs, this one held no promises or wishes for another chance. It was two people realizing that something beautiful had once existed between them, even if it hadn't lasted.

"Take care of yourself," he whispered.

"You too."

She watched him walk away. He turned back once before disappearing around the corner. She lifted her hand and waved.

Then she went home.

Later that evening, she lay on her bed and opened the photo gallery on her phone. She found the old folder she had been avoiding for months.

The first photograph captured their first holiday together. They stood by the sea, wind in her hair, while he held her waist. They both smiled at the camera, showing confidence. They thought they would be there for each other for years.

She swiped.

She found another photo from his birthday, then one from Christmas. She scrolled; memories flooded back. She recalled how he always stole the crispiest piece of food from her plate.

She remembered her complaints about his shoes left in the hallway. They often spent evenings dreaming about their future, as if it were already waiting for them.

She saw a photo of herself in one of his shirts. She stood in front of a mirror, and he stood behind her, making a silly face. She laughed so hard that she had to cover her mouth.

For a moment, she stared at the photograph and realized that she did not miss him.

She missed that version of herself.

The woman who had completely fallen in love.

The woman who had been willing to try.

The woman who didn't yet know that loving someone didn't mean losing herself when things got tough.

She kept scrolling and found a photo of them on a bench in a park. Their shoulders touched as they both laughed at camera

She remembered that day.

She remembered feeling safe.

She remembered being happy.

And instead of feeling sad because the moment was gone, she felt grateful that it had happened at all.

The relationship hadn't lasted, but that didn't mean it had been meaningless.

It taught her to communicate instead of expecting others to read her mind. She learned to recognize the difference between compromise and self-abandonment. She discovered how to express her needs without shame. She understood that love can be real but still unhealthy. Most importantly, she learned to walk away when staying meant losing herself.

She stared at the photographs for a long time before locking her phone.

She didn't delete them.

She didn't need to keep opening them either.

She didn't need to destroy her past to show she had moved on.

She had finally understood that moving on was not about forgetting someone.

It was about remembering them without wanting to return.

It was being able to remember the love without reopening the wound.

It was knowing that some people can matter to you, even if they aren't part of your future.

She placed her phone on the bedside table and turned off the light.

For the first time in almost a year, she did not wonder whether he would come back.

She didn't wonder whether they had made a mistake.

She didn't wonder whether things would have been different if they had tried harder.

She accepted that they had loved and hurt each other. They learned from their experiences

and moved on from a relationship they thought would last forever.

Some people come into our lives to stay.

Others come to change us.

Sometimes, a relationship doesn't need to last forever to teach you valuable lessons.

7

LET IT COME DIFFERENTLY

His sister noticed it before he did.

At first, she thought he was struggling to get over his ex. That made sense to her since the breakup had been tough. He carried more memories than he knew how to handle. She understood well that heartbreak didn't vanish because they stopped talking.

But then she started noticing a pattern.

Every time he met someone new, somehow, his ex found her way into the conversation.

They were having dinner with a woman he had met through a friend. She laughed at something he said. He smiled and then whispered, "That laugh reminds me of her."

His sister looked up from her plate.

The woman smiled politely, unsure if she should reply. He kept talking as if nothing was odd.

Another day, a woman walked by them in a restaurant. She wore a distinct fragrance, and he turned his head a bit.

"She wore the same perfume."

His sister finally put her fork down.

He looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

But it wasn't nothing.

She had begun to understand that he wasn't simply remembering his ex.

He was measuring everyone against her.

Every laugh was compared to hers.

Every song reminded him of her.

Every familiar scent pulled him backwards.

Even small habits became evidence that someone might somehow carry a piece of the woman he had lost.

At first, his sister thought it was harmless nostalgia. Many feel this way after losing someone important. But then she realized something deeper was going on.

He wasn't looking for someone new.

He was looking for his ex in everyone he met.

And because nobody could be her, everyone failed.

If a woman didn't laugh the way his ex had laughed, something felt wrong.

If she didn't like the same music, they had nothing in common.

If she expressed affection differently, he wondered why it couldn't feel like before.

If she disagreed with him where his ex would have agreed, he noticed the difference.

He sometimes felt uneasy about love different from what his ex had shown. Instead of enjoying it, he was so used to the old kind of love that anything new felt off.

His sister watched this happen for months.

She watched him go on dates and come home saying things like, "She's nice, but..."

She saw him turn away women who had done nothing wrong. But didn't remind him of someone who was gone.

One evening, after returning from yet another date, he stood in the kitchen making coffee. His sister decided she could no longer watch him repeat the same pattern.

"You're doing it again."

He looked over.

"Doing what?"

"Looking for her."

His expression changed.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do."

He turned back towards the coffee machine.

"I wasn't even talking about her tonight."

"You didn't have to."

He frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't have to say her name for her to be in the room."

He went quiet.

His sister leaned against the counter.

"You've been doing this for a long time."

"I miss her."

"I know."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is that you keep expecting everyone you meet to make you feel exactly the way she did."

He didn't answer.

She continued carefully.

"What if you stopped looking for her?"

He looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"What if you let someone be different?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard.

She wasn't asking him to forget his ex.

She wasn't asking him to pretend the relationship had never mattered.

She was asking him to stop using the past as a measuring stick for every person who came after it.

He sat down at the kitchen table.

For a while, he didn't say anything.

His sister could see that he was thinking, and for once she didn't interrupt him.

Eventually, he admitted that he didn't know how to do what she was asking.

She smiled.

"You don't have to know yet."

After that conversation, something slowly began to change.

Not dramatically.

He didn't wake up one morning completely healed. No new woman came along to wipe away all his past feelings.

Instead, he began paying attention differently.

When he met someone new, he stopped asking himself whether she reminded him of his ex.

He started asking whether he liked being around her.

He met another woman who made him laugh in a new way. He realized that being understood differently than before felt comforting.

And she loved him in a way that felt new. She didn't show affection like his ex did. Instead, she expressed it through small acts he hadn't felt before.

She remembered things he said in passing.

She checked whether he had eaten when he worked late.

She challenged him when he was being unfair.

She laughed at his terrible jokes.

She didn't share all his interests, and she didn't react like his ex. They had different mannerisms and favorite songs. Still, the differences started to feel less like something was missing.

They became part of what made her herself.

And slowly, he understood what his sister had been trying to tell him.

He spent so much time looking back that he forgot that new love isn't meant to replace old love.

He was turning down great connections because they didn't look like something that had ended before.

He had been expecting new people to continue an old story instead of allowing them to begin stories of their own.

Then he stopped.

And for the first time, that brought him peace instead of disappointment.

Later that night, his sister asked how the date had gone.

He smiled.

"It was good."

She waited.

"No comparisons?"

He shook his head.

"None."

She smiled.

He looked down for a moment before adding, "I finally understand what you meant."

"What?"

"I wasn't looking for someone I could love."

His sister waited.

"I was looking for someone who could make me feel the same way I felt before. And those aren't the same thing."

He had long believed that moving on meant finding someone new to bring back lost feelings. However, he finally realized that healing isn't about finding the same love in a different person.

It meant becoming open enough to recognize another kind of love when it arrived.

His ex was part of his life. He didn't need to erase that chapter or act like it meant nothing because it was over.

He could remember her without searching for her.

He could value what they shared without needing anyone else to copy it.

He could miss what was gone and still make room for what was possible.

Maybe that was the peace he had missed all along. Love isn't meant to be a perfect copy of the past. The person who comes after heartbreak shouldn't compete with the one who caused it.

New love can feel wrong, not for its lack of beauty, but because we hold onto a photo of an old love. We keep comparing the two and wonder why they don't match. The real gift of moving on is putting that photo down and truly seeing the person in front of us.

8

ME OR YOUR EX

It was nearly midnight when Amelia borrowed Ryan's phone. At first, it seemed like a normal request. They had been together long enough for his phone to feel like part of their shared life. She could grab it anytime to check or search for something. She unlocked it with the passcode he never hid from her. Then she opened the gallery, hoping to find the picture she wanted among the hundreds of photos they had taken together.

Instead, she saw her.

Ryan's ex.

The first photograph showed them on a beach. They stood barefoot in the sand, with the sea behind them. Both were smiling at the camera, as if nothing could go wrong. Amelia stared at it for a moment. Then she swiped to the next one. She hoped it might be an old photograph he had saved and forgotten about.

The next picture was from a birthday dinner.

Then another.

They laughed with their faces close. His arm was around her waist, and her head rested on his shoulder.

Amelia scrolled further.

There were more.

A road trip.

A restaurant.

A photo of them together showed how comfortable they were together. Amelia felt a strange ache deep beneath her ribs.

She stopped scrolling when she heard the bedroom door open.

Ryan walked in, glanced at her and immediately noticed the phone in her hand.

"Who is she?"

He stopped.

"My ex."

"I know that."

His eyes moved to the screen.

"Oh. Those? I never bothered deleting them."

Amelia looked at him for a long moment before handing the phone back.

"That's what you call it?"

"What else should I call it?"

She sat on the edge of the bed, arms crossed loosely. Ryan stood for a moment, then sat beside her.

The room was quiet, except for distant traffic outside. Amelia hoped he would say something sensible, something that made what she had seen seem harmless. She didn't want to feel angry with him. She wanted to understand him. Yet, every explanation she thought of led back to the same uncomfortable question.

Why had he kept them?

"Keeping memories is one thing, Ryan," she said eventually. "Keeping photos of someone you once loved in your private space while starting a new love with me is another."

He sighed.

"They're pictures. They don't mean anything."

Amelia nodded slowly.

"Then deleting them shouldn't mean anything either."

He looked at her.

She noticed he was looking for another answer. He wanted to keep what he had but not make her feel like she was asking for too much.

"They're part of my past," he said.

"I know."

"I can't erase everything that happened before you."

"I never asked you to."

"You're making it sound like that."

"No, Ryan. "I'm here wondering why you still want photos of another woman while we're building a life together."

He looked down at his phone.

Amelia watched him carefully, then softened her voice.

"I'm not asking you to pretend she never existed. I know she existed. I know you loved her. I know you shared things with her that I'll never be part of, and I'm not threatened by the fact that you had a life before me."

Ryan finally looked at her.

"Then what is this about?"

Amelia took a breath.

"It's about what happens after you choose someone new."

He said nothing.

She continued.

"When you end a relationship and start a new one, you don't have to pretend the memories were bad or that you didn't care about people from before. But there comes a point where you have to decide where your heart and your attention belong now."

Ryan rubbed his thumb across the edge of the phone.

"I love you."

"I know."

"Then why isn't that enough?"

"Because this isn't about whether you love me."

He looked at her.

"Then what is it about?"

Amelia's voice became softer.

"Consideration."

The word remained between them.

She looked down at her hands.

"I don't want to become the woman who checks your phone every night because she's afraid of what she might find. I don't want to question if you're still attached to someone else. I also don't want to spend our time comparing myself to pictures of a woman who's not even here.

"You're not competing with her."

"I know I'm not."

She looked at him.

"But sometimes you make me feel like I am."

Ryan's expression changed.

For the first time since she found the pictures, he seemed to get that the argument wasn't really about the photos.

It was about what they represented.

Amelia had never expected to be the only woman Ryan had ever loved. She wasn't naive. She knew a heart doesn't enter a new relationship without history, scars, or old memories that once mattered.

What she had expected was that when he chose her, he would make space for the life they were building together.

"I don't need you to erase your past," she said. "I need to know that you're not still keeping a place for it in our present."

Ryan looked at the screen again.

The photographs were still there.

Hundreds of them.

A whole relationship compressed into tiny squares on a phone.

"I honestly never thought about it," he admitted.

Amelia smiled sadly.

"That might be the problem."

He frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You never thought about it because you were comfortable with it. You never had to ask yourself how it might look to the person beside you."

Ryan was quiet.

She leaned back against the headboard.

"I don't want to control what you keep. That's not what this is. If you want those photographs because they genuinely mean something to you, then tell me that. If there is some unfinished part of you that still needs them, tell me that too. I would rather hear an uncomfortable truth than receive a convenient explanation."

He looked at her.

"They don't mean anything to me."

"Then why keep them?"

"I don't know."

Amelia nodded.

"Exactly."

Ryan looked at the phone again.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Then Amelia gave him a faint smile.

"Think about it this way."

He looked at her.

"Why are you still decorating the hallway with pictures of the person who already left you behind?"

Ryan stared at her.

There was no clever answer this time.

No defense.

He didn't think about memories or old photos. He never questioned the harmless nature of things.

Because suddenly he understood what Amelia had been trying to tell him.

She wasn't asking him to hate his past.

She wasn't asking him to erase the years before her.

She was asking him to be present in the relationship he had chosen.

Ryan looked at Amelia, then at the phone in his hand.

This time, he understood the difference.

The pictures were never really the problem.

The problem was that he had never stopped to consider what keeping those pictures said to the woman he loved now.

9

THE PRESENT AND YOUR PRESENCE

She came home one evening, and when she opened the bedroom door, she froze. Something lay in the middle of the bed, grabbing her attention.

It was a beautiful necklace.

She walked over, picked it up gently, and turned it in her hands. She admired the delicate design and then saw the small folded note next to it.

She opened it.

"I saw it and thought of you."

She smiled.

For a moment, the gift warmed her heart. She knew he often surprised her with lovely things. Despite everything, she felt grateful he thought of her when he was out without her.

She held the necklace against her neck and looked in the mirror. She imagined him picking it out, standing in a shop, and wondering if she would like it.

Then her eyes moved towards the other side of the room.

The smile disappeared.

Their daughter had left her school bag there that morning.

Beside it was the invitation card she brought home. It had details about the performance she had spent weeks getting ready for.

He had promised he would come.

Their daughter had asked him twice that morning.

"Daddy, you'll be there, right?"

He had looked up from his phone and promised her that he would.

She spent the afternoon glancing at the school hall entrance. She saved a seat next to her mother. She wanted them both there when she walked onto the stage.

He never came.

She tried to explain it to their daughter later. She said her father was likely busy with work. The little girl nodded and replied, "It's okay," in that way children do when they want to ease adult guilt.

That evening, when he got home, she expected him to ask about the event.

He didn't.

He asked whether she had seen the necklace.

She had said yes.

He had smiled, kissed her forehead, and told her he thought she would like it.

She thanked him.

The next morning, flowers arrived at her office.

They were beautiful, arranged carefully with a small card attached.

She stared at them for a moment before reading his message and smiling.

She called him.

"Thank you for the flowers."

"I knew you'd like them."

"I do."

"I'll see you tonight."

"Okay."

But that evening, she suffered from headache and it was one of those days when lots of work piled up. By the time she left work, she felt so tired that she wanted to cry.

She called him on her way home.

No answer.

She called again.

Still nothing.

She waited a bit and called again, hoping he'd see the missed calls. She wanted him to know she wasn't calling to chat.

Nothing.

She put her phone down and drove herself home, in pain.

By the time she got there, she had told herself that she was expecting too much. She thought she should stop needing him to notice every tough moment. Also, she wondered if the necklace and flowers should have been enough to show her he loved her.

But when she walked into the house, she realized that she did not want flowers.

She did not want another necklace.

She did not want another beautifully wrapped box.

She wanted the man who had promised their daughter he would be there.

Later that night, the front door opened.

He walked into the room carrying another expensive gift.

He looked pleased with himself.

"I got you something."

She looked at the box.

Then she looked at him.

He noticed the change in her expression.

"What?"

She said nothing for a moment.

Then she asked, "Do you know what I wanted today?"

He smiled, still holding the box.

"Gift?"

She shook her head.

"No."

His smile faded slightly.

She looked down at the gift in his hands before looking back at him.

"I wanted you."

He stood still.

"I called you three times today."

"I'm sorry. I was busy."

"I know."

She took a breath.

"I didn't need another gift."

He slowly put the box down.

"I needed you to show up."

He looked at her.

"I needed you to notice that I wasn't okay, and I needed you to remember that our daughter performed yesterday."

His face changed.

She saw the memory coming back to him. He remembered the promise he made that morning. The little girl stood by the door, asking if he would come.

He sat down.

For once, he didn't try to explain.

He didn't say work had been difficult.

He sat there, hands on his knees, staring at the floor. It seemed he had realized that all the ways he showed his love looked

different from how she received them.

She reached up and touched the necklace around her neck.

"I appreciate the things you buy me," she murmured softly. "I really do."

Then she unclasped the necklace and placed it carefully on the table.

"But gifts can't tell me what you thought about me."

She looked directly at him.

"Your presence tells me I matter to you."

He lowered his eyes.

She didn't want him to feel guilty for buying her things. She knew his gifts were sincere. Also, she understood he loved her in the only way he knew how.

He worked hard.

He provided.

He bought beautiful things.

Whenever he realized he forgot something important, he tried to make up for it with expensive gifts. This made the disappointment feel smaller.

But somewhere along the way, he had forgotten that their daughter did not need a better gift.

She had needed to look into the crowd and see her father sitting there.

His wife had not needed another necklace that evening.

She had needed him to answer the phone when she called because she was having a terrible day.

He spent years thinking love was about what he could provide. Maybe no one taught him that people often remember the simple moments. It's not about the expensive gifts bought after realizing he had been absent. It's about choosing to be there when he could have been somewhere else.

He looked at the necklace lying on the table.

Then he looked at his wife.

"I thought I was showing you that I loved you."

"I know."

"Then why does it feel like I wasn't?"

She reached across the space between them and took his hand.

"Because I don't need proof that you can buy something for me."

He looked at her.

"I need proof that I mattered to you."

He was quiet for a long time.

Then he asked, "Is she still awake?"

She knew immediately who he meant.

Their daughter.

"No."

He nodded.

"I will talk to her tomorrow. And I'll apologize."

"You should."

He squeezed her hand.

"I should have been there."

She didn't tell him she had forgiven him. But she had, she knew forgiveness should come when someone realized their mistake.

She leaned against him, letting silence fill the space. Change often begins not with promises or big gestures, but when someone stops justifying their actions. It's about truly understanding how those actions made the one they love feel.

The necklace remained on the table that night.

The flowers were still sitting in a vase in her office.

He had still left the expensive gift he brought home unopened.

For the first time, he realized that those things weren't

worthless. She had valued each one, but they couldn't replace what she truly wanted.

She had wanted him beside her in the school hall.

She had wanted him to answer the phone.

She had wanted to feel that when something mattered to her, it mattered enough to interrupt his day.

As he sat with her that night, holding her hand, he realized that love isn't about what you can buy. Sometimes, the most precious thing to give is free. It might be an hour in a bustling school hall, a timely phone call, a promise fulfilled, or being there when your loved one needs you.

10

THE LONG WAY HOME

They had been driving home for nearly twenty minutes when she saw something was wrong.

They had spent most of the journey chatting about everyday things. Their talk had no real start or finish. Then, she suddenly realized they had missed their usual turn.

She looked up.

"Oh, we're going the wrong way."

"I know."

She turned towards him.

"You know?"

He kept his eyes on the road, but she caught the small smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

She looked through the windscreen and recognized the street they were on, then looked back at him.

"Why did you pass the turn?"

He said nothing.

She waited.

"Are you lost?"

"No."

"Then where are we going?"

"You'll see."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

Her answer raised her suspicions. He wasn't great at keeping secrets. When he tried to surprise her, a smile would often give it away before he did anything.

Still, she let him continue driving.

They passed a familiar road, then another. Gradually, the buildings became less known. He slowed down next to a small shop nestled between two other shops.

He parked.

She looked through the window.

Then she looked at him.

Then back at the shop.

It was an ice cream shop.

She smiled.

"So this was the plan?"

"Yeah."

"You deliberately passed our turn?"

"I did."

"Why?"

He switched off the engine.

"Because I wanted ice cream."

She laughed.

"You could have said that. You're strange."

She opened her door.

"I knew you'd come around."

They walked in and ordered two cups, picking different flavors. They both knew she would eventually reach over and steal some of his.

They took their ice cream outside and sat on a small bench by

the shop. She took a spoonful from her cup.

Then another.

Then, without warning, she leaned towards his cup and stole some of his.

He stared at her.

"You have your own."

"I know."

"Then why did you take mine?"

She smiled innocently.

"I wanted to taste yours."

"You could have asked."

"And would you have given me some?"

"No."

"Exactly."

He shook his head as she laughed. He complained for a few minutes about her stealing his ice cream. Still, he pushed his cup closer to her.

She noticed. And she took another spoonful.

They started talking.

Not about anything important.

The conversation kept finding somewhere else to go.

Every time it seemed to be ending, one of them remembered something else.

She told him a story she had forgotten to tell him earlier.

He interrupted halfway through to tell her something unrelated.

She laughed at him.

She threatened to leave him sitting there alone.

He told her he would finish her ice cream if she did.

Eventually, the cups were empty.

The street had become less noisy.

She looked at her phone and saw they had been sitting there longer than they meant to.

"We should go."

He nodded.

They walked back to the car.

Once they were inside, she looked at the clock on the dashboard.

"We could have been home already."

She studied his face for a moment, and suddenly she understood why he had taken the longer road.

It had never really been about ice cream.

He had simply wanted a little more time with her.

They had time for themselves. Even if they only sat outside a small shop, eating ice cream and chatting about things.

She smiled and looked out of the window.

He started the car.

Neither of them said anything about it.

They didn't need to.

Sometimes, love isn't in fancy plans or costly dates. It's in the small choices people make. It's about choosing to stay a little longer with someone, rather than rushing home.

Oh! the intimacy of taking the long way home, knowing exactly where the road was supposed to lead but choosing, for a little while, to go somewhere else simply because you were not ready for the time together to end.

11

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE CINEMA

Every weekend, they went to the cinema together.

She loved films.

He liked going with her.

There was a difference, although she didn't realist it at first.

She spent hours checking what was on. She read reviews, watched trailers, and messaged him about films to see. He usually replied with something simple like, "Whatever you want." She took this as him being easygoing.

Then, one afternoon, she noticed something.

She had watched three different films that month. When she tried to remember which one he liked best, she suddenly realized she had never asked him.

They sat together before another film, sharing popcorn as the ads played. Then she turned to him.

"You've watched three different films with me this month," she said. "Which one did you actually like?"

He thought about it.

She waited, hoping he would mention the action film from last weekend or the romantic comedy they had watched before

that.

Instead, he said, "The first one."

She smiled.

"Really?"

He nodded.

She stared at him.

"That was your favorite?"

"No."

She laughed.

"You just said it was."

"I said I remember it."

"Why?"

He looked at her as though the answer were obvious.

"Because I fell asleep on your shoulder."

She shook her head, smiling.

"You slept through the entire film."

"I know."

"And somehow that's what you remember?"

He shrugged.

"You were warm."

She laughed again and nudged his arm.

"What about the horror film?"

His expression changed immediately.

"Oh, I loved that one."

"You did?"

"Absolutely."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You felt terrified."

"I did not feel terrified."

"You nearly broke my fingers."

He looked down at her hand as though remembering.

"I held your hand firmly."

"You held it so tightly that my fingers went numb."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice dramatically.

She burst out laughing.

"You pressed your face into my chest."

"I was checking your heartbeat."

"My heartbeat?"

"Yes."

She laughed harder.

"You were using me to hide."

He smiled.

She shook her head, still laughing.

"And the action film?"

He immediately sat up.

"That one was important."

"Why?"

"That film taught me at least five ways to save your life."

She stared at him.

"You're ridiculous."

"I am serious."

"You spent half the movie eating popcorn."

"I was observing."

"You were asleep during the car chase."

"I was conserving energy."

She laughed again, and he smiled because this was what he had wanted all along, to made her laugh.

The lights began to dim around them.

People settled into their seats.

The screen brightened, and the ads faded away. She leaned in closer to him as he reached for her hand.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then she whispered, "So what kind of movie do you actually want to see today?"

He looked at her.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Then why do you keep coming?"

He looked down at their hands.

For once, there was no joke waiting behind his answer.

"Because I've finally realized something."

She waited.

He turned towards her.

"I don't come here because I want to watch my favorite film."

She smiled slightly.

"Then why?"

He squeezed her hand gently.

"I'm here because I love going with you."

She stared at him for a moment. The simplicity of his answer made her smile in a way no film could.

She spent months believing he only tolerated her movie choices. She never thought he attended cinemas because he wanted her beside him. And the film had never been the reason he kept coming back.

She was.

He couldn't say which actor gave the best performance or which scene made the audience gasp. But he remembered falling asleep on her shoulder. He recalled how tightly she squeezed his hand during the horror film. He thought of her laugh when he pretended to rescue her from imaginary danger. He remembered sitting next to her in the dark, whispering comments since she

couldn't watch anything without sharing her thoughts.

Those were the things he had been keeping.

Not the films.

Her.

The screen lit up in front of them, and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"You know," she whispered, "you could have told me this earlier."

He smiled.

"You never asked."

She laughed softly.

"Fair enough."

The film started, but neither of them cared much about the action on screen anymore.

He held her hand beneath the armrest, and she rested against him as the room became quiet around them.

Maybe one day they would stop going to the cinema.

Life might get busier. Work could eat into their weekends. Responsibilities may shift. They may end up watching films at home. They could be half-focused while cooking dinner or doing laundry.

But she hoped that even then, years later, he would still remember the same things.

Just being beside her in the dark that felt magical. Holding her hand.

And love isn't always about sharing interests. Most times it's about being there for the person you care about and supporting what matters to them.

12

YOUR FAVORITE SNACK

When he got home, the bedroom was dark. She drew the curtains. She lay under the blanket, facing away from the door. She hoped that if she stayed still, he would get that she didn't want any company.

He stepped into the room quietly and noticed her immediately.

"You're home," she said without turning around.

"I am."

She pulled the blanket higher over her shoulder.

"I don't want to talk."

He stood there for a moment.

"I know."

She turned slightly, surprised by how easily he had accepted it.

"And please don't tell me everything will be fine."

"I won't."

That was all he said.

He left the room. For a few minutes, she heard him in the kitchen. He opened cupboards and set something down. Then, she heard his footsteps again.

The mattress sank a bit as he approached. Then, he gently set something on the bedside table.

She ignored it.

He didn't say anything.

A few minutes later, she finally lifted her head enough to look.

It was her favorite snack.

Months ago, while they strolled through a supermarket, she had mentioned it. She said she didn't know why she liked it, but it always made her feel better after eating it.

She frowned.

"I'm not eating."

"I know."

"Then why did you bring it?"

"Because you'll want it later."

She looked at him.

"I said I'm not eating."

He nodded seriously.

"I heard you."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"You often say you're not hungry when you're upset."

She stared at him from beneath the blanket.

"You're annoying."

He smiled.

"Good."

She frowned.

"At least you're talking to me now."

She tried to hold onto her irritation, but the smile at the corner of her mouth betrayed her.

She quickly pulled the blanket over her face again.

He laughed softly and sat on the bed's edge. He didn't touch her, pull the blanket away, or ask her to explain what had

happened.

That was one of the things she loved about him, although she rarely said it.

He knew that her silence did not always mean that she wanted him to leave her completely alone.

Sometimes, it meant she wanted someone close. She didn't want to explain why she was hurting.

Sometimes she wanted to talk.

Sometimes she wanted to cry.

Sometimes, she felt like complaining about everything that went wrong. Then, she wanted to hear someone say she was right to be angry.

And sometimes, like tonight, she simply wanted the world to stop asking things from her.

He seemed to understand the difference.

She lowered the blanket again. She saw him sitting quietly, scrolling through his phone. He didn't try to start a conversation.

"You really came here to annoy me?" she asked.

He looked up.

"No."

He put his phone down and turned towards her.

"I came because I know you."

She remained silent.

"When you're hurting," he said, "you don't always want someone asking you to explain your feelings. Sometimes, you don't even know how to explain them yourself."

She looked at him more carefully.

He whispered, "Sometimes, you need someone who knows when to sit with you, when to give you space, and when to help you smile."

Something inside her loosened.

She looked towards the bedside table.

"You remembered my favorite?"

He followed her gaze and smiled.

"I remember the little things about you that you think nobody notices."

She looked back at him.

He remembered many things she never thought were important enough to mention again.

He knew she liked the window seat whenever they traveled.

He knew she hated it when someone called her just after she had woken up.

He knew that when she said she wasn't hungry after a rough day, she was likely exhausted, not full.

He knew which songs she played when she was happy and which ones she returned to when she needed to be alone.

He knew she liked the room a bit colder at night. She always took the blanket, any time she was truly upset.

None of those things had ever announced themselves as evidence of love.

He had simply paid attention.

She stared at him for a few seconds, and he didn't look away.

"You really notice all that?"

He smiled.

"More than you think."

She swallowed, suddenly feeling much more emotional than she had expected.

She had a terrible day. For hours, she felt nobody understood her. Now, this man sat beside her. He didn't try to fix anything or ask her to be cheerful. He didn't make her sadness an inconvenience.

He had simply made room for it.

She moved slightly beneath the blanket.

"Come here."

His smile appeared immediately.

He opened his arms.

"I was waiting for that."

She laughed softly and moved closer. Resting her head on his chest, his arms wrapped around her. For a while, they said nothing; there was nothing left to explain.

The snack remained untouched on the bedside table.

Her problems had not disappeared too.

Maybe tomorrow would still bring whatever had gone wrong.

But tonight, she didn't have to solve any of it.

She just lay there in the arms of someone who knew that loving her wasn't about words but rather remembering what made her smile. And knowing when to sit quietly waiting until she was ready to come out from under the blanket.

13

EXACTLY WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO BE

They were sitting at a crowded restaurant when she noticed he had stopped listening to her. She had been telling him about her day, something about a disagreement between two people at work and she was in the middle of explaining why she thought one of them had completely overreacted when she realized he had not said a word for several moments. She paused. He was looking at her. Not distractedly, as though his mind had wandered somewhere else, but steadily, almost thoughtfully, as if he had forgotten that there were other people in the room.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"You've been looking at me for five minutes."

He smiled. "I know."

She gave him a suspicious look before glancing around the restaurant, suddenly noticing everything she had ignored since they sat down. People were talking over one another, waiters were moving between crowded tables with plates balanced

carefully in their hands, and music was playing somewhere behind them, soft enough to disappear beneath the noise.

"You're missing everything."

He leaned closer. "No. I think I found the only thing I came here for."

She laughed and looked away. "That's such a line."

"Maybe."

He reached across the table and took her hand. She looked down at their fingers.

"And you weren't even listening to me."

"I was listening."

"You were staring at me."

"I can do both."

She smiled despite herself. "Then tell me what I just said."

He didn't hesitate. "You were telling me about your colleague."

She stared at him. "You actually were listening."

"I told you."

"Then why were you looking at me like that?"

He shrugged. "Because I like looking at you."

She rolled her eyes. "You see me all the time."

"I know."

"So what's so interesting?"

He smiled again. "I don't know. Maybe I'm still getting used to the fact that you're actually here."

She laughed softly and reached for her glass, trying not to let him see how much his words had affected her.

They had been together long enough for their relationship to lose some of the nervous excitement that came with the beginning of something new. They knew each other's habits now, knew which subjects could start an argument and which

jokes could always make the other laugh, knew how the other behaved when tired and how they became when something was bothering them but neither of them wanted to talk about it.

They had also reached the stage where silence no longer needed to be filled. She had once thought that was a sign that something was fading. She had been wrong. There was a kind of comfort that only arrived when two people stopped feeling the need to constantly prove that they were enjoying each other's company.

She could sit beside him without speaking. He could work while she read. They could spend an entire afternoon doing separate things in the same room and still feel as though they had spent the day together.

That evening, however, she could not understand why he seemed so fascinated by her.

"What?" she asked again.

He smiled. "Nothing."

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me."

"I'm allowed."

"Not for this long."

"Why not?"

"Because you're making me self-conscious."

He laughed. "You're beautiful."

"There it is."

"What?"

"The line."

"What line?"

"The thing men say when they don't know what else to say."

He leaned back in his chair. "I wasn't going to say that."

"You just did."

"Because you made me."

She laughed.

A waiter placed their food on the table, interrupting them for a moment, and she thanked him before turning back to the man sitting opposite her. He was still smiling.

"You're still doing it."

"I know."

She shook her head. "Tell me what you're thinking."

He looked at her for a moment before answering.

"I was thinking about how strange it is that there are so many people here, and I barely notice them."

She glanced around. The restaurant had become even busier. Someone was celebrating a birthday near the back, and the people at the table were singing loudly while one of the waiters carried a small cake towards them. Two friends near the window were laughing over something on one of their phones.

"It's a crowded place."

"I know."

"So how can you barely notice anyone?"

"I notice them."

"Then?"

He looked at her hand beneath his. "I just don't care about anything happening over there as much as I care about what's happening here."

She smiled. "That sounds dangerously romantic."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

He turned his hand over and intertwined his fingers with hers.

"Have you ever noticed how the world outside starts feeling less important when you're beside someone who makes you feel

like you're exactly where you're supposed to be?"

She stopped smiling because the words had reached somewhere deeper than she expected.

She looked at him.

For a moment, the restaurant seemed to move farther away. The music became softer. The conversations blurred. She could still see everything, but none of it seemed to demand her attention anymore.

She thought about all the places she had been before him, all the people she had met, all the relationships she had tried to understand, and all the times she had mistaken excitement for love because she had not yet learned that love could be quiet without being empty.

She thought about how comfortable she felt sitting across from him. He didn't made every problem disappear. There were things they disagreed about. There were days when they annoyed each other. There were conversations neither of them wanted to have. But somehow, even when life outside their relationship became complicated, being with him never felt like another thing she had to survive.

It felt like coming home.

"You know what I realized?" she asked.

"What?"

"I don't think I've ever felt this comfortable with anyone."

He smiled.

"I can be tired. I can be annoying. I can be quiet. I can talk too much. I can change my mind halfway through a conversation. I can have a bad day and not pretend everything is fine."

She paused.

"And you don't make me feel like I have to become someone else to deserve being loved."

He was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, "That's because I don't want someone else."

She looked at him.

"I want you."

The words were simple, but she felt them differently.

He wasn't promising that their lives would always be easy. He wasn't pretending that love could protect them from disappointment, grief, failure or all the ordinary difficulties that came with being human. He was simply telling her that when he looked at her, he did not feel as though he had settled.

He felt certain.

She smiled.

"You know, you were supposed to listen to my story tonight."

"I did."

"You spent half the time staring at me."

"I was multitasking."

She laughed. "You're impossible."

"Probably."

She picked up her fork. "I'm going to finish my story."

"Go ahead."

"And this time, you're not allowed to interrupt."

She began talking again, and he listened. But every now and then, she caught him smiling.

14

SHE ONLY MET HIM ONCE

They had been introduced by a mutual friend at a small gathering, and at first she had barely noticed him.

There were other people around, conversations happening everywhere and enough noise to make everyone speak a little louder than necessary, but somehow, after the introductions were over, she found herself sitting beside him and talking as though they had known each other for years.

They talked about almost everything.

The strangest things they had ever done.

The films they pretended to understand because everyone else seemed to love them.

Childhood memories.

The kind of people they could never date.

At some point, she told him a joke that she immediately regretted because nobody laughed.

Nobody except him.

He laughed so hard that she began laughing too, even though the joke was still terrible.

They talked for several hours.

By the time they finally went their separate ways, she had almost forgotten that they had only just met.

There was no promise to call.

No exchange of dramatic words.

No lingering goodbye.

They simply said goodbye, smiled at each other and went in different directions.

She went home expecting nothing.

The next morning, she barely thought about him.

Then, sometime in the afternoon, she remembered something he had said.

She smiled.

That was all.

She went about her day.

A week passed.

Then another.

Life continued.

Work became busy again. Friends needed attention. Family matters came up. There were bills to pay, errands to run and ordinary responsibilities that slowly pushed the memory of that afternoon towards the back of her mind.

Until something funny happened.

It was nothing important, something so ridiculous that she would normally have sent a message to one of her closest friends.

Instead, she picked up her phone and opened her contacts.

Her thumb hovered over the screen.

She didn't even know why she was looking for his name.

She stopped.

They didn't have each other's numbers.

She stared at the screen for a moment and laughed at herself.

"What is wrong with me?"

She put the phone down.

But she thought about him for the rest of the day.

She didn't missed him.

That would have been impossible.

You couldn't miss someone you barely knew.

At least, that was what she told herself.

Months passed.

One afternoon, she was walking home when she passed a small café she had never noticed before.

Something about the place made her stop.

Perhaps it was the smell of coffee drifting through the open door.

Perhaps it was the laughter coming from inside.

Or perhaps it was simply that she remembered the way he had laughed at her terrible joke.

She stood there for a moment, smiling at a memory that had no business still being alive.

She had met him once.

Once.

Yet somehow, he kept appearing in places he had never been.

A song reminded her of something he had said.

A restaurant reminded her of the conversation they had had about food.

A particular phrase made her remember the way he had looked at her when he was trying not to laugh.

Sometimes she would see something beautiful and think, without meaning to, that he would probably like it.

That was the part she could not explain.

She didn't know him.

Not really.

She didn't know what annoyed him.

She didn't know how he behaved when he was angry or tired or disappointed.

She didn't know whether he was kind.

She didn't know whether he had habits she would have found irritating if she had spent enough time around him.

She knew almost nothing.

And yet the memory of him had somehow survived longer than memories of people she had known for years.

One evening, she found herself telling a friend about him.

"You remember that guy I met that day?"

"Which guy?"

"The one at the gathering."

"The one you spoke to for hours?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

She shrugged.

"Nothing."

Her friend stared at her.

"You've been talking about him for months."

"I haven't."

"You have."

"I mentioned him twice."

"Exactly."

She laughed.

"It's not like I want to marry him."

"I didn't say you did."

"I barely know him."

"Then why do you keep remembering him?"

She had no answer.

That question stayed with her.

Why?

Why did one conversation remain when hundreds of others had disappeared?

Why could she remember the sound of his laughter but not the name of someone she had spoken to almost every day for an entire year?

Perhaps it was because some people did not need years to leave an impression.

Perhaps there were conversations that arrived at exactly the right moment.

Perhaps sometimes we remembered people not because they had changed our lives, but because, for a few hours, they made us feel like a version of ourselves we hide from other people.

She wondered about that often.

She wondered whether he ever remembered her.

Whether something had ever reminded him of that day.

Whether he had ever walked past a café and remembered her terrible joke.

Whether he had ever heard a song and thought of their conversation.

Or perhaps she had simply been a forgettable experience in his life.

The thought should have disappointed her.

Instead, she found something strangely peaceful about it.

Not every meaningful encounter had to become a relationship.

Not every person who touched something inside you had to stay.

Some people arrived briefly and left before you had the chance to understand why meeting them mattered.

And sometimes the only thing they left behind was a memory that appeared unexpectedly, years later, in a place they had never been.

She never saw him again.
She eventually stopped wondering whether she would.
Life moved forward.
She met other people.
She fell in love.

15

WHEN HER HAPPINESS BECAME HIS

He knew something had changed the day she called him screaming with excitement.

She had gotten the job.

For the next ten minutes, she talked without stopping while he listened and laughed, telling him how she had almost cried when they gave her the news, how she had stood outside the office afterwards because she needed a moment to believe that it had actually happened, and how the first person she thought about calling was him.

He smiled throughout the entire conversation.

When the call finally ended, he lowered his phone and sat there for a moment, still smiling at the screen.

His friend, who had been watching him from across the table, leaned back in his chair.

"You got the job too?"

He looked up.

"No."

"Then why are you smiling like that?"

He glanced at his phone again.

"I don't know."

But he did.

He just wasn't ready to say it yet.

Her happiness had somehow become his happiness too.

It wasn't the first time he had noticed that he cared about her, but it was the first time he understood that what he felt had gone beyond simply enjoying her company or wanting her to be around.

He was genuinely happy that something good had happened to her.

He was happy simply because she was happy.

And somehow, that felt different.

They had started as friends, although neither of them could remember exactly when the friendship had become something more complicated. There had never been one dramatic moment when everything changed. It had happened gradually, through conversations that lasted longer than they needed to, through messages sent for no particular reason, through small details they remembered about each other.

He knew she hated being late but was almost always late.

He knew she became quiet when something was bothering her.

He knew she could spend an unreasonable amount of time deciding what to eat and then order the same thing she had ordered the week before.

He knew how excited she became when talking about the things she wanted for her future.

And he knew how hard she had been trying to find a job that would make her feel as though all the effort she had put into building her career had finally meant something.

He had watched her apply to one position after another.

He had listened when she complained about unanswered emails and rejection messages.

He had heard the disappointment in her voice whenever another opportunity disappeared.

There had been days when she called him simply because she was tired of pretending she wasn't discouraged.

"I don't know what I'm doing wrong," she had said once.

"You're not doing anything wrong."

"Then why does nobody want me?"

"They do."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know you."

He had simply meant it.

He wanted her to succeed.

He wanted her to wake up one morning and feel proud of the life she was building.

He wanted her to stop doubting herself every time something did not work out.

He wanted the world to give her a reason to believe that all her effort had not been wasted.

So when she called him with the news, something inside him lifted with her.

He listened to her talk about the salary, the office, her new colleagues and everything she had already started planning in her head, and although he barely got a word into the conversation, he didn't mind.

She was happy.

That was enough.

After they ended the call, his friend was still watching him.

"You're in love with her."

He laughed.

"Don't start."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"You're smiling at your phone."

"She got a job."

"You've said that three times."

"Because she got a job."

His friend leaned forward.

"You're not this excited when you get good news."

He stopped smiling for a moment.

The truth of that statement sat between them.

He was usually pleased when something good happened to him, but this felt different. Her news had changed his entire mood within seconds. A day that had started badly had suddenly become good because something good had happened to her.

He looked down at his phone again.

"She worked hard for it."

His friend nodded.

"I know."

"And she really wanted it."

"I know."

"So I'm happy for her."

His friend smiled.

"That's not friendship anymore."

He didn't answer.

And somewhere inside him, he knew his friend was right.

He had started noticing it in other ways too.

When she was excited about something, he found himself becoming excited.

When she was disappointed, he felt the urge to make things

easier for her.

He had begun remembering her important dates without putting them in his calendar.

He noticed when she changed her hairstyle.

He could tell when she was pretending to be okay.

Once, while walking through a shop, he saw a book by an author she loved.

He bought it without thinking.

When she saw it later, she looked at him in surprise.

She smiled in that way she had whenever something touched her more than she wanted to admit.

He had thought about that smile for the rest of the day.

He had not understood why.

Now he did.

Love had not arrived in his life with a dramatic announcement.

It had slipped in quietly through ordinary things.

Through remembering.

Through listening.

Through wanting to tell her something before he told anyone else.

Through wondering whether she had eaten.

Through hoping she got home safely.

Through being genuinely proud when she succeeded at something he had nothing to do with.

That night, after his friend had gone home, he lay in bed thinking about the phone call again.

He could still hear her voice.

"I got it!"

The excitement in those two words had stayed with him.

He smiled in the darkness.

Then he wondered what would happen when the excitement

faded.

What would happen when the job became difficult?

What would happen when she had a bad day?

What would happen when she failed at something?

The answer came almost immediately.

He would still want her to be okay.

That was when he finally understood the difference between wanting someone and loving someone.

Wanting someone made you think about what they could bring into your life.

Loving someone made you care about what life was bringing to theirs.

He didn't just want her beside him.

He wanted good things to find her even on the days when he wasn't there to witness them.

He wanted her to succeed even if he received none of the credit.

He wanted her to wake up excited about her own life.

He wanted her dreams to become real.

He wanted her to be happy in ways that had nothing to do with him.

And that realization frightened him a little because it meant she had become important in a way he could no longer pretend was casual.

The next morning, she sent him a message.

I still can't believe it happened.

He smiled before replying.

You deserved it.

A few seconds later, another message appeared.

Thank you for always believing in me.

He stared at the words for a long time.

Then he typed:

I'll always believe in you.

He almost deleted it because it felt too revealing.

Instead, he sent it.

Her reply came almost immediately.

I'm glad I have you.

He put the phone down and stared at the ceiling.

He had spent so long wondering whether he was ready to tell her how he felt that he had missed the simpler truth.

He didn't need to know exactly when he had fallen in love with her.

There had been no single moment.

It had happened somewhere between the conversations that lasted too long, the little things he remembered, the disappointments he wished he could take away and the happiness that became his whenever something good happened to her.

He thought about the way her voice had sounded when she called him with the news.

He thought about the smile he had worn after the call.

And finally, he understood why his friend had asked the question.

He wasn't simply happy to have her.

He was happy whenever life was good to her.

Her happiness could change his entire mood.

Her success could make him proud.

Her disappointment could stay on his mind long after she had stopped talking about it.

And somewhere between wanting her beside him and wanting the world to be kind to her, he knew.

He loved her.

He only wondered when he would finally find the courage to tell her.

16

REASONS TO SMILE

He never really bought her flowers. Not because he didn't care, and certainly not because he didn't know that flowers could make her happy, but because he had a strange way of loving her, one that had slowly become so ordinary to both of them that she sometimes forgot how much thought was hidden inside the little things he did.

He remembered that she hated Mondays, so on the mornings when she had to return to work after the weekend, he would wake her up with a message before her alarm had the chance to do it, usually something ridiculous enough to make her smile before she even got out of bed.

"Good morning. Unfortunately, Monday has arrived again. Please remain strong."

Sometimes he would add something more encouraging.

"You've got this. And if you don't, pretend you do until Friday."

She would laugh and send him an annoyed emoji, but he knew she liked it.

When she got to work, he would check on her every few hours.

"How's my favorite employee?"

"Busy."

"Are you eating?"

"Yes."

"Proof?"

She would send him a picture of whatever was on her desk.

He would reply with something stupid.

"Excellent. I can now confirm that you're still alive."

And somehow, even on the days when she was exhausted, she would smile.

Sometimes he saved funny videos because he knew exactly the kind of things that would make her laugh. He would come across something ridiculous while scrolling through his phone, watch it once and immediately think of her, saving it without even considering whether he would remember to send it later.

He always did.

There were mornings when she would wake up to three videos from him.

"Don't watch these at work."

She would open the first one.

Then the second.

Then the third.

By the time she got to the end, she would be laughing into her pillow.

"You have too much free time."

His reply would come almost immediately.

"I use my free time wisely."

"You send me nonsense."

"You smiled, didn't you?"

She would stare at the message, trying not to admit that he was right.

There was a time she had a terrible day at work and came home determined to complain about everything that had gone wrong. She called him expecting sympathy, and he listened while she talked for several minutes about her manager, her colleagues, the amount of work she had been given.

When she finally finished, there was silence.

"You're supposed to say something."

"I am thinking."

"About what?"

"About whether your company knows they hired a woman who is too beautiful to be stressed."

He continued, "Also, I have decided that your manager is probably jealous because you have better brain."

She laughed.

That was simply how he loved her.

Not with grand gestures that made other people notice, but with small things that made her feel noticed.

One afternoon, she was sitting with her friend when the conversation somehow turned to relationships. Her friend had just received flowers from her boyfriend and was showing her pictures of the bouquet, talking about how romantic the whole thing had been.

"He sent them to my office," she said excitedly. "Everyone was asking who they were from."

She smiled and looked at the pictures.

"They're beautiful."

"You should tell your boyfriend to buy you flowers."

She laughed.

"He doesn't really do flowers."

Her friend frowned.

"Does your boyfriend ever buy you flowers?"

She smiled.

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

She was about to explain when her phone vibrated on the table.

She looked down.

Another message from him.

She opened it and immediately covered her mouth when she saw what he had sent.

It was a ridiculous picture of a man falling into a swimming pool, followed by a message.

"This is me falling in love with you..."

She burst out laughing.

Her friend looked at her.

"What did he send?"

She turned the phone around.

Her friend watched the video, then looked at her with a confused smile.

"This is what makes you laugh?"

"You don't understand."

"I really don't."

She looked back at the screen, still smiling.

Then she looked at her friend.

"He gives me something else more often."

"What?"

She held up her phone.

"Reasons to smile."

He didn't always know what she needed.

Sometimes he got it wrong.

Sometimes she wanted to be left alone and he made her laugh when she was trying to remain angry.

Sometimes his jokes were terrible.

Sometimes his timing was even worse.

But he kept trying to make her smile.

And over time, she began to realize that there was something deeply comforting about being loved by someone who paid attention to the small things.

He remembered the things that frightened her and the things that excited her.

He remembered when she had an important meeting and asked how it went.

He remembered when she was having a difficult week and checked on her more often without making her feel watched.

He remembered her.

That was his version of flowers.

She realized that maybe love was not always about roses arriving at the door, expensive dinners or gestures that could be photographed and shown to other people.

Sometimes love was somebody remembering that Mondays were hard for you.

Sometimes it was a message at the exact moment you needed one.

Sometimes it was a funny video sent in the middle of a boring day.

Sometimes it was someone who knew you were hurting and refused to let you forget that you still had reasons to smile.

He never really bought her flowers.

But he had filled her life with little reminders that she was loved.

And whenever someone asked what he gave her, she never knew how to explain that the best things he gave her could not be wrapped, arranged in a vase or left on her doorstep.

He gave her laughter on difficult days.

He gave her comfort when she needed it.

He gave her reasons to look at her phone and smile.

And perhaps that was his way of saying, every single day, without having to say the words at all:

I see you.

I remember you.

And I want life to be a little kinder to you.

17

STILL YOUR WOMAN

Years into their marriage, their children had become his priority. He was always checking on them, asking whether they had eaten, helping with homework, remembering school activities, worrying about fevers, planning for their future and making sure they had everything they needed, and she loved that about him because she knew what kind of father he was and how deeply he loved their children.

She loved their children too.

More than anything.

But somewhere along the way, something between them had become questionable.

The little touches that once happened without thought became less frequent. He no longer reached for her hand simply because she was sitting beside him. He stopped pulling her closer when they watched television. The kisses became quick and familiar, more like habits than moments, and the kind of look that used to linger between them seemed to have disappeared.

At first, she told herself it was normal.

They were parents now.

Life was different.

They were tired.

There were always things that needed to be done.

She understood all of that, so she said nothing.

But understanding something did not make it hurt less.

There were nights when she would lie beside him after he had fallen asleep and stare at the ceiling, wondering when she had stopped being the woman he looked at and become simply the mother of his children.

She didn't want to compete with them.

She never could.

They were her children too, and she would choose them over almost anything in the world.

But sometimes she wanted to be chosen in a different way.

She wanted to be looked at and not simply seen as the woman who packed lunches, remembered appointments and folded clothes.

She wanted to feel like his wife again.

Not just his partner in raising children.

Not just the person who shared the bills, the house and the responsibilities.

His woman.

There were moments when she caught herself remembering the beginning of their marriage, when he would look and she could feel the attention before she even turned to him, when he would find an excuse to touch her hand, when sitting beside him could make her feel beautiful without him saying a word.

She missed that woman.

She missed feeling wanted.

One evening, after the children had gone to bed, she found him sitting on the edge of their bed checking something on his

phone.

She stood at the doorway for a moment and watched him.

He looked tired.

She knew he was.

She was tired too.

She almost walked away.

Instead, she said, "Do you still want me?"

He looked up immediately.

"What?"

She regretted asking almost as soon as the words left her mouth.

She sat beside him and looked down at her hands.

"Nothing."

"No. What did you mean?"

She swallowed.

"Do you still want me?"

He stared at her, surprised, and she quickly shook her head.

"I'm not jealous of the children. I love them. They're everything to me too. I just miss being wanted by you."

The words came out more quietly than she expected.

He became still.

She looked away.

"I know you're a good father. I know how much you love them, and I would never want you to love them any less. That's not what I'm saying."

She paused, trying to find words for something she had carried alone for too long.

"I just don't want to disappear inside this family we built together."

His expression changed.

She continued.

"Sometimes I feel like you look at me and only see their mother. You see the woman who knows where their shoes are, who brush their teeth, who knows what they need for school and what they like for dinner."

Her voice trembled slightly.

"But before I was their mother, I was your wife. And I still am."

"Then why would you think I don't want you?"

She looked at him.

"Because sometimes I don't feel wanted."

He had no immediate answer.

He had spent so much time making sure his children knew they were loved that he had forgotten that his wife needed to feel loved too.

He had assumed that because they had built a family together, she already knew what she meant to him.

He had mistaken commitment for reassurance.

He had forgotten that love could remain true and still need to be expressed.

He could see her now.

The same woman who had once waited nervously for him to ask her out.

The same woman whose hand he had held on their wedding day.

The same woman who had given him a family.

He squeezed her hand.

"I am sorry."

He moved closer.

"I've been so focused on being a father that I forgot I still need to be your husband."

She smiled faintly.

"I never wanted you to choose between us. I just wanted to know that I'm still somewhere in your heart."

He looked at her.

"You're not somewhere in my heart."

He paused.

"You're at the center of it."

He lifted her chin gently.

"I love being their father," he said, "but I don't want being their father to make me forget how lucky I am to be your husband."

She smiled through her tears.

He pulled her closer, and for the first time in a long time, she rested against him without wondering whether he noticed that she was there.

Nothing in their marriage had magically become perfect that night.

They would still have days when one of them was too tired for romance and nights when the only thing they wanted was sleep.

But something important had been said aloud.

She had finally told him that being a mother had not erased the woman she was.

And he had finally understood that loving his children deeply did not mean he had to love his wife less.

A family is not only built by the children who fill the house with noise.

It is also held together by the two people who once chose each other before anyone else called them parents.

And after years of giving everything to the family, a wife does not need her husband to choose her instead of their children.

She simply needs him to look at her again and remind her that she was never forgotten.

18

JUST IN CASE

She called him a friend, but he had never really been just a friend. He was the person she kept close enough to reach whenever she needed him, the person whose messages she never ignored for too long, the person she could call when she was upset and knew would answer without asking too many questions, and although she had never promised him anything, she had quietly allowed him to remain in a place that should never have existed inside her relationship.

She told herself there was nothing wrong with it because she had never kissed him, never slept with him and never told him that she loved him. As far as she was concerned, there had been a difference between having someone around and actually wanting them.

But she knew why she kept him around.

Just in case.

Just in case her boyfriend cheated.

Just in case they broke up.

Just in case the relationship she had invested so much of herself in suddenly ended and she found herself alone with

nobody to call.

Her friend had asked her about him once.

"Why haven't you cut him off?"

She shrugged.

"He's my friend."

Her friend looked at her for a moment.

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you need him so close?"

She hesitated before answering.

"Just in case."

Her friend frowned.

"Just in case of what?"

She smiled as though the answer was harmless.

"Nothing. Just in case."

She didn't think of herself as disloyal. In her mind, she was simply protecting herself from the possibility of being hurt. Her boyfriend was the person she loved, the person she wanted to build a life with, the person whose name she smiled at when it appeared on her phone, but somewhere in the back of her mind was another possibility she refused to admit she was preparing for.

What if he left?

What if one day he decided she wasn't enough?

What if another woman came along?

What if everything they had built disappeared?

She wanted to believe she trusted him, but she also wanted the comfort of knowing that if he ever broke her heart, there would be another man waiting to pick up the pieces.

And that was the part she never said aloud.

The other man knew.

He knew she had a boyfriend.

He knew she loved him.

He knew there was no promise that anything would ever happen between them.

Still, he stayed.

He answered her late-night calls.

He listened when she complained about her relationship.

He told her she deserved better whenever she and her boyfriend had an argument.

Sometimes his messages crossed a line, but she never stopped them.

Sometimes he told her things a man should not tell another man's girlfriend, and instead of putting distance between them, she smiled and continued the conversation.

She liked the attention.

She liked knowing that someone wanted her.

She liked knowing that if her relationship failed, she would not have to start from nothing.

She never called it cheating because she had never intended to be with him.

She never stopped to consider that betrayal was not always about what you intended to do.

Sometimes it was about what you were willing to keep available.

Then one day, everything changed.

Her boyfriend found the messages.

He did not shout when he first confronted her.

That somehow made it worse.

He stood in front of her with the phone in his hand, his face unreadable, and asked the question that made her stomach drop.

"Who is he?"

"My friend."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Friends don't talk like this."

She reached for the phone.

"It's not what you think."

"What am I supposed to think?"

"I've never loved him."

He gave a short, bitter laugh.

"That doesn't make it better."

She shook her head.

"I was only keeping him around."

The words sounded different once they were spoken aloud.

He stared at her.

"Keeping him around for what?"

She couldn't answer.

He already knew.

"For when I leave?"

"No."

"For when you get tired of me?"

"No."

"For when I stop being enough?"

She looked down.

He nodded slowly.

"You were keeping another man around in case I stopped being enough for you."

"It wasn't like that."

"Then what was it?"

"I was scared."

"Of what?"

"Of losing you."

He looked at her, and for a moment she thought he might

understand.

Instead, his expression broke.

"And you thought the best way to protect yourself from losing me was to make sure you had someone waiting in case I did?"

She began crying.

"I didn't want him."

"That isn't the point."

"I love you."

"I know."

"I never planned to leave you for him."

"I know."

"Then why are you acting like I cheated?"

He looked at her with a sadness she had never seen in his eyes before.

"Because you gave another man a place in our relationship that you should have protected for me."

She reached for his hand.

He stepped back.

That small movement hurt more than anything he could have said.

"I didn't love him," she whispered.

He shook his head.

"You keep saying that as though betrayal only counts when you fall in love."

She said nothing.

"You didn't have to love him," he continued. "You just had to know he wanted something from you and decide that you liked having him there anyway."

Her tears fell freely now.

"I was afraid."

"And I understand that."

He paused.

"But instead of telling me you were afraid of losing me, you found another man to make sure you wouldn't be alone if I did."

She wanted to argue.

She wanted to tell him that she had never kissed the man, never imagined a future with him, never wanted him in the way she wanted her boyfriend.

But suddenly she understood why none of those explanations mattered.

The betrayal had not been that she wanted another man.

The betrayal was that she had quietly prepared for the possibility of wanting one.

She had loved her boyfriend while keeping a door open somewhere else.

She had asked him to give her his whole heart while making sure hers would never be left completely empty if he walked away.

He looked at her one last time.

"I hope you understand something."

She nodded through her tears.

"You were trying so hard to protect yourself from the possibility of me hurting you that you didn't realize you were hurting me already."

Then he walked away.

She didn't follow him.

She stood there with the terrible knowledge that she had lost the person she loved, because she had been too afraid to trust the person she already had.

The other man was still there, of course.

He sent her a message that night.

Are you okay?

She stared at it for a long time.

For the first time, she saw the message differently.

He had been waiting.

Not for her happiness.

Not for her relationship to succeed.

He had been waiting for the day it failed.

And she had allowed him to wait because knowing someone was available had made her feel safe.

She deleted the message.

Then she deleted the conversation because she finally understood that he had never been the safety she thought she needed.

The safety she had wanted had been the certainty that she could never be completely abandoned.

But love had never promised that.

Loving someone meant accepting that they could hurt you, disappoint you or even leave you, and choosing honesty anyway.

She sat alone that night thinking about everything she should have done differently.

She should have told her boyfriend she was afraid.

She should have admitted that sometimes the thought of losing him frightened her.

She should have asked him to reassure her instead of finding another man who could serve as an escape route.

She should have understood that keeping someone in reserve did not make her stronger.

It only meant that she had never fully trusted the person she claimed to love.

And perhaps that was the hardest part.

She had never loved the other man.

But she had loved the security of knowing he was there. And that is enough to break someone's heart.

Betrayal is not always about wanting someone else. It is about keeping someone else close enough to become an option.

She had lost the man she loved while trying to make sure she would never be left with nobody.

And now she finally understood the question that would stay with her long after he was gone:

How do you convince someone that the person you betrayed them with was never the person you wanted, when the very act of keeping that person close had already told them that they were not enough?

19

THE CHASE WAS EASIER

He was good at chasing women. The flirting came easily to him, as did the attention, the late-night conversations that stretched until morning, the carefully chosen messages that made a woman smile at her phone, and the satisfaction of finally getting the attention of the woman he had spent weeks trying to impress. He knew how to make a woman feel wanted when he was trying to win her, knew when to call, when to disappear for a few hours just long enough to make her wonder about him, what compliment to give without making it sound rehearsed, and exactly how much attention was enough to keep the excitement alive.

He enjoyed that part.

He enjoyed the uncertainty of it, the feeling of not knowing whether she would eventually say yes, the small victories that came whenever she laughed at one of his jokes or agreed to see him again, and the satisfaction that came when the woman who had once seemed impossible to reach finally became his girlfriend.

But something strange always happened afterwards.

Once she was his, he changed.

The calls became less frequent.

The messages became shorter.

The excitement that had once made him stay awake until two in the morning suddenly disappeared, and things he had once done naturally began to feel like responsibilities he needed to remember.

At first, the women noticed.

Then they complained.

He would promise to do better.

For a while, he would.

Then, slowly, he would return to the same pattern.

He wasn't necessarily cruel.

He wasn't always unfaithful.

He didn't wake up one morning and decide that he no longer cared.

He simply became tired.

Tired of planning dates.

Tired of checking in.

Tired of having difficult conversations.

Tired of explaining himself.

Tired of making compromises when he wanted things his own way.

Tired of remembering that another person's feelings were involved in the decisions he made.

And because he didn't understand what was happening inside him, he usually convinced himself that the woman was the problem.

"She changed."

"She became too demanding."

"She wants too much."

"She wasn't like this when we started dating."

Sometimes he even told himself that he had simply chosen the wrong woman.

Then he would meet someone new.

And suddenly, everything would come alive again.

He would become charming.

Attentive.

Patient.

Interested.

He would send good morning messages, remember little details, stay awake to talk, plan thoughtful dates and make promises about how different things would be with her.

His friends would watch the transformation and shake their heads because they had seen it before.

He had done this many times.

He would chase a woman until she fell for him, then slowly become the man she had never asked him to be.

One evening, his friend finally asked him about it.

They were sitting together after work, and he had just finished telling him about a woman he had recently started seeing.

"She really likes you?"

He smiled.

"She does."

"And you like her?"

"Of course."

His friend studied him.

"How long have you been seeing her?"

"A few weeks."

"And you're already talking about how much you like her."

"So?"

"Nothing."

His friend leaned back.

"I just wonder what happens after she becomes your girlfriend."

He frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You always do this."

"Do what?"

"You chase women like you're trying to win a prize, and the moment you get them, you start acting like someone forced you into the relationship."

He laughed.

"That's not true."

"It is."

"No, it isn't."

His friend looked at him.

"Then tell me why every woman you've dated eventually complained about the same thing."

He became quiet.

"You stop trying."

He wanted to disagree, but he couldn't immediately think of an answer.

His friend continued.

"You're amazing when you're trying to get someone. You're patient. You're thoughtful. You make time. You listen. You remember everything. Then the relationship becomes real, and suddenly all those things become difficult."

He looked down.

"Maybe I just lose interest."

"Every time?"

He didn't answer.

His friend shook his head.

"I don't think you're losing interest in them."

"Then what?"

"I think you like being wanted more than you like the work of loving someone."

The words stayed with him.

He didn't like them.

But he couldn't completely dismiss them either.

That night, he thought about every relationship he had walked away from.

He remembered the beginning of each one.

He remembered the excitement.

He remembered how hard he had worked to make each woman believe he was serious.

Then he remembered what happened afterwards.

He had always thought those moments meant the relationship was no longer working.

Now, he wondered whether they had simply been asking him to do the part he had never learned.

Stay.

Try again.

Listen.

Compromise.

Love someone when there was nothing new to discover.

The chase had always given him something to look forward to.

There was always a goal.

A number he wanted.

A date he wanted.

A woman he wanted to impress.

There was always the possibility of rejection, and that possibility made every successful moment feel exciting.

But a relationship didn't have an ending like that.

There was no final victory.

No moment when someone became yours and the work was finished.

There was only another morning.

Another conversation.

Another disagreement.

Another day when you had to decide whether you were still willing to show love even though nothing exciting was happening.

That was what he had never understood.

He had mistaken the end of the chase for the beginning of boredom.

He had thought the fading of excitement meant the feelings were disappearing.

He had never learned that love eventually asked for something deeper than excitement.

It asked for consistency.

It asked him to keep calling even when he had nothing interesting to say.

It asked him to listen to the same story again.

It asked him to apologize when his pride wanted him to defend himself.

It asked him to compromise when getting his own way would have been easier.

It asked him to remain gentle after the novelty had disappeared.

It asked him to choose someone on ordinary days.

He wasn't tired of the women.

He was tired of what loving them properly required.

And suddenly, that truth explained every relationship he had

ever ruined.

He had spent years learning how to make women fall for him but almost no time learning how to care for the woman who eventually did.

He knew how to start love.

He had never learned how to maintain it.

The next time he felt that familiar excitement with someone new, he noticed something he had never noticed before.

He was already thinking about how to win her.

He stopped himself.

For once, he wondered what would happen after he did.

Would he still call when there was nothing to chase?

Would he still make time when life became busy?

Would he still choose her when she stopped being new?

He realized that those were the questions that mattered. Because anyone could be charming when they wanted something.

Anyone could be attentive when they were trying to impress someone.

Anyone could stay awake all night during the beginning of a relationship.

The harder thing was waking up months later, when the butterflies had settled and ordinary life had taken their place, and still looking at the person beside you and deciding that she was worth the effort.

That was the kind of love he had never learned.

And for the first time, he understood that perhaps his problem had never been that he couldn't find the right woman.

Perhaps he had never stayed long enough to become the right man for one.

20

THE RISK OF LOVING HARD

They were sitting in the car when she suddenly asked, "What's the worst thing about being in love?"

He looked at her, surprised by the question. There had been no argument, no particular reason for the sudden seriousness in her voice, and nothing about the day suggested that she had been thinking about anything beyond the two of them sitting inside the car.

"Why are you asking?"

She shrugged and looked through the windscreen. "I don't know. Just answer me."

He thought about it for a moment, resting his hand on the steering wheel as though the right answer needed to be found somewhere beyond the glass.

"Knowing exactly what could break your heart and still staying. Still trusting. Still letting them get close. Still giving them the parts of you that you know they could hurt."

She looked down at their hands, which were resting together between them.

"That sounds terrifying."

"It is."

"Then why do it?"

He smiled faintly. "Because love wouldn't mean much if you only gave your heart to someone who could never hurt it."

She was quiet for a while, thinking about what he had said. Perhaps because she had expected him to give her something romantic, she didn't know what to do with an answer that sounded almost frighteningly honest.

She had always thought the beautiful part of love was the feeling of being safe with someone—the certainty that there was finally a person in the world who could hold the most delicate parts of you without dropping them. But sitting beside him that evening, she began to understand that love could never come with that kind of guarantee.

The person who could make you happiest could also become the person whose absence would hurt the most. The person whose words could make an ordinary day beautiful could also become the person whose silence could ruin it. The person you trusted enough to tell everything could eventually become the person with the greatest ability to wound you.

"So you're saying love is dangerous?" she asked.

"Sometimes."

"That's not very reassuring."

He laughed softly. "I'm not trying to scare you."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

He looked at her. "I'm saying that loving someone means accepting that they have the ability to hurt you and trusting them enough not to use that ability against you."

She looked at him carefully. "But what if they do?"

He didn't answer immediately. The question had suddenly become heavier than the conversation they had started with.

"Then you learn that loving someone doesn't mean abandoning yourself for them."

She watched him.

"You can love someone and still leave when they keep hurting you."

She nodded slowly. "So trusting someone doesn't mean being blind."

"No." He shook his head.

"It means seeing them clearly and still deciding that they're worth trusting."

She looked down again. There was something comforting about that distinction because she had spent years believing that being in love meant giving someone everything and hoping they would be careful with it.

Maybe love was not about pretending there was no danger. Maybe it was about choosing someone who understood the weight of what you had given them.

She had always thought that being loved meant someone would promise never to hurt her, but no honest person could make that promise. People were imperfect, misunderstandings happened, tempers rose, and even people who loved each other deeply could sometimes say things they wished they could take back.

Perhaps the better promise was not that he would never hurt her. Perhaps it was that he would never become careless with her heart.

"You know what scares me?" she said.

"What?"

"That one day you could become the person who knows exactly how to hurt me."

He looked at her. "I know."

"And you don't find that frightening?"

"I do."

"Then why are you so calm?"

He smiled.

"Because I also know that you know how to hurt me."

She looked at him. "I do?"

"Of course." He laughed.

"You know me too well."

She smiled despite herself.

"So we're both in trouble."

"Probably."

"For the record," she said, "you'd better not break my heart."

He laughed.

"I'll try."

She raised an eyebrow.

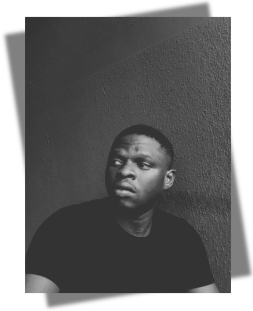
"Try?"

"I can't promise I'll never make mistakes." He glanced at her. "But I can promise I'll never stop caring when I do."

She smiled.

Somehow, that promise felt more honest than perfection ever could.

Because love was never really about finding someone who could never hurt you. It was about finding someone who knew exactly where your heart was fragile and loved you carefully enough to handle it.



About the Author

Niyi ‘Bamiro is a writer known for his compelling work on love, relationships, human emotions, and the complexities of everyday life.

Through his relationship writing, Niyi has developed a distinct voice that blends emotional honesty with engaging storytelling. His micro fiction, often shared across social media, resonates with readers because it captures ordinary moments, difficult truths, and the quiet experiences that shape how people love, hurt, heal, and grow.

His writing extends beyond entertainment. Many of his relationship stories have sparked meaningful conversations, challenged perspectives, and encouraged readers to view love and human connection in new ways.

Niyi is also an aspiring author whose immersive stories explore romance, faith, conflict, identity, and the choices that define us. His debut novel, The Saint and the Beacon, is scheduled for release between December 2026 and February

2027.

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COMING THIS DECEMBER



THE SAINT AND THE BEACON

At 17, Glorietta Valentin has devoted her life to faith.

A student of St. Leon High School and a discerner at St. Barbara Catholic Church, she dreams of one day becoming a Catholic sister. She has spent her life avoiding the kind of things that could lead her away from the future she believes God has chosen for her.

Then Jeremiah Beacon arrives.

Charming, talented and impossible to ignore, Jeremiah is everything Glorietta has taught herself to stay away from.

Getting close to Glorietta was never supposed to mean anything.

Until it does.

As the line between temptation and love begins to blur, Glorietta finds herself questioning the life she once thought was certain. But Jeremiah has secrets he cannot keep forever, and some betrayals are too painful to forgive.

Now, with danger closing in and the truth threatening to tear them apart, Glorietta must decide how far she is willing to go for the boy who changed everything.

Because falling in love was never part of the plan.

And neither was falling this far.