

Kristy Kelly

FINDING FORGIVENESS



KRISTY KELLY

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Finding Forgiveness

Kristy Kelly

1

Chapter One

The vibrant hues of the autumn sky seemed to mock the turmoil brewing within Kimberly. Her youngest daughter, Megan, moved with palpable excitement between the house and the waiting storage truck. Kimberly wondered if she had ever faced life with such untainted joy, a stark contrast to the unease that had settled over her. At 52, the simple joy that once defined her life felt distant. The manicured lawn, the lilies she'd lovingly nurtured—all now amplified her sense of loss. She fought back tears as she walked towards Megan to say goodbye, knowing that even though the college was nearby, it felt like a world away.

A shadow of loneliness crept into her heart, a feeling she'd long suppressed. The house felt empty, a condition that had started long before Megan's departure. She hugged Megan tightly, letting tears fall, a stark acknowledgment that she was no longer needed to care for her children. Though Christmas was only a few months away, it felt light-years away. And would it even matter when the man who was once her world would be gone?

“Mom,” Megan said, her brow furrowed with concern. “I’m not leaving forever, you know”.

Kimberly nodded, unable to speak, and wrapped her arms around her daughter.

“Besides, the last time I did laundry, I turned everything pink. You’ll be seeing me at least once a week,” Megan added with a smile.

Kimberly managed a smile, remembering all the work she put into ensuring that her children would be able to handle whatever life threw at them. It seemed like yesterday that Gregory had taught Megan to ride her bike right by the curb where they stood.

“Text me the moment you get there,” Kimberly said, her head buried in Megan’s hair.

“I will, I promise,” Megan replied, her excitement clear.

Gregory emerged from the house, arms laden with boxes. Kimberly paused to admire his physique; even at 54, his distinguished, slightly graying black hair and well-maintained physique were still handsome. She had kissed the chin now lined with stubble a thousand times, but as she stared, her mood darkened. It was always the small things, the stubble, the line between his brows when he was irritated, that made her wonder how much of her love was lost to what he’d done.

After Megan and Gregory exchanged their goodbyes, Kimberly stepped onto the sidewalk and watched her daughter drive away.

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Gregory put his arm around Kimberly's waist, a gesture that usually thrilled her. Despite the betrayal, a part of her still loved him.

"Well, after almost thirty years of marriage, we're on our own," he said, his voice sending a familiar shiver down her spine.

"In more ways than one," Kimberly replied, slipping out of his arm. She walked straight to their bedroom, wishing once again that they had separate rooms. She hated him sometimes, but he never failed to make her desire him. The weight of his lies and betrayal had dulled that desire, however, leaving her feeling hollow.

He followed her and his voice, laced with irritation, broke the silence. "What was that remark about?" He hated hidden meanings and riddles—ironic, considering the life he'd hidden from her.

"It means we'll be on our own. It means you'll be on your own in this house, and I'll be on my own at the hotel I'm moving into today."

His face reddened as her words sank in, the vein in his forehead pulsing. His dark eyes, almost black with anger, fixed on her. "And to what do I owe the dishonor of my wife leaving me?" His voice was harsh, and Kimberly felt a pang in her chest. The pain in his voice made her want to retract her words for a moment.

"For two years, I've watched you lie in bed with another woman, all while I tortured myself hoping you'd change," she spat, the

anger building. “That made me realize I was worth nothing in your eyes. I promised myself that when the children left, I would too. Megan was the last, and she left today”. She turned towards the suitcase she’d packed that morning.

“What are you talking about? I’ve never—this isn’t what you think!” His voice trembled with confusion and denial.

Kimberly’s heart clenched, but she continued. “I hoped it was a phase, a mid-life crisis. She kept calling, telling me where you were when you said you were on a business trip”.

Gregory moved towards her, but she stepped away.

“I changed my number, but the calls kept coming. Three months ago, I made the decision. I’d had enough.” Kimberly’s voice cracked as tears threatened to fall. “The children have left, and now, so have I”.

Gregory’s face showed shock, his mouth agape. “How could you not come to me? Did you have so little faith in me, in us, to believe a lie? Kimberly, look at me”.

She stepped away, every step more painful than the last. “I can’t. Goodbye, Gregory”. She fumbled with the doorknob, tears burning her eyes, and walked out of the room, not giving him a final glance.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

After Kimberly left, Gregory's mind drifted to the day he proposed. The memory gripped him with a force he couldn't shake, the summer when he was 21, just before the chill of fall. He climbed the steps to Kimberly's porch, knowing he'd be there for his usual Friday visit, three hours he cherished. He wanted every moment with her for the rest of his life.

His father's investment in his education secured his future, but one thing was missing—the fiery redhead who'd cast a spell on him. He knocked, and her father answered. Mr. Kilbane was easy to deal with, unlike Mrs. Kilbane, whose presence always intimidated him.

"Fall's coming," Mr. Kilbane said, stepping onto the porch with Gregory.

"Yes, sir," Gregory replied.

"You'll be heading back to school soon, I imagine."

"Yes, sir, I got accepted to law school," Gregory said as he sat. His mouth went dry, nerves creeping in. He had rehearsed his speech, but now, the words caught in his throat.

"What are your intentions toward my daughter?" Mr. Kilbane's blunt question startled him. Usually, Kimberly's mother asked direct questions, her father had always been reserved.

Gregory froze. A future without Kimberly wasn't a future he could imagine. "I'll marry her, if she'll have me," he said, swallowing hard. "With your permission".

The quiet chuckle that followed surprised him. “Does she know that?”.

The screen door slammed, and Kimberly appeared, her anger obvious. She marched towards him, poking a finger into his chest. “How dare you tell my father we’re getting married without asking me first?”

“Well, I would’ve asked you, but I wanted your father’s permission first,” he replied, biting the inside of his cheek to hide the laugh threatening to bubble up.

“I’m not a child, Gregory. You ask me first”. With that, she spun on her heel and stormed off the porch.

Gregory stared after her, barely able to contain his laughter. He was sure of one thing—he’d spend his life convincing her he was worthy of her.

Her father advised him, “Go after her, or she’ll only get worse. And make sure it’s a church wedding”.

Gregory gave a small smile, “Yes, sir”. He bounded off the porch to catch up with Kimberly.

She stood near the edge of the yard, her blue dress swirling in the breeze. He couldn’t suppress the laughter any longer, his shoulders shaking as a deep chuckle escaped him. “Don’t you laugh at me, Gregory Davenport! I’m angry with you!” she snapped.

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“Marry me,” he said, pulling out the ring he’d saved for.

“No,” she pouted.

“Marry me, Kimberly.”.

“No,” she repeated, a smirk tugging at her lips.

“Kimberly Kilbane, marry me. Be the mother of my children, my partner in life, the woman I grow old with”. Dropping to one knee, he held the ring up to her.

She froze, her hand flying to her mouth. Panic seized Gregory’s chest. Was she going to say no?.

“Say something,” he urged.

“Don’t be dumb. You know I’ll marry you. Mother and I have already finished my wedding dress,” she replied.

He blinked, shocked. “How did you know? I didn’t even know until recently”.

“Gregory, you’ve been in love with me since you spilled ice cream on my dress at the state fair. I knew you’d figure it out eventually,” she said.

He shook his head. “You already knew? Why did you get angry with me then?”.

“Because I didn’t want you to propose in front of my dad. I

wanted it to be special—just between us,” she replied. She motioned around them, then chuckled, amused by the whole thing.

He laughed, relieved and overwhelmed by how much he loved her. “In case you’re wondering,” she said, stepping closer and pulling him into her arms, “I love you, too”. Her lips found his, sealing their engagement with a kiss.

The memory of that kiss now felt like a lifetime ago. Gregory’s chest tightened with the pain of losing her. He sank to the floor, unable to stop the tears. Why had she believed that lie? Why hadn’t she given him a chance to explain? And now she was gone.

Numb, Gregory found his way to his office. He collapsed into the leather chair Kimberly had bought him, his eyes falling on the desk she’d designed for him. Everywhere he looked, he saw her.

How could she have believed that lie?

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Chapter Two

The victory she had fought for with her words offered no satisfaction. Kimberly drove a block from their house before pulling over, the heat in her eyes quickly turning into the sting of tears. The moment she turned off the engine, they came flooding out. She buried her face against the steering wheel and sobbed, a scream building from the pit of her stomach. At first, she shoved her fist into her mouth, fighting the urge to let it out. But the scream surged again, and this time, she let it rip. She threw her head back, mouth open, howling in agony until she could no longer summon the strength to keep going. She cried for herself, her children, and for Gregory too. At one point, he had loved her; he had to have, right?

Her thoughts spiraled, battling between the man she once knew and the man she had come to doubt. She had fought so hard to believe he could never do something like this to her. It wasn't in his nature. But the calls came—relentless and insistent, slowly chipping away at her resolve, until doubt crept in. Then came the photograph. Every detail of it was seared into her memory—the

way the stranger looked at him, her eyes filled with admiration. Kimberly didn't recognize her, but that look... the worship in her eyes as she gazed at her husband... it burned through her.

As the tears slowed, Kimberly glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen, her makeup ruined, mascara streaking down her cheeks. She inhaled deeply, wiped her face with the back of her hand, and started the car again, easing back onto the road. By the time Kimberly pulled into the hotel parking lot, her nerves were shot. White knuckles gripped the steering wheel. She placed the car in park, then turned off the ignition. A strange numbness settled over her, as if her body was trying to detach from her emotions. She disconnected her cell phone from the car, shoving it into her purse without looking at it.

She knew she looked a mess—like a walking nightmare—but she had no strength to care. She entered the revolving door of the hotel. The soft Christmas music enveloped her, soothing the frantic pace of her mind. Warmth surrounded her, but it didn't reach inside. A woman in a smart suit with large hoop earrings stared blankly at her as she approached the counter. Kimberly placed her overnight bag on the countertop, and her identification on top. Without saying anything more than the bare minimum, the woman handed her a box of tissues. Kimberly blinked back the fresh wave of tears threatening to fall and took them gratefully.

The check-in process was quick, and soon she was handed the key to her room. She was already too tired to be anything but numb. Once inside, Kimberly locked the door behind her. The

CHAPTER TWO

silence pressed down on her, making the weight of her emotions feel even heavier. She reached for her phone and dialed her mother's number.

"Kilbane residence," came the familiar voice, unperturbed by technology despite her seventy-four years.

"Hello, Mama," Kimberly said softly.

"Hello, darling. I thought you'd call yesterday. How's Megan settling in? Are you lonely in that big house without her?" Her mother's concern hit Kimberly like a wave, threatening to pull her under. She struggled to keep her composure.

"Megan's fine. I didn't want to call right away and smother her." Guilt tugged at her. She hadn't thought of her children at all in the rush of everything else.

"Are you feeling okay?" Her mother's tone shifted to one of concern.

"I'm fine," Kimberly lied, forcing the words out. She couldn't bring herself to explain.

"You sound a little stuffy, though. You know Megan could never forget her mother. You're just tired, darling. There's no need for tears."

Kimberly's chest tightened. She blinked hard, fighting the tears. "Mama, I'm not crying because Megan left... I left Gregory".

The silence that followed seemed to stretch on forever, though it was only a minute.

“Please tell me you didn’t leave him for the nonsense you were talking about a few years ago,” her mother said, the words laced with disbelief.

“I don’t think Gregory cheating on me is ‘nonsense,’ Mama,” Kimberly replied, her voice tinged with anger.

“Gregory cheating on you is nonsense,” her mother retorted.

“I didn’t want to believe it, either, but the calls never stopped. They knew where he was. They knew things I didn’t.” Kimberly’s voice shook with the weight of it all.

“And what did Gregory say when you confronted him?”

“I never asked him,” Kimberly admitted, the regret choking her words. “I trusted him too much. By the time I found out, it was too late”.

“Sounds to me like you weren’t faithful to him either,” her mother said, her words slicing through Kimberly’s heart.

“How can you say that?” Kimberly’s anger flared. “I was faithful to him!”

“You don’t understand, Kimberly,” her mother said gently. “Being faithful isn’t just about not sleeping with someone else. It’s about trusting them beyond what you hear, beyond the

doubt.”

“Mama, why, when I need you the most, are you defending him?” Kimberly’s voice cracked as she struggled to understand why her mother wasn’t supporting her. She refused to hear the truth in her words.

“There are no sides when a marriage breaks apart, darling. There are only two people left to rebuild what’s been destroyed.”

Kimberly swallowed hard, her heart breaking. She couldn’t face the weight of her mother’s words, the truth she wasn’t ready to accept. “I have to go, Mama. I’ll call you soon.”

“Remember the promise you made on your wedding day, Kimberly. Trust in God to help you through this. Pray for Gregory and pray for yourself.”

The sternness of her mother’s voice echoed in her mind, the same as it had on her wedding day.

“Yes, Mama. Goodbye.” Kimberly ended the call, but her mother’s words lingered in her mind. The memory of her wedding vows flashed before her eyes:

“Do you take Gregory as your lawful husband, to have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?”

“I did my part,” Kimberly whispered aloud. “I loved him. I cherished him.”

"I take this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Her voice, once so sure and full of hope, now felt hollow. "I was faithful to him!" she yelled, her voice echoing through the empty hotel room. Her mother's words echoed in her head: "Faithfulness means trusting them beyond anything you hear, no matter what."

Kimberly slammed the door behind her and began pacing the room. She had done the right thing. She had no choice. He had given her none.

"Why didn't I just ask him? Why didn't I confront him sooner?" Her thoughts spiraled out of control. She kept hitting the same wall, the same question: What kind of person spends years destroying her own marriage? The calls had never revealed the other woman's identity, but Kimberly had always suspected it was a mistress. She couldn't help but sympathize with the woman. After all, Kimberly knew what it was like to love a man and share him with someone else.

Even now, part of her wanted Gregory to come looking for her, to drive to every hotel in town, begging her to come home. She wanted him to promise that everything he'd done was over and that life without her was impossible. Was that too much to ask? A faithful husband? She loved him. She deserved his loyalty and respect. She deserved his undivided love. Kimberly collapsed onto the bed, curling into a fetal position. Tears fell again, soaking into the pillow as her heart broke once more.

* * *

Unable to contain his restlessness, Gregory called the one man he knew would help him win his wife back: his lifelong best friend and partner at the law firm they owned, Michael. Michael had been the best man at Gregory's wedding and was the godfather to all three of his children. When Michael's wife, Angelica, answered the phone, Gregory groaned inwardly. He'd never understood why Michael had married such a disagreeable woman. She shouted for her husband, and soon Michael came on the line.

"Gregory, is everything all right? Kimberly's not having a meltdown now that the last kid's left, is she?" The concern in Michael's voice sent a sharp pang through Gregory's chest. The bitterness toward his wife simmered as he recounted what had happened.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Michael said after listening, as if sensing that Gregory needed someone to listen more than to advise. True to his word, Michael knocked on Gregory's door exactly ten minutes later. Familiar with the house from their vacations, he punched in the code and entered when Gregory called out for him to come in. Gregory remained at his desk, his gaze fixed on the surface as Michael entered the den and helped himself to a glass of bourbon. He looked at Gregory, his face a mixture of confusion and concern. "What did you do?"

Gregory wasn't sure if Michael was asking about what he'd done to cause the situation or what he'd done afterward. "She thinks I was having an affair—or even two, apparently, for a long time now." The bile rose in his throat as he spoke. Each word stoked his anger further. How dare Kimberly accuse him without giving

him a chance to defend himself?

“Were you?” Michael’s voice was devoid of emotion. As the question sank in, Gregory’s anger surged. He leapt from his chair, stormed around the desk, and swung a fist that connected squarely with Michael’s chin. Pain shot through his knuckles from the impact.

“I guess that answers my question,” Michael said, unruffled, smiling slightly as he rubbed his chin and placed a steady hand on Gregory’s shoulder.

“What are you thinking, Mike? I would never cheat on Kimberly. I love her, and the fact that she believes I’d do something like that—it kills me.” Gregory sank back into his chair, exhausted by the day’s events.

“What are you going to do?” Michael asked, never one to waste time with trivial questions. He got straight to the core of any problem, a trait that had helped make their firm so successful. Michael could fix anything.

“I figure I have a few options. One would be to kill her for putting me through this,” Gregory said, grinning darkly. “Two would be to hunt down whoever filled her head with these lies and kill them. And three, to fight for her—to make her see how wrong she is.”

Michael regarded him with an unreadable expression, his face briefly expressionless. The red mark on his chin reminded Gregory of the emotional rollercoaster he was on. “Well, first

things first,” Michael said at last, “we need to figure out what made Kimberly think you were unfaithful.” With that, Michael dove right into plotting a solution.

Gregory felt grateful to have such a supportive friend, an ally in the fight to save his marriage. He could only hope the spirit of Christmas might open Kimberly’s heart enough for a miracle. Long after Michael left the den, Gregory wandered into the kitchen, gazing at the spotless surfaces. His wife had even cleaned the kitchen before leaving him. The thought lingered in his mind as he paced the empty house. Suddenly, the phone rang, pulling him back. On his way to answer it, he tripped over one of Megan’s swimming trophies. He sucked in a breath, resisting the urge to curse. He picked up the receiver with a sigh, his voice barely audible.

“Hello?”

A woman’s voice came on the line. “Mrs. Davenport, he’s with her again. He bought her a teddy. Check his credit card statements. Why do you stay with a man who flaunts his affairs right in your face?” The line went dead before he could respond. The caller had clearly mistaken him for Kimberly.

Gregory stared at the phone, stunned. He knew he should have been out tonight—Kimberly would have been the one to receive that call. Replaying the words in his mind, he remembered buying a teddy earlier, but it hadn’t been for a mistress or even for Kimberly. He’d picked it up as a gag gift for Allen in accounting, who’d recently finished his studies to become a pastor. The bright red teddy was meant to be a funny reminder

of what Allen was “giving up”.

“Son of a...” Gregory began, but the phone rang again. He let it ring four times until his daughter’s voice came on the answering machine. He couldn’t bring himself to speak to his children just yet. He had to figure out what was going on. The woman’s voice from the phone call continued to haunt him. He knew he’d heard it before.

When Michael didn’t respond to his shouted calls, Gregory picked up his cell and dialed his friend. “Careful, Gregory,” Michael answered dryly. “You’re calling more than a teenage girl.”

“I just got a call from our mystery woman. She told Kimberly that the teddy I bought today was for my mistress,” Gregory said, unable to keep the disgust from his voice.

“Well, that’s our first real clue. Give me twenty minutes, and make sure your fax machine is on.” Michael hung up without another word.

Michael returned half an hour later, a satisfied grin on his face.
“Phone records.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of that myself,” Gregory admitted.

“Because your first reaction was anger, your second was violence. Not much left over for rational thinking.”

“Are you sure this is legal?”

“You’re pulling the phone records from your own line. And Jack won’t mind—you did him a favor back in the day,” Michael reassured him. They sat together, watching the fax machine as it printed out the call log. Gregory was grateful Michael stayed by his side that evening, filling the silence Kimberly’s absence left behind.

After the initial shock wore off, he began to see Kimberly’s actions as a defection. She hadn’t trusted him enough even to ask about the accusations; she’d simply taken the caller at their word. His goal was to shove proof of his innocence in her face, to make her understand what she’d put him through. Then, perhaps, he’d graciously take her back—after she groveled a bit.

The fax emitted a series of beeps, and Gregory’s heart lifted for the first time that evening. As soon as the last page printed, he snatched up the sheets and scanned the incoming call list.

“Well?” Michael prompted.

Gregory sighed, staring at the number listed right before his daughter’s call. It had come from his office. Now he had to decide what to do. He could march to the hotel where Kimberly was staying—he’d checked the charges on the joint credit card as soon as she left and knew her location. He could shove the phone records at her, as he’d planned. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized it would only escalate the situation. Someone had poisoned Kimberly against him, feeding her lies until her heart had turned. He wanted to believe she’d struggled

to accept it at first, that she hadn't mentioned it because she didn't fully believe it.

Though he felt betrayed, he still loved her as deeply as the day he married her. His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. Grace's number flashed on the caller ID. He groaned, knowing that if he didn't answer, she'd come storming over to find out what was going on.

"Hello, my angel," Gregory said.

"Hi, Daddy. I was calling to check on Mama. I thought she might need some moral support now that the last chick has flown the coop."

Gregory closed his eyes, debating how to respond. "She's so inconsolable that she took the AmEx to Pittsburgh," he said finally. "She mentioned something about presents." It wasn't a complete lie—she had taken the AmEx, and she had mentioned Christmas shopping.

"Oh, retail therapy at its finest. Why didn't you go?"

"Someone has to work to pay off that AmEx bill."

"Ah, work—your mistress." Grace laughed.

Her words hit him hard. She was right, in a way. Work had been his mistress, but not in the way she thought. He'd cheated on Kimberly emotionally by prioritizing his job over their relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

“Look, Daddy, I have to go. Give Mama my love,” Grace said, hanging up before he could reply.

Gregory stared at the phone, guilt flooding him. If he’d been more attentive, more focused on his marriage, Kimberly might not have been so easily swayed by lies. He wouldn’t have let the distance between them grow. He’d courted her with passion once, and it wasn’t too late to do it again. Determined, he crumpled the phone records and threw them into the wastebasket. Gregory smiled to himself. What better way to prove his love than to win her heart all over again?

3

Chapter Three

Kimberly

Kimberly needed fresh air. She stepped out of her hotel room, determined to find some space away from the tangled mess in her mind. She walked down to the lobby, hoping a quiet stroll in the park would clear her head. As she approached the front door, a voice called her name from behind. She turned to see a man standing at the desk, holding a single rose in his hand.

Confused, she walked back toward him. “I’m Kimberly Davenport.”

“This is for you, ma’am.” He offered her the rose, his hand outstretched. Kimberly took it, staring at the brilliant flower in wonder. The delicate petals glowed with life, and for a brief moment, it distracted her from the chaos of her thoughts. Her eyes scanned the rose for a card, and she found one attached to the stem. She opened it and read the words, feeling a lump form in her throat:

There weren’t enough roses in the shop for each day that I took you for granted. So, I bought all they had.

There weren't enough roses in the shop for each day that I took you for granted. So, I bought all they had.

It was unsigned. Her heart sank. Gregory knew how much she loved roses. This wasn't a gesture of love—it was emotional blackmail. The deliveryman cleared his throat, drawing her attention back. "There's more in the truck. Where would you like them?"

"More?" Kimberly could barely hide her disbelief.

"Yeah. A lot more. Not a big market for roses in December, so I had to get them from a couple different suppliers." He smiled, clearly unaware of the storm brewing inside her. Kimberly's anger surged, but she fought to stay composed. She followed the man outside to his truck, still clutching the single rose. When he opened the back, she gasped. The entire space was lined with roses—red, white, pink, yellow—all of them perfect and breathtaking. Her pulse quickened. Gregory had bought every single rose in the shop, just as his note had said.

"Could you send them to my house?" she asked, trying to sound calm despite the storm inside her.

"Sure, I can do that. These are the last roses, so I won't be delivering any more today." He grinned and jotted down her address, seeming oblivious to the emotional havoc he was causing.

Kimberly handed him the rose. She needed time to think, time to process this absurdity. As she made her way back to her car, her irritation with Gregory grew. Roses didn't fix years of betrayal. They didn't erase the damage he'd done. She needed to confront him, but she wasn't ready to do that yet—not in the emotional chaos of the moment. Although she was still angry, she kept the single rose with the card, demonstrating a small flicker of hope.

If anyone could help her sort through her emotions, it would be Father Rochelle. She called ahead to make sure he could see her before she returned to her hotel. The priest was always accessible to his parishioners, and today, she needed his guidance more than ever.

Arriving at the church, Kimberly slipped through the side entrance and made her way to Father Rochelle's office. She knocked softly before entering, grateful that he didn't hesitate when she asked to meet without an appointment.

"Kimberly, I'm glad you're here," Father Rochelle greeted her warmly. "Please, sit. You sounded upset on the phone. What's troubling you?"

She sank into the chair across from him, feeling the weight of her emotions pressing down on her. "Thank you for seeing me. I know you're busy with the Christmas services, but I really need your help."

"What's on your mind?"

Kimberly took a deep breath and began speaking, her words tumbling out in a rush. She told him everything—leaving Gregory, the call from the other woman, her confusion, and the overwhelming flood of emotions she couldn't seem to sort through. Father Rochelle listened patiently, only interrupting to ask a few clarifying questions. By the time she finished, she was dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, feeling both relieved and more conflicted than ever.

"Oh, my child," Father Rochelle said softly, his voice filled with empathy. "I wish you had come to me sooner. The three of us could have worked through these issues together. But let me ask you this—are you certain, without any doubt in your heart, that Gregory has been unfaithful to you?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with implications. Kim-

berly hesitated. Her mind screamed the answer she thought she knew, but her heart wasn't so sure. She had never caught him, never seen it with her own eyes. "No," she whispered, her voice barely audible. This admission was a turning point; she was no longer fully convinced of his guilt.

Father Rochelle nodded. "Then there is still hope for you both. We will pray for guidance, and perhaps our Lord will grant you the clarity you seek." He prayed for peace and understanding—for both Kimberly and Gregory—and by the time he finished, Kimberly's face was streaked with tears. "Thank you, Father," she said, her voice trembling.

"I would like to see you both soon," he added.

"I'll talk to him. I'll tell him you'd like to meet."

"Be strong, Kimberly. Trust in God to guide you," Father Rochelle said, his voice steady and reassuring.

Kimberly nodded, wiping her eyes. She left the office feeling a strange mix of relief and uncertainty. Her heart was still heavy with the doubt she hadn't been able to shake. As she drove back to the hotel, she replayed the priest's words over and over in her mind. She prayed for answers, for clarity—anything that would help her make sense of the mess she was in. But as soon as she arrived at the hotel, she realized she couldn't escape the storm raging inside her.

"Excuse me, my room card isn't working," Kimberly said as she approached the front desk. She'd tried it several times before giving up.

The woman behind the counter glanced at the card and then at the computer. "Mrs. Davenport, room 1201, the penthouse suite. The key isn't working?"

Kimberly frowned. "The penthouse? I'm not in the penthouse."

The woman checked again, her brow furrowing in confusion. “According to the system, we upgraded your room this morning. Same American Express card as the original reservation.”

Gregory. Of course. She tried to keep her emotions in check. “Thank you for checking. I’ll need a new key.” With the new key in hand, Kimberly grumbled her way up to the penthouse suite. She didn’t know what Gregory was up to, but she was determined to confront him. When she opened the door to the suite, though, all her anger dissipated in an instant. The room was beyond luxurious—glistening marble floors, a stunning view of the city, and a king-sized bed covered in soft, inviting linens. It was a dream come true.

For someone else, she thought bitterly.

As she wandered through the suite, her heart ached with the realization that Gregory wouldn’t be there to share it with her. That was the reason she was here—alone.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She wasn’t expecting anyone, so she opened the door, only to find a bellhop with a cart laden with champagne, strawberries, and a chocolate fondue fountain.

“I didn’t order this,” Kimberly said, confused.

“We received the request on your behalf,” the bellhop said, with an air of polite formality. “Your driver is waiting for you in the sitting room, and the concierge has arranged for a car to take you wherever you need to go.”

“My driver?” Kimberly echoed, her mind racing.

“Yes, ma’am. A black stretch limo, with a uniformed driver, just as requested”.

Gregory, again. She felt a knot form in her stomach. He was giving her the weekend she’d always dreamed of—with him. This grand gesture made her want him there, beside her, sharing

this moment.

“Thank you,” she said softly. The bellhop left, but Kimberly’s thoughts only grew more tangled. He had remembered the weekend she’d always wanted, but without him. It made her want him here, beside her, sharing this moment. Her emotions warred inside her as she stared at the door. She didn’t know whether to thank him or ask him to leave her alone.

Finally, she picked up the phone and dialed his office.

“Gregory Davenport,” his voice answered, calm and warm.

“Hello, Gregory,” she said, her heart pounding.

“I was hoping you’d call,” he said, his voice tinged with relief.

“Why are you doing this?” Kimberly asked, frustration bubbling to the surface.

“Because you deserve this. I’ve failed you in the past, and I’m sorry. I’m trying to make up for it.” Kimberly didn’t know what to say. She was caught between anger and longing. “Why now? I don’t know what to think or feel. I can’t decide if I’m angry at you for doing this, or grateful you remembered.”

“I refuse to give up on us, Kimberly. I love you. I’d like to take you on a date—just one date. No pressure. You pick the time and place.” Her mind spun, but a part of her wanted to see what else he had planned. “Okay, one date.”

“I’ll meet you tomorrow at 7:00 p.m. at our favorite Italian place,” he said, sounding thrilled.

“It’s quite a distance from my hotel, but it seems I have a driver who will take me there. Goodbye, Gregory.” She hung up, feeling more confused than ever. Her agreement to a date is a shift in her thinking, indicating she’s willing to engage with him and see what he has planned.

* * *

Gregory

A knock at the door jolted Gregory from his thoughts. He glanced through the peephole and saw a man standing with a crate full of roses. His stomach dropped. Kimberly hadn't kept the flowers, but it didn't surprise him—he'd overdone it, hadn't he? He'd gone for the grand gestures when small ones would've had more meaning. With a sigh, he opened the door.

"Yes?" Gregory asked, his voice heavy with fatigue.

The florist, a tall man with a professional smile, set the first crate down at Gregory's feet. He wasn't done. He placed another, then another, until the foyer was filled with a small mountain of crates.

"Ms. Davenport requested the delivery to the house," the man said, his tone formal, but with a hint of sympathy. He handed Gregory a clipboard.

"Mrs.," Gregory corrected, the word slipping out before he could stop it. He winced. It had been years since he had to make such a correction. But then again, Kimberly could've introduced herself as "Ms." for all he knew. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he pushed it aside.

"Sorry, Mrs. She did keep one, though. The one with the card," the florist added, his expression shifting to something more hopeful.

Twelve crates. A dozen full of roses. Gregory stared at them, feeling both guilt and a flicker of hope. She kept one. She could've discarded them all, trampled them underfoot like she had with their marriage. But one? That was something. Maybe she hadn't entirely given up on him yet.

He turned back to the florist, trying not to show how the gesture, once meant to capture Kimberly's attention, was al-

ready starting to feel like a misstep. “Thank you. I’ll handle the rest.” He signed the clipboard absently, his thoughts already elsewhere.

As the florist left, Gregory felt the weight of the roses pressing down on him. The over-the-top gesture, meant to show his love, now felt like a mistake. Kimberly was never one for grand gestures. She preferred simplicity—small vacations, quiet moments. He had heard her talk about those things for years, but somehow, work always got in the way. He’d planned lavish trips, but each time, his obligations pulled him away. Now, those missed moments echoed in his mind, like failures he couldn’t undo.

He remembered one time saying, “Let’s go, just the two of us. We’ll spend the weekend in the penthouse, strawberries, champagne. Chauffeur service. It’ll be fun.”

But she never wanted that. She preferred quiet time. He had always been too caught up in business. She had stopped mentioning her dreams of small getaways long ago, and he’d let it slide. What had he given her in return for everything she did for him, for their family? A paycheck and the occasional romantic gesture. Not nearly enough.

His thoughts wandered back to their biggest fights—those about family vacations. Kimberly always made it a point to take the kids on their annual camping trips. She called it their reset week. The kids hated it at first—no technology, no screens—but by the end, they loved it. Gregory had planned to join them every year, but work always came first. And Kimberly was always there, holding everything together. He had failed her so many times.

The realization was painful but undeniable. He had been a neglectful husband, taking advantage of a woman who had given

him everything.

The first step to solving any problem was admitting it. And Gregory was certain—he had failed his wife. But it wasn’t too late to fix it.

He picked up the phone and made a few quick calls. It didn’t take much to arrange an upgrade to Kimberly’s hotel room, or to book a stretch limousine to drive her around town for the week. Strawberries, champagne, chocolate fondue. It wasn’t much, but it was something. He would show her how much he needed her—how much he had taken her for granted.

But why had it taken him this long to realize it?

His mind churned with the question, and with the uncomfortable realization that he had been too focused on his career and neglected the one person who mattered most. And how had he not seen the lie Kimberly believed—the one about him and another woman? He couldn’t understand how it had happened, but he knew that his neglect had made it too easy for her to believe.

He couldn’t change the past, but he could make sure she knew he was fighting for her now.

With that resolve, the weight of the roses seemed to lift from his shoulders. He had spent the morning hoping the flowers would bring Kimberly running back to him. That hope had evaporated quickly. Now, he would focus on the next steps. Work was his only option for now. He couldn’t risk his children finding out the truth too soon.

As for the person who had planted the seeds of doubt in Kimberly’s mind—Gregory was certain they worked in his office. That person was close. He didn’t know who yet, but he would find them. He needed answers.

The phone call he had received from the mystery woman had

come from one of the open lines in the building. Only three direct lines existed. The rest were extensions. Gregory was sure he could trace it back. It wouldn't be easy, but it was possible.

He considered installing a camera, but the logistics were tricky. If word got out, the culprit would know. Gregory didn't have the luxury of time. It was a risk he had to take. He'd enlist Michael to help him monitor the phone lines and set a trap. They would wait for the right moment.

But why? Why would anyone in his office want to hurt him like this? The betrayal felt personal. Someone who worked for him had deliberately set out to destroy his life.

Gregory stared at the intercom and pressed the button. "Emma, please bring me all the files on the employees we've hired in the last five years. Both current and former."

There was a slight pause before she responded. "Yes, sir."

He waited as Emma gathered the files. When she returned, she stacked them in front of him.

"Can I help with anything else?" she asked.

Emma had been his administrator for twenty years. Her loyalty was unquestionable, but Gregory couldn't involve her. Not in this.

"Thank you, Emma. You've been a great help. I'm not sure what I'm looking for yet, but I'll let you know if I need anything." He gave her a soft smile as he dismissed her.

Once Emma left, Gregory began sorting through the files. The task felt daunting, but he knew he had to find the reason behind the betrayal. Who would want to destroy Kimberly like this? And why?

The pile of involuntary terminations was small—a comfort to his pride. He started with the voluntary terminations, flipping through files and scrolling through social media. But there were

no obvious red flags. Nothing stood out.

Next, he moved on to the involuntary terminations. His hope waned as he found no useful information. The current employees were next. He sifted through the files carefully, determined to find something—anything—that would explain what was happening. The person who poisoned Kimberly's mind needed to be found. And Gregory was determined to be the one to do it.

4

Chapter Four

Kimberly

Kimberly arrived at the restaurant, the cool night air biting at her skin. She tugged her sweater tighter, but the chill seemed to seep into her bones. The restaurant, a place filled with memories of laughter and shared meals with Michael and Angelica, now felt like a battleground. She checked her reflection in the glass of the door, her hand trembling as she smoothed her hair. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic rhythm that belied the calm she was trying to project. She replayed her prepared words in her mind, like a mantra, trying to ignore the memories that threatened to soften her resolve.

She entered the restaurant, the clatter of voices a stark contrast to the coldness in her chest. She spotted Gregory near the entrance. A familiar warmth, unwelcome and unexpected, stirred within her as he smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He leaned in to kiss her cheek, his touch sending a shiver down her spine, before settling across from her. She pulled back from his touch, a subtle movement, but enough to create space

between them.

“Hello, darling,” he said, his voice warm.

“Hi,” she replied, her voice catching in her throat. She hated how easily he disarmed her, how his presence made her feel insecure when she should be strong. She clenched her hands in her lap, to stop them from reaching across the table.

“You look nice,” he said, his eyes lighting up, but he glanced away quickly as if unsure of her reaction.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice steady, but she avoided his gaze. She took a deep breath, the air catching in her lungs. “We need to talk, Gregory. This... this has gone too far.”

He nodded, his expression softening, his gaze returning to meet hers. “I know. We need to make this right.” His voice wavered slightly, a small crack revealing a vulnerability he tried to hide.

Their waiter arrived, and Kimberly chose water. Gregory ordered a soda, and she used the moment to gather her thoughts, but the memories of shared meals and laughter tugged at her, creating an unwelcome sense of nostalgia.

“I only have one question,” she said, her voice steady.

He leaned forward, his eyes searching hers. “I was never unfaithful, Kimberly”.

“That’s your story, and you’re sticking to it, huh?” she asked, her voice laced with disbelief, shaking her head slowly. She felt a surge of anger at his easy denial.

“The truth doesn’t change,” he insisted, his voice gaining intensity. “You can ask today, or ten years from now, and my answer will remain the same. You are the only woman in my life.” He reached for her hand, but she pulled it back, her jaw clenched tight.

“Why can’t you just be honest with me?” she asked, her voice

rising louder than she'd intended. She glanced around, realizing they weren't alone, but the heat of her frustration made it hard to care. She was tired of the lies, the years of doubt, the slow unraveling of their marriage.

His face fell, a flicker of vulnerability she wasn't sure she could trust. "I can see now that you came here with your mind already made up." His voice was softer now, almost pleading. "What will it take for you to believe in the man you married, instead of the person who's supposedly out to destroy our relationship?" He reached across the table, his fingers hovering near hers, a hesitant touch.

"The truth," she replied, her voice cold, cutting through the air like a knife.

"Then let me get it," he insisted, his voice gaining intensity, his eyes pleading with her. "Let me find out who did this to us."

"That shouldn't be hard," she shot back, standing abruptly, unable to sit at the same table as him for one more second. She pushed back from the table, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. "You see him every morning in the mirror." She had waited so long to say that, the words tasted like ash in her mouth.

His face twisted in disbelief. "Kimberly, believe me, I never cheated on you." His voice cracked, his eyes pleading for her trust, but she was too hurt to see it.

"She knew about the scar you got from hopping the fence when you were twenty-two," Kimberly snapped. "The only two people who should know about that are me and your doctor. Every time I checked on you, I'd find out she was right." The memory of the calls, the taunting voice that had chipped away at her trust, fueled her anger.

"Kimberly, please—" He reached for her, his hand outstretched, as if he could pull her back.

“No!” she interrupted, the anger she’d been holding back for so long spilling over. She had loved him with everything she had, and he had thrown it all away. “I loved you with everything I had. And you destroyed something so pure, so right. All for what, Gregory? A quick fling because you were having a midlife crisis? I deserved better than that!” Her voice broke, tears welling in her eyes.

“And I deserved the chance to defend myself,” he said quietly, his voice filled with hurt.

His words felt like a slap, and her vision blurred with tears. “You had your chance. But you never came back to me. You never even tried. You just threw it all away for someone else!” Her voice was raw with pain.

Unable to bear another moment in his presence, Kimberly turned and stormed out of the restaurant. Her heels clicked sharply against the floor, the sound echoing her emotional state. The air outside felt colder, sharper, as she rushed to the waiting limousine. She slammed the door behind her, her chest rising and falling with each ragged breath.

Back in her hotel room, she paced the floor, her steps heavy with guilt. She had meant to be strong, to stand firm, but now, the anger faded, replaced by a hollow ache in her chest. She had lashed out, unable to see past the bitterness that had been eating away at her for so long. She stopped at the window, and stared out at the city lights. Her reflection stared back at her, a stranger she barely recognized.

Gregory had only wanted to defend himself, and she had trampled on that. His grand gestures—the roses, the penthouse, the driver—did he think they would buy her back? A part of her knew better than that; she knew they were about showing how deeply he still cared, but she had dismissed it all. She picked up

the phone, her hand trembling.

“Hello?” His voice was thick, groggy, a stark contrast to the anger he’d shown earlier.

“Did I wake you?” she asked, her guilt rising like a tide. Even after everything she had put him through, his first concern was still for her.

“No,” he said, his voice still thick with sleep. “Are you all right?”

“Gregory, I’m sorry,” she said, the words tasting like ash on her tongue. “For how I behaved tonight. It was... juvenile. Uncalled for.”

“Oh, Kimberly,” he sighed, the weight of his own grief pressing through his words. “I just... I wish I could make this right. I miss you. I can’t stand being apart.”

“Can we just talk? Like we used to?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, a lump in her throat making her words tight and raw.

“Anything you want. We can talk about the weather, if you want. Just... please, let’s talk.” His voice cracked with the weight of his emotions, revealing the depth of his own pain.

Kimberly smiled through the tears that threatened to spill. “Okay. No heavy stuff. Let’s just talk.”

They talked about the small things—work, memories, the little moments they had once shared. Their voices softened, their tones more tender, as they slipped back into their old ways. There were pauses, hesitations, but they both seemed to relax into the familiar rhythm of their conversation. It felt comfortable, like they had never been apart. For a moment, it was just the two of them, finding solace in each other’s company again.

“Remember the Ferris wheel?” Gregory asked, his voice filled

with affection, the question a reminder of their shared history.

"How could I forget?" Kimberly replied, her heart aching as the memory washed over her, a wave of nostalgia softening her resolve. She closed her eyes, picturing them laughing together, her heart aching with a tenderness that she'd almost forgotten. For a moment, she allowed herself to drift back to that night, to the young girl she used to be, and to the man who had once made her believe in forever.

* * *

Gregory

The following morning, Gregory sat in the kitchen, the steam from his coffee doing little to warm the chill that had settled deep within him. The conversation with Kimberly replayed in his mind, her words echoing with a painful clarity. He remembered her voice as she told him she was leaving, the sting of her words cutting deep, each syllable a reminder of how far they'd drifted. He pushed the mug away, the ceramic clattering against the countertop – a sharp sound in the otherwise silent house. He clenched his jaw, the muscle in his cheek twitching, a mix of determination and desperation battling within him. He would fix this. He would show Kimberly he could be the husband she deserved. He rubbed his thumb over the worn spot on his wedding ring, the metal warm against his skin as he recalled the day he'd placed it on her finger and a pang of loss shot through him as he imagined a life without her.

At work, he forced himself to focus, his gaze fixed on his

agenda. The woman trying to destroy his marriage was still out there, a viper lurking in the shadows. He leaned over his desk, the wood cool beneath his hands as he considered how close she might be, his eyes narrowed, scanning the room for subtle clues he might have missed. Michael had agreed to help, and together, they'd create the perfect trap. He entered the break room, his senses on high alert, every sound, every movement magnified.

"So, before we dive into another day," Gregory began, his voice a little too loud, "does anyone have any exciting plans they want to share?" He met each gaze as he spoke, his mind racing as he waited for someone to take the bait. He watched as Josephine stopped mid-sentence, her eyes flicking towards him before quickly shifting to the coffee machine.

Angelica raised an eyebrow, her smile a little too knowing. "What about you, oh illustrious leader? Any plans?"

He chuckled, as if the words were a joke, "I'm going to a travel agent today to book a surprise vacation... you know, for later this year... a little something to make up for lost time." He watched as Carol paused mid-sip of her coffee, her eyes narrowing slightly before she turned back to her conversation. A small tremor of satisfaction pulsed through him. "I want to take the entire family," he added, his gaze drifting towards Josephine, who was now rearranging items on the shelf, her expression unreadable. "Maybe to Ireland... it's her mother's homeland". His fingers tapped lightly on the table, his heart hammering against his ribs. He paused, waiting for a reaction, his gaze lingering on Angelica, her eyes wide but seemingly uninterested.

As he walked back to his office, he thought about the call he'd received where the mystery woman said he bought a teddy for his mistress. He remembered the red teddy, the gag gift for Allen. He shook his head, the irony bitter on his tongue. He had

bought that gift, a light-hearted attempt at camaraderie, and now, it had been twisted into something sinister. He thought of how Kimberly had always wanted quiet moments together, how she had stopped mentioning her dreams of small getaways long ago. His work had consumed him, leaving little time for her, and now he was paying the price for his neglect. He ran a hand through his hair, his breath catching as he realized how his actions had created an environment where she couldn't trust him, a silent admission of his failings.

He looked around his office, at the desk she designed for him, the photos of their children, their life together. His heart ached as he thought about her, and how easily she had believed the lies, never once considering that he was innocent. He clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms as he considered the damage done by both his neglect and the lies he now knew were aimed at their marriage. He would fix this. He had to.

5

Chapter Five

Kimberly

Kimberly stared at her reflection in the darkened window of the hotel suite. Her eyes were red-rimmed, the faint lines around them more pronounced than usual. She traced the rim of her coffee cup, the cool ceramic a poor contrast to the heat rising in her cheeks. Her life felt less like a path she was choosing and more like a chaotic spiral she was caught in. The phone conversation with Gregory from the previous night had stirred up long-dormant memories, moments of shared laughter and easy intimacy she'd almost forgotten. Despite everything—the neglect, the distance, the gnawing suspicion—the love hadn't faded; it still burned within her, a stubborn flame amidst the ashes of her confusion. He deserved a chance to defend himself.

Her breath hitched, and her hands trembled as she remembered the self-righteous anger that had driven her to leave. How had she allowed her belief in his innocence morph into such a firm conviction of his guilt? She had stood on her soapbox, proclaiming how she deserved more, how he'd betrayed her,

and how she could no longer live with it. Yet, she hadn't asked him a single question after the first phone call. Her reflection stared back at her, a stranger with haunted eyes. Why hadn't she just asked him? How had she ended up leaving their home, the house they had built together, that she had spent decades perfecting?

That suffocating desire for change gripped her again. It was as if an unseen force was pushing her, demanding she break free from the confines of their failing marriage. The memory of her wedding day—the vows, the promises—warred with the image of a stranger gazing at Gregory with open admiration. The weight of that image made her feel as if she was drowning. She had to make him stop, or she had to accept that he was. Would he have confessed to it if it had been true? The constant denials had been so much more difficult to bear than the truth would have been.

Yet, as much as she wanted to believe in his guilt, a part of her—a small, stubborn part—clung to the idea that maybe he hadn't cheated. His denial, though far from comforting, offered her a strange relief, a sliver of hope that she couldn't bear to snuff out. Gregory had never been one to hide the truth, even when it hurt. She couldn't recall a single time when he'd chosen deception over honesty. A memory surfaced—his face grim with concern when he confessed to losing money at the casino—the contrast between then and now was stark. The thought made her heart ache with a pain she hadn't felt in years.

One person, however, knew the truth. But the thought of calling that woman made Kimberly's teeth grind. Her hand hovered over the phone, each ring a reminder of Angelica's sharp tongue. What would she say? Kimberly's jaw clenched as she moved her hand away from the phone, a physical manifestation

of her reluctance. Angelica was nothing if not direct, blunt in her opinions, and unafraid to challenge her. She had never been able to tolerate that about her, and the thought of the two of them, snooping around behind Gregory's back, was enough to make Kimberly laugh despite the tension in her chest.

She could use someone to talk to, someone who wasn't spiritually or emotionally invested in the well-being of her marriage. As she sat at the small dining table in her hotel suite, staring at the smartphone Gregory had bought for her when she'd dropped her old one in the lake—a lifeline of sorts—she wondered if speaking to Angelica was the answer. The phone buzzed in her hand, and the name "Angelica" flashed on the screen. Sometimes there was nothing mysterious about the Lord's actions. The universe had decided today would be the day she'd talk to the wife of her husband's best friend. On the third ring, she pressed the button to accept the call and lifted the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Angelica," she greeted, her tone more pleasant than she felt.

"Have you lost your ever-loving mind?" Angelica's voice cracked through the phone, blunt and cutting. It wasn't the kindness Kimberly had come to expect from her. But rudeness? That was new.

* * *

Gregory

Kimberly needed to know the truth. Each passing day left her

less certain, the edges of her conviction blurring. She had been away from Gregory for almost a week, and her once unshakable belief in his guilt was starting to waver. The question—fight or flee—kept looping in her mind. Was their marriage worth saving, or had it truly reached its end? She had to decide. Make him stop cheating, or accept that he was. It would have been easier to deal with his infidelity if he'd admitted it. She would have preferred his confession over the endless denials.

Yet, as much as she wanted to believe in his guilt, a small part of her clung to the idea that maybe he didn't cheat. His denial, though far from comforting, did offer her a strange relief. Part of her fought against the lie he was telling her. Gregory had never been one to hide the truth, even when it hurt. She couldn't remember a time when he'd chosen deception over honesty. The taste of the hotel coffee had gone cold on her tongue, its bitter aftertaste a perfect metaphor for her current state. She paced to the window, the low hum of the air conditioner a counterpoint to the frantic pace of her thoughts.

One person knew the truth. But the thought of calling that woman—the frustrating woman—made Kimberly's teeth grind. She could use someone to talk to, someone who wasn't spiritually or emotionally invested in the well-being of her marriage. As she sat at the small dining table in her hotel suite, staring at the smartphone Gregory had bought for her when she'd dropped her old one in the lake, she wondered if speaking to Angelica was the answer. The phone had more bells and whistles than she cared to learn, but it could take photos and video calls with her children. It was a lifeline of sorts. Kimberly's hand hovered over the phone, each ring like a taunt. A shiver of trepidation ran down her spine, the idea of speaking with Angelica almost unbearable. The phone buzzed on the table, "Angelica" flashing

across the screen. Before she could decide whether to pick it up or let it go to voicemail, it rang again. Sometimes there was nothing mysterious about the Lord's actions. The universe had decided today would be the day she'd talk to the wife of her husband's best friend. On the third ring, she pressed the button to accept the call and lifted the phone to her ear.

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"Have you lost your ever-loving mind?" Angelica's voice cracked through the phone, blunt and cutting. It wasn't the kindness Kimberly had come to expect from her. But rudeness? That was new.

"Excuse me?" Kimberly's fingers twitched, the 'End Call' button seeming like a lifeline. She clenched her jaw, her eyes narrowing, fighting the urge to hang up and escape Angelica's sharp tongue.

"I just spoke to the woman who claims she knows about your husband's infidelities," Angelica went on, her tone laced with disgust. "Also, seriously, Kimberly, what kind of woman listens to a voice try to destroy her marriage for two years without confronting the man?"

Kimberly froze. There was so much to unpack in Angelica's words. How and why did Angelica accept a call meant for her? And why hadn't I confronted Gregory sooner? The thought of punching him in the face had crossed her mind, but the reality of it was another story.

"I don't know what to say to that," Kimberly replied after the silence between them stretched long.

"I can help with that, too." Angelica's voice dripped with sarcasm. "You say, 'Angelica, I have no common sense and need your expertise in helping me plan a dinner date with my husband

because I have a lot of words to say to him””.

Kimberly regretted answering the phone. Angelica’s voice, relentless in its truth, grated on her nerves. Part of why the two women had never been friends was how much Angelica reminded Kimberly of her mother. Her world wasn’t big enough for two domineering women battling over who could tell Kimberly how she’d messed things up.

“What would you have done?” Kimberly’s voice, sharp and defensive, betrayed her irritation. She hated giving Angelica the satisfaction of knowing she was getting under her skin, but her curiosity won out, as it always seemed to do.

“I wouldn’t have waited two damn years,” Angelica responded, without hesitation. “I mean, I know we aren’t friends, but I’d have totally followed him around at night to uncover the truth. You could have at least asked if I saw anything suspicious at the office. I work one door down from your husband.”

The thought of Kimberly and Angelica snooping around behind Gregory’s back made her laugh, despite the tension in her chest. This whole situation is insane.

“If the roles were reversed, and someone called you about Michael, how would you have handled it?” Kimberly had to know. Though she couldn’t match Angelica’s boldness, hearing how another woman would have dealt with this mess might give her some clarity.

Angelica didn’t hesitate. “Well, I’m not as nice as you. After the first phone call, I would have burned everything Michael owned on the front lawn while roasting marshmallows in nothing but his favorite tie and my best high heels. I’d want him to see what he threw away.”

Kimberly inhaled too quickly and choked on her own breath.

She couldn't even imagine doing something like that, not to Gregory.

"You'd really do that?" she asked, half-laughing, half-shocked.

"That's after I slashed all of his tires and broke every window on all three of his vehicles. Even if he's innocent, something in his world reached out to harm me. That puts the blame on him."

Angelica's unapologetic response made everything sound so simple. Kimberly was both disturbed and oddly impressed.

"Did you ever think you'd be calling me to tell me what a fool I've been?" Kimberly asked, though she wasn't sure she wanted an answer.

"I've wanted to make this call for years, but you've never done something as epically stupid as letting a viper into your marriage," Angelica's bored tone only fueled Kimberly's rising temper.

With her eyes closed, Kimberly pinched the bridge of her nose. "You make it so hard to like you."

"Wow, honesty, for the first time since I've known you. Tell me more," Angelica's voice shifted, a little too amused.

"You're a bully," Kimberly shot back, surprising herself with the honesty. "If someone has an idea that differs from yours, you browbeat them until they agree with you. Everything dissolves into a debate when you're involved."

"I'm a lawyer. That's my literal job description."

"Did you call me just to ask me if I'd lost my mind?" Kimberly's patience was wearing thin, and she fought the urge to hang up.

"I meant to invite you to lunch, honestly. You're just so prickly all the time, I can't help myself." Angelica's tone softened, like she was trying to make peace in her own way.

Kimberly's heart sank. She could feel how far she had fallen, and the pain of it hit her unexpectedly. She took a deep breath, and her voice softened. "Sushi?" she asked, trying to focus on something simple, something that could break the tension.

"Even better," Angelica replied. "Let's go get Pho soup at the local Vietnamese place. They don't mind if you sit at their table for an extended period. And you'll be spilling your guts before we plan the perfect date for you and Gregory. I'll text you the address. Be there in an hour."

Before Kimberly could respond, Angelica ended the call. Kimberly stared at the phone in her hand, a chill running down her spine, wondering what she had just agreed to. The sudden silence of the phone felt heavier than Angelica's sharp tongue, a reminder of the unpredictable path she was now on. She had agreed to lunch with her husband's best friend's wife, and a tiny part of her admitted that she was curious to know what she might learn, no matter how painful it would be to hear.

6

Chapter Six

Lunch with Angelica left Kimberly emotionally drained. Hearing her fears spoken aloud by someone else—someone who knew her so well—was a painful revelation. The Vietnamese soup she'd enjoyed earlier felt like lead in her stomach, heavy as she processed all that Angelica had forced her to face. The truth about her own faults in the marriage was a bitter pill to swallow, each word a sharp reminder of her own inaction and silence. Had she really been so passive, so willing to let her marriage crumble?

"Not a drop of dye in sight," Angelica commented, admiring Kimberly's natural hair. "I'd give anything to have this color." Kimberly barely noticed the tresses anymore. When Gregory's attention wasn't on her, she'd lost the desire to care about her appearance, a stark symbol of how much she'd let herself fade into the background. She had once taken pride in her appearance, but now, it felt like another task on a long list of things she had failed at.

* * *

After lunch, Angelica insisted on a stop at a boutique that specialized in head-to-toe transformations. The salon smelled of hairspray and lavender, a strange combination that made Kimberly's stomach churn slightly. As she settled into the salon chair, a wave of apprehension washed over her. Was this really necessary? Was she being selfish?

"Thank you," Kimberly said, her voice barely above a whisper, the word feeling heavy on her tongue, like an obligation rather than gratitude. She watched as the stylist began snipping at her hair. The scissors felt cold against her neck, each snip a tiny severing of the old her, and a strange sense of liberation began to unfurl within her.

"Holiday party?" Angelica asked, her voice surprisingly gentle as she glanced over, noticing Kimberly's nervous fidgeting.

In the next chair, Angelica, too, was getting pampered. After spending the better part of thirty minutes pointing out Kimberly's cowardice, Angelica softened, confessing her desire to be a better friend. The confession, so unexpected, made a warmth spread through Kimberly's chest.

"No," Kimberly replied, her tone shifting from hesitant to firm, "more like a date."

Angelica raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Oh? A hot night on the town?"

"With my husband." Kimberly glanced at herself in the mirror, the woman staring back at her both familiar and alien. She hadn't seen this version of herself in a long time—the one with a spark of confidence in her eyes, the one who had loved her life and had the power to choose her own path. Could she really bring that woman back?

Yes, she would fix her marriage. The first step was acknowledging that she had given up her voice, embracing the role of

the victim. Angelica had been brutally honest, tearing down the weak parts of Kimberly's character, and though the truth stung, it was the kind of wake-up call she needed. Had she really let herself become so powerless?

With a fresh haircut that felt surprisingly light and bouncy, and her nails gleaming with a smooth, glossy manicure that made her hands feel almost delicate, Angelica led her to the evening dress section. The fabrics shimmered under the soft lights, each dress a promise of a different kind of night, a different kind of her. If anyone had told Kimberly she'd be taking fashion advice from Angelica, she would have laughed. But here she was, caught in a whirlwind of silk and lace.

Angelica had dropped a bombshell when she bluntly pointed out one simple fact: Kimberly had never fought for her marriage. Instead, she had embraced a narrative that let someone else turn her into a victim. There were moments during lunch when Kimberly hated the woman holding up the mirror, but those moments were fewer than the ones spent hating the woman in the reflection. Had she been so busy blaming Gregory that she'd forgotten to fight for herself?

Today, that image would be shattered. No more silent suffering, no more talking about separations or divorce. Tonight would be about rebirth—about rekindling the love they once had and placing it at the center of their lives.

"You look stunning," said the boutique stylist as Kimberly stepped out of the dressing room, the dress a soft sea-green that seemed to glow against her skin. Angelica smirked beside her, a mix of satisfaction and approval on her face.

"Thank you," Kimberly said, a blush creeping up her cheeks as she took in the sight of herself in the mirror. The dress, with its crisscross front and delicate straps, made her feel both

vulnerable and powerful, a delicate balance she'd forgotten how to strike. The bare back was a symbol of her own exposure, the one she would no longer shy away from.

"I mean it," the stylist continued. "It's as if the designer made this dress just for you." Her eyes gleamed with approval. "I know exactly what you need for this look. I'll be right back."

"There she is," Angelica said, her eyes alight with admiration. "The woman I met so long ago. The only woman in the world who intimidated me."

Kimberly's gaze lingered in the mirror. Could she really be that woman again? The one who didn't allow anyone to disrespect her? The dress was a soft sea-green that crisscrossed over her front, revealing a hint of cleavage. The straps tied delicately behind her neck, and the back was bare, falling straight to her ankles. In its simplicity, it was beautiful.

"I intimidated you?" Kimberly turned to face her friend, her voice laced with genuine surprise.

"Uh, yeah," Angelica replied, a teasing glint in her eyes. "You're a nightmare in heels when you decide someone isn't worth your time." The words, a mixture of playful banter and brutal honesty, struck a chord within Kimberly, reminding her of the strength she had allowed to fade.

Tears pricked Kimberly's eyes, her character stripped bare yet again. "And yet, you're still here, teaching me how to be a better woman, wife, and apparently, a better human. Is there anything else you'd like to get off your chest?" She met Angelica's gaze, seeing not judgment, but a reflection of her own potential.

Angelica smiled, but the words that followed were unflinching. "Just stop being a selfish jerk and maybe let the world in once in a while." Her tone was light, but the sincerity rang through. Kimberly felt a pang of guilt. Had she been so wrapped up in her

own pain that she'd forgotten to be there for others?

Before Kimberly could respond, the stylist returned with boxes of shoes and jewelry. "I wasn't sure what size you wore, so I grabbed a few options."

Kimberly slipped on a pair of clear heels with a green heel that matched the dress perfectly. The shoes felt like a promise, a step forward into a new chapter. They reminded her of Cinderella's glass slipper, a symbol of transformation and hope. "Was it possible for her to find her own fairy tale ending?"

"These are perfect," she said, her voice thick with emotion, a genuine thank you escaping her lips.

"I thought silver would complement the dress best," the stylist said, offering a set of teardrop emerald earrings in a soft silver setting. She completed the look with a matching necklace. Kimberly hesitated, her fingers grazing the cool metal, her eyes drawn to the small price tag, a knot of guilt forming in her stomach. "Did I really deserve to spend this much on myself? "

"Try them on with the dress first," the stylist suggested, her smile warm, and with a knowing look that seemed to see straight through her doubts. "I have a feeling they'll be worth every penny." Kimberly paused, taking a deep breath before clasping the necklace around her neck, the weight of the pendant a grounding sensation. The cool metal against her skin felt like a promise of something solid, something real amidst the chaos within her.

Kimberly donned the earrings and necklace, her heart skipping a beat as she checked her reflection. The transformation was undeniable. The dress, the jewelry, the shoes—she felt like someone else entirely. The woman in the mirror was confident, radiant, a stranger she almost didn't recognize. She stood

taller, proud of the woman she saw before her, the woman who had been buried under layers of doubt and resentment. Was it possible to keep her and the strength she now embodied? Gregory wasn't the only one to blame for the rift in their marriage. It took two to cause the distance between them, and she was ready to fight for them both.

"I know you may think I'm just trying to make a sale," the stylist said, her voice warm, "but if you'd like, we can finish your look with makeup. It's rare we get to send a fairy princess off to meet her handsome prince."

"I'd like that," Kimberly said, a playful smile tugging at her lips. "Let's just hope he doesn't turn into a frog when he sees the bill."

The stylist smiled again. "The last thing he'll be thinking about when he sees you is a bill. Besides, it's not every day we get to see a marriage as it was meant to be."

Kimberly closed her eyes, fighting the urge to stomp her foot in frustration. Another reminder of what she'd neglected. She could hear her mother's voice echoing in her head, a voice that had always urged her to stand tall. If her daughters learned that their mother had silently assumed the worst about her husband for two years, they might start to use silence as a shield. How had she been so foolish?

She felt the stylist's brush sweep over her face, dabbing and blending with skill. Kimberly leaned back, savoring the brief silence as she collected herself. "I had been so focused on the pain that I'd forgotten what it felt like to hope, to believe in something greater than myself. What was I doing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" the stylist said, her voice apologetic as a powder puff brushed Kimberly's face, causing her to sneeze.

"Don't worry," Kimberly said quickly, not wanting to make

the woman feel worse. “It’s nothing. I have a daughter, a little older than you. Her go-to response to everything is an apology. Powder in the nose will always trigger that reaction. But you should know, it’s important to hoard the power we’re given as women. Apologies are a sign of guilt, and that takes away from our power. Take it from me, someone who almost threw away thirty years of marriage because I didn’t fight for myself. I gave away my power when I stopped trusting, when I stopped fighting, when I gave up my voice. I won’t make that mistake again. Not ever. Hoard your power. It’s a precious commodity.”

The stylist paused, considering the words. “Then I take back my apology and I’ll just say, you good?”

Kimberly smiled. “I’m excellent.”

* * *

Scene 3

With a fresh haircut and her nails gleaming with a manicure, Angelica led her to the evening dress section to find something that would dazzle Gregory. If anyone had told Kimberly she’d be taking fashion advice from Angelica, she would have laughed. But here she was, embracing the unexpected, her heart pounding with a strange mixture of excitement and fear.

Angelica had dropped a bombshell when she bluntly pointed out one simple fact: Kimberly had never fought for her marriage. Instead, she had embraced a narrative that let someone else turn her into a victim. There were moments during lunch when Kimberly hated the woman holding up the mirror, but those moments were fewer than the ones spent hating the woman in the reflection. The sting of Angelica’s words was a catalyst, forcing Kimberly to confront the harsh truth about her own

inaction. Had she been so busy playing the victim that she'd forgotten how to fight?

Today, that image would be shattered. No more silent suffering, no more talking about separations or divorce. Tonight would be about rebirth—about rekindling the love they once had and placing it at the center of their lives. This wasn't about just fixing a marriage; it was about reclaiming her own voice and her own power, about choosing to fight instead of surrender.

"You look stunning," said the boutique stylist as Kimberly stepped out of the dressing room, Angelica smirking beside her. The dress, a soft sea-green, was a perfect symbol of the new path Kimberly was choosing, a path filled with hope and a new beginning.

"Thank you," Kimberly said, a blush creeping up her cheeks as she took in the sight of herself in the mirror. She saw not just a woman in a dress, but a woman ready to face her fears.

"I mean it," the stylist continued. "It's as if the designer made this dress just for you." Her eyes gleamed with approval. "I know exactly what you need for this look. I'll be right back."

"There she is," Angelica said, eyes alight with admiration. "The woman I met so long ago. The only woman in the world who intimidated me." Angelica's words were both a challenge and a testament to Kimberly's inner strength, a reminder of the woman she had once been and the woman she could be again.

Kimberly's gaze lingered in the mirror. The dress was a soft sea-green that crisscrossed over her front, revealing a hint of cleavage. The straps tied delicately behind her neck, and the back was bare, falling straight to her ankles. In its simplicity, it was beautiful. Was this really her? Could she really be this confident and radiant again?

"I intimidated you?" Kimberly turned to face her friend, her

voice laced with surprise.

“Uh, yeah,” Angelica replied, a teasing glint in her eyes. “You’re a nightmare in heels when you decide someone isn’t worth your time.” The playful banter was a stark contrast to the seriousness of their previous conversations, a sign that their friendship was growing and evolving, even in the midst of turmoil.

Tears pricked Kimberly’s eyes, her character stripped bare yet again. “And yet, you’re still here, teaching me how to be a better woman, wife, and apparently, a better human. Is there anything else you’d like to get off your chest?” The vulnerability in Kimberly’s voice was genuine, a stark contrast to the guardedness she had displayed before. She was allowing herself to be seen, flaws and all.

Angelica smiled, but the words that followed were unflinching. “Just stop being a selfish jerk and maybe let the world in once in a while.” Her tone was light, but the sincerity rang through. The advice was a punch to the gut, but Kimberly knew it was the truth. She had been so consumed by her own pain that she had forgotten to be present for those around her.

Before Kimberly could respond, the stylist returned with boxes of shoes and jewelry. “I wasn’t sure what size you wore, so I grabbed a few options.”

* * *

Kimberly slipped on a pair of clear heels with a green heel that matched the dress perfectly. They reminded her of Cinderella’s glass slipper, a symbol of transformation and hope. Could these shoes lead her to her own happily ever after?

“These are perfect,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Thank you.” The gratitude in her voice was genuine, a far cry from the perfunctory thank you she had offered at the start of the scene. She was finally learning to accept help and kindness.

“I thought silver would complement the dress best,” the stylist said, offering a set of teardrop emerald earrings in a soft silver setting. She completed the look with a matching necklace. Kimberly hesitated, glancing at the price tag. Was she worth this extravagance?

“Try them on with the dress first,” the stylist suggested. “I have a feeling they’ll be worth every penny.” The stylist’s words, though seemingly a sales pitch, were exactly what Kimberly needed to hear, a gentle nudge towards self-worth.

Kimberly donned the earrings and necklace, her heart skipping a beat as she checked her reflection. The transformation was undeniable. The dress, the jewelry, the shoes—they were not just adornments; they were symbols of her transformation, tangible reminders of the strength she was reclaiming. The woman in the mirror was confident, radiant, a stranger she almost didn’t recognize.

She stood taller, proud of the woman she saw before her. This was the woman she had once been, the woman she was fighting to become again. Gregory wasn’t the only one to blame for the rift in their marriage. It took two to cause the distance between them, and she was ready to fight for them both. She would no longer be a silent victim; she would be an active participant in her own life.

“I know you may think I’m just trying to make a sale,” the stylist said, her voice warm. “But if you’d like, we can finish your look with makeup. It’s rare we get to send a fairy princess off to meet her handsome prince.” The stylist’s words, though

slightly cliché, were filled with genuine warmth, a reflection of the hope and positivity that had begun to bloom in Kimberly's heart.

"I'd like that," Kimberly said, a playful smile tugging at her lips. "Let's just hope he doesn't turn into a frog when he sees the bill." The humor in her voice was a welcome change, a sign that she was finally starting to find joy again.

The stylist smiled again. "The last thing he'll be thinking about when he sees you is a bill. Besides, it's not every day we get to see a marriage as it was meant to be." The stylist's comment was filled with a sense of optimism, echoing the hope that Kimberly herself had begun to feel.

Kimberly closed her eyes, fighting the urge to stomp her foot in frustration. Another reminder of what she'd neglected. If her daughters learned that their mother had silently assumed the worst about her husband for two years, they might start to use silence as a shield. The thought was a stark reminder of her own responsibility as a role model. She could not allow her pain to become a lesson in silence for her children.

She felt the stylist's brush sweep over her face, dabbing and blending with skill. Kimberly leaned back, savoring the brief silence as she collected herself. She felt a sense of calm amidst the chaos, a moment of peace in the storm.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" the stylist said, her voice apologetic as a powder puff brushed Kimberly's face, causing her to sneeze.

"Don't worry," Kimberly said quickly, not wanting to make the woman feel worse. "It's nothing. I have a daughter, a little older than you. Her go-to response to everything is an apology. Powder in the nose will always trigger that reaction. But you should know, it's important to hoard the power we're given as women. Apologies are a sign of guilt, and that takes away from

our power. Take it from me, someone who almost threw away thirty years of marriage because I didn't fight for myself. Hoard your power. It's a precious commodity." The words were not just for the stylist, they were for herself as well, a reminder of the lesson she had learned. She would no longer apologize for being strong.

The stylist paused, considering the words. "Then I take back my apology and I'll just say, you good?" The stylist's response was filled with newfound confidence, a sign that Kimberly's words had resonated.

Kimberly smiled. "I'm excellent." The word, simple and straightforward, was a testament to her inner strength. She was no longer broken, she was excellent, and she was ready to face whatever came next.

7

Chapter Seven

Kimberly

After Angelica helped Kimberly settle into the car, being careful not to wrinkle her dress, the two women set off toward Kimberly's house. Angelica had convinced her that the best course of action was to show up and demand Gregory take her out on a date. She'd even thought to bring a corsage, ready to pin it to whatever attire he was wearing.

As they turned onto Kimberly's street, the sight of cars lined up around the block caught her off guard. "Of all days for someone to have a party," Kimberly muttered under her breath. The sheer volume of vehicles—sedans, trucks, and SUVs—lined the street, spilling over and blocking a few driveways. Her neighbors would be furious.

"Drive up on the lawn," Kimberly instructed when they couldn't find a spot to park. Her SUV, built for situations like this, would manage just fine.

Angelica drove over the curb, parking the vehicle on the grass. She checked the visor mirror, making sure her makeup and

hair were still intact. Nerves crept in, but she wasn't surprised. She wanted to look perfect for Gregory. They deserved the life they'd once dreamed of—one that had slipped away because he'd buried himself in work and she hadn't fought for herself, or for their marriage.

Kimberly got out of the car, careful not to let her new heels sink into the soft grass. Angelica moved ahead, pressing the doorbell in rapid succession. Kimberly opened her mouth to tell her the house key was in her hand, but before she could speak, the front door opened to reveal her youngest daughter, Megan, wearing a formal dress.

Kimberly's stomach dropped. She bit her lip to suppress a groan. She had hoped to have a quiet moment with Gregory, to talk about everything that had happened, and what she dreamed would come next. But seeing Megan—whom she hadn't seen in a week—shifted her focus.

"Hi, Mama!" Megan exclaimed, her face lighting up. "Wow! You look stunning! I heard you were out shopping for presents. I thought they were for us, not your body!" Her infectious smile made Kimberly forget, for a moment, the whirlwind she had walked into.

"Shopping for presents?" Kimberly frowned, confused as she pulled Megan into an embrace.

"Isn't that where you've been this week? Off to Pittsburgh for last-minute holiday shopping?" Megan asked, pulling back and giving her mother a puzzled look.

Kimberly mumbled something that sounded vaguely like agreement. It wasn't surprising Gregory had come up with a plausible excuse to explain her absence without embarrassing her in front of the children.

"Oh! Come see something," Megan said, grabbing Kimberly's

hand and leading her toward the backyard. “You’ll love it!”

“Where’s your father?” Kimberly asked casually, trying to mask her growing curiosity.

“He’s around. Come on!” Megan tugged her forward, and Kimberly followed.

As they reached the back door, her breath caught in her throat. The backyard had been transformed into something almost unreal. Rows of chairs, draped with white taffeta and adorned with green bows, lined the path. Green and white flower petals were scattered down the aisle, which led to a small altar.

Kimberly’s mind spun. “What on earth...?”

“Surprise!” The voices of friends and family rang out joyfully from the yard, and Kimberly stood frozen, her gaze scanning faces she hadn’t seen in years.

“I... I don’t understand,” she whispered, trying to take everything in. This was more than she had bargained for.

Before she could process further, a familiar voice called out from behind her.

“Kimberly.”

Her heart skipped. She turned to find Gregory standing there, dressed formally, his face full of love and anticipation.

“Gregory, what’s going on?” she asked, needing him to anchor her in the surreal moment.

“Every day, I wake up thinking of you. Every night, before I sleep, I pray for you. And every night, while I’m asleep, I dream of you,” he said softly, his voice carrying the weight of years spent apart.

Her breath caught in her throat as his words stirred emotions she had long buried. “When I’m away from you, I want nothing more than to be beside you. When I’m afraid, I want your strength. When I’m happy, I want your laughter. It has taken

me three decades to realize how much you mean to me.” He paused, eyes searching hers.

The world around them faded as he continued, “I know this is unexpected. I know we have issues to address, but I don’t want to face them alone.”

Gregory then lowered himself to one knee, and Kimberly’s breath hitched.

“Kimberly, my beautiful Kimberly. Will you do me the honor of renewing our vows? Marry me again, and let’s face the rest of our days, loving each other.”

The crowd fell silent. Kimberly’s thoughts whirled, caught between disbelief and the dawning realization that this was real. Gregory was asking her to marry him again.

“Nothing in this world would give me greater pleasure,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, as she opened her fingers to let him slide the ring above the one she had never taken off.

A cheer erupted from the crowd as Gregory leaned in to kiss her forehead. “The next one will be in front of the priest,” he teased, winking at her. For a moment, their past troubles seemed distant, dissolving in the warmth of his love.

Just then, a voice shouted from behind them.

“I’m here! I’m here!”

Kimberly turned to see her son Devon running toward them, struggling to tie a bowtie around his neck. “I couldn’t help with the planning, but I promised Dad I’d be here in time to give the bride away. I’m not too late, am I?”

Kimberly couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of him. Tears welled up in her eyes as she wiped them away, hoping her makeup would survive the moment.

“You’re right on time,” Gregory said with a grin, turning toward their son.

Gregory took Kimberly's hand and pressed something into her palm. She opened her hand to reveal a small charm shaped like a doghouse.

"What's this?" she asked, confused.

"It's a reminder," Gregory said, his tone lighthearted. "When I do something stupid—and we both know I will—you can put me in there."

He pointed to a small fenced-in shed at the edge of the yard, the words "Gregory's Doghouse" painted in bold letters above the door.

"I love you, Kimberly," he said. "Thank you for loving me enough to stand here with me."

"My place is beside you," she replied softly, though she still didn't quite understand the charm's meaning.

"Well, technically, right now, your place is with Devon," Gregory said, nudging her toward their son.

Her heart full, Kimberly linked her arm with Devon's as he led her down the aisle. The soft crunch of rose petals beneath her Cinderella shoes was drowned out by the sound of the wedding march playing in the background. Camera flashes popped around her, but she only had eyes for her son.

Kimberly was in awe. Gregory had planned an entire wedding in one day. The thought of how much he believed in their love, how far he was willing to go to rekindle it, overwhelmed her.

As she reached the front, Father Rochelle smiled at her and addressed the gathered crowd. "Friends and family of Gregory and Kimberly, today we witness the renewal of their faith and love in the bonds of their marriage."

Kimberly turned toward Gregory, taking both of his hands in hers as Father Rochelle began the vows.

"Do you take Gregory Davenport as your lawful husband, to

have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish until death do you part?"

Memories of their original wedding day flooded her heart. This was right. She could feel it in her bones.

"I do," Kimberly answered, her voice steady. "I take this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

"Do you take Kimberly Davenport as your lawful wife, to have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish until death do you part?"

"I do," Gregory's voice rang out, strong and certain.

When Father Rochelle announced, "You may kiss the bride," Kimberly's heart fluttered, and she felt like she might swoon. This moment was everything.

*

Gregory

The day had been perfect, surrounded by friends and family, basking in the kind of joy only a wedding could bring. It was a day neither of them would ever forget. Yet, as the last of their guests left, an unexpected silence settled over the house, and Kimberly stood there, her mind racing. She knew there was something important to say, but she wasn't sure where to begin.

Gregory had gone to take a shower, leaving her in his office. She paced restlessly, her thoughts tangled, trying to form the words that felt so important but elusive. Her eyes landed on the wastebasket in the corner, and for reasons she couldn't explain,

it held her attention.

She took a few steps forward and noticed a crumpled piece of paper peeking out from the top. That wasn't like Gregory. He was meticulous about keeping everything organized, especially documents. The pile in the trash was unusual—too much paper for someone as thorough as him.

Curiosity led her to retrieve the documents, smoothing them out carefully. As she read, her pulse quickened. The pages were filled with telephone records—each one marked with a single number highlighted in bright ink. Her stomach dropped as she realized the number came from an extension in Gregory's office.

Before she could even make sense of it, a voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Your mystery woman called after you left. I heard the torture she put you through. I'm so sorry you had to go through that, and even worse, that you went through it alone. It was Michael's idea to pull the phone records to see who it was."

Gregory stood in the doorway, fresh from the shower, his towel hanging low on his hips. Water droplets clung to his skin, and for a moment, Kimberly couldn't focus on anything but the sight of him. She lowered the documents, embarrassment creeping over her like a cold wave. She didn't need more proof of her own foolishness. The shredder hummed to life as she slid the papers inside, the mechanical sound filling the silence between them.

"Why did you throw it away?" Gregory asked softly, his gaze steady but laced with something she couldn't quite place.

She swallowed, struggling to hold herself together. "I wanted a life with you based on love. I didn't need a piece of paper to tell me I didn't cheat on you."

The weight of her own stupidity pressed heavily on her chest.

She could have uncovered the truth herself, if only she'd trusted him, if only she'd thought it through. How lucky she was that he could forgive so easily.

Her face flushed with shame, but the truth of what had happened, of everything Angelica had said about her, hit her like a punch to the gut. She had almost lost everything. Everything that mattered.

"Oh God, Gregory," she whispered, her voice breaking as she looked at him. "What have I done?"

She felt the urge to run, to escape the reality of what she'd almost destroyed. But the questions, the whys that swirled in her mind, wouldn't leave her. Why had Angelica done it? Why had she worked so hard to try to tear their marriage apart?

Gregory moved toward her, his hands gentle as he cupped her face, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"We both have things we wish we'd done differently, Kimberly. But that was yesterday. Today is our wedding day. And only the future lies ahead of us. The past can't harm us now."

"But why?" she asked again, her voice full of hurt. "Why would she spend all that time trying to destroy us?"

Gregory sighed, his eyes distant for a moment, before he turned back to her. "It's a sad story. One I'd rather not repeat. Our love was a bone of contention for her. She was jealous."

He paused, his expression shifting as if he were reconsidering his words. "No. Let me be completely honest. I had to let her husband go from his position. He spiraled after that. Alcohol took over, and he lost everything—his family, his life. It's a sad, messy situation, but there are no heroes or villains here, just circumstances beyond anyone's control."

Kimberly didn't know what to say. That was a long time to focus on someone else, a long time to hold on to bitterness.

"And a long time to believe lies," Gregory added softly. She nestled closer to him, her head resting against his chest, and the warmth of his embrace wrapped around her like a shield.

"So, what now?" she asked, her voice small.

"Now we live. Really live. We embrace love and faith because we have an abundance of both. Today is our second chance, Kimberly. And we're going to make the most of it."

She could feel his hands gently holding hers, his touch comforting, a reassurance that they were in this together. Her heart pounded as she lifted her face to his, yearning for the kiss she knew was coming.

His lips met hers gently at first, then deepened as he pulled her closer, his hands in her hair. The kiss was everything she'd wanted—tender, yet fierce, full of all the things they hadn't said.

They pulled away, breathless. Gregory's smile was all she needed to see. It was a smile that told her everything: he had never stopped loving her, and he never would.

"What's so funny?" Gregory asked, his eyes wide in mock confusion as she began to laugh.

"A wedding, Gregory?" Kimberly wiped away the tears that had sprung to her eyes, her laugh uncontrollable now. "What if I had said no?"

He raised an eyebrow, then smirked. "I'm a lawyer, Kimberly. I'm good at convincing people to agree to my demands. Besides, I wanted a honeymoon."

She gasped. "We're going on a honeymoon?"

"Yes. I've been planning it for a while. Ireland. Your mother always talked about wanting to go back. I thought it would be the perfect vacation. I know I should've planned it years ago, but work always seemed to get in the way. That will never happen again."

Kimberly blinked, surprised. “We’re going to Ireland?”

“Yes. And we’re taking your father, your mother, Megan, Grace, and Devon too,” he said with a chuckle. “Maybe honeymoon isn’t the right word, but it will be the best family vacation we’ve ever had. Maybe Michael and Angelica will join us too—after all, they helped make today happen.”

Kimberly laughed again. “Honeymoon Davenport style, complete with friends and family in tow.”

Gregory gave her a serious look then, his expression turning slightly more somber. “I have one question.”

Her heart skipped a beat as she gazed up at him. “What?”

“Do you trust me?”

The question, full of raw vulnerability, hit her like a thunderclap. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

“I trust you, Gregory,” she said softly, her voice cracking as the weight of everything finally hit her. “Can you ever forgive me for not believing in you?”

He shook his head, pulling her into his arms once more. “There’s nothing to forgive. Our adventure starts now. This is our new beginning. Today, God gave us a miracle. A new chapter, Kimberly.”

She looked up at him, her heart full, and whispered, “I love you, Gregory.”

He smiled down at her, love radiating from his eyes. “I love you, today, tomorrow, and forever. This is just the beginning, Kimberly. Our next thirty years start now.”

Hand in hand, they walked to their bedroom. She turned off the lights, and as they climbed into bed together, the future seemed bright, filled with the promise of love, trust, and the adventure they were about to embark on.