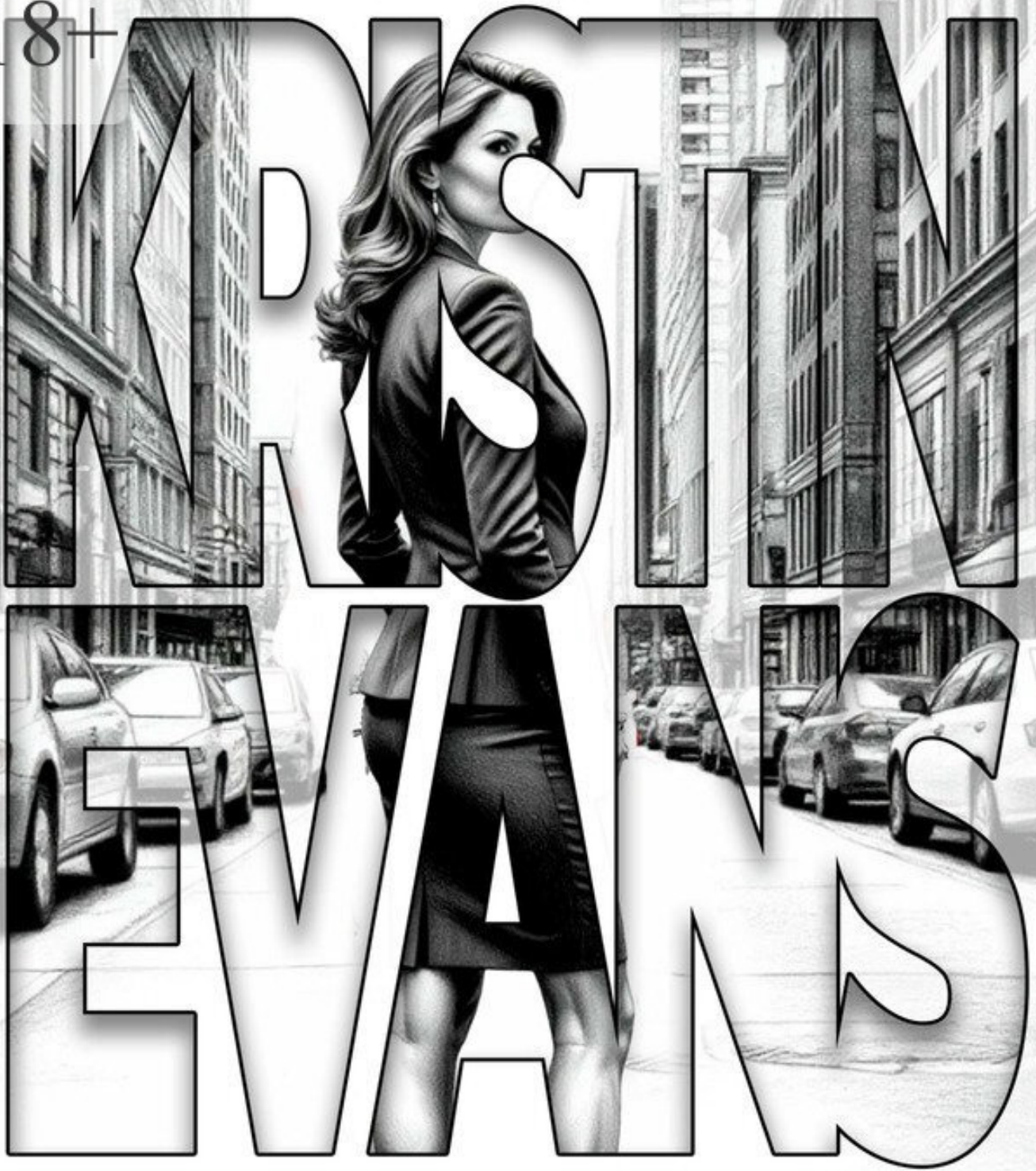


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MIRIAM EVANS

AFTER THE BETRAYAL

Kristin Evans

After the betrayal

«Издательские решения»

Evans K.

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Anna and Maxim's perfect marriage was a crystal castle — beautiful and fragile. A single discovery in the glove compartment of a car shatters it to pieces. Betrayal. Infidelity. A pain there's no escaping from. But when everything you held dear lies in ruins, the only way out is to rebuild yourself from the ground up. A profound psychological novel about surviving when your world stops giving you air, and finding the strength to breathe again.

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After the betrayal

Kristin Evans

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Kristin Evans

After the Betrayal

Chapter 1. The Perfect Facade

The last rays of the evening sun filtered through the curtains of the finest linen, casting golden highlights on the soft peach-colored walls. Anna took a step back, assessing her work. The table was set with the same meticulous care she used when designing interiors for her most demanding clients. The snow-white tablecloth, bought on their first trip to Paris; the silverware – a wedding gift from Maxim’s parents; the candles in crystal holders, which she had painted herself with watercolors. Every element was meticulously chosen, like the final stroke on a project she had labored over for weeks.

Tonight was supposed to be perfect. Five years of a happy life, filled with laughter, plans, and love. Five years they celebrated every year with the same passion as their first kiss. Anna smiled, remembering their first anniversary: Maxim had arranged a romantic dinner on the roof of their then-rented apartment. She had laughed, saying they were both covered in sauce, and he had kissed her despite the bits of tomato stuck between her teeth. How they had changed since then... Or hadn’t they?

She walked into the kitchen, where Bolognese sauce – their signature dish since their first date – simmered on the stove. The smell of fresh basil and tomatoes filled the air, mingling with the aroma of roasting eggplant. Anna checked the oven – their favorite mozzarella was slowly melting inside. Everything was ready. All that was left was to wait for Maxim.

«Mommy, can I draw a picture for Daddy?» Her daughter’s quiet voice caught her off guard.

Anna turned and saw five-year-old Sophia standing in the doorway in her unicorn pajamas. The girl’s fair hair was tousled from her nap, and her big brown eyes, so much like her father’s, looked up at her hopefully.

«Of course, sweetheart. Just put on your apron so you don’t get messy.»

Sophia nodded happily and raced to the living room for her paints. Anna watched her go, her heart swelling with warmth. Her daughter was the most beautiful gift life had given her, along with Maxim. Sometimes, looking at Sophia, Anna forgot that she had once been afraid of becoming a mother, of ruining their perfect couple. But their daughter had become the bridge that connected them even tighter.

She returned to the table and arranged the photos in elegant silver frames. There they were together – at their wedding, on vacation in the Maldives, on Sophia’s birthday. Each picture told a story of their love, each was a piece of a puzzle made of happy moments. Anna ran her finger over the glass covering a photo of Maxim smiling with newborn Sophia in his arms. His eyes shone with such love that she could still feel that warmth.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Anna flinched, her heart beating faster. She knew: it was Maxim. He always called when he was running late, always gave her a heads-up. But today he had promised to be home early. Today was a special night.

«Hello,» she said, and her voice sounded calmer than she felt.

«Anuta, I’m so sorry,» Maxim’s voice was tense, like a tightly drawn string. «I just got an urgent call. I have to fly out on a business trip immediately. A client from Moscow is insisting on a face-to-face meeting.»

Anna froze, her fingers gripping the phone so tightly her knuckles turned white. Today. Of all days.

«But... it’s our anniversary today,» she said softly, fighting to keep her voice from trembling.

«I know, my love, believe me, I’m in shock too. But if we lose this client, the company could lose a major contract. You know how important this is for us.»

Anna nodded, though he couldn't see her. She understood. She always understood. Maxim owned a construction company, and his work often required sacrifices. But he had never missed their anniversary before. Never.

«When will you be back?» she asked, looking at the set table.

«Tomorrow evening, I promise. I'm already rushing to the airport.»

«Okay,» she forced out. «Be careful.»

«I love you,» he said, and his voice held such sincerity that Anna almost believed everything would be alright.

But when she hung up, a silence hung in the room – thick and heavy, like an old blanket. She looked at the clock: only an hour remained until he was supposed to arrive. Anna took a deep breath, trying to pull herself together. She couldn't let the evening be ruined. Sophia deserved a celebration, even if her father wouldn't be there.

«Sophia!» she called out to her daughter. «Daddy can't make it tonight.»

The girl appeared in the doorway immediately, holding a piece of paper smudged with paint.

«Daddy's gone again?» she asked, and her voice held such sadness that Anna wanted to cry.

«Yes, sweetie,» Anna crouched down to be at her level. «But we'll have a girls' night. I made your favorite eggplant parmesan, and we can watch your cartoon.»

Sophia looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded.

«Then I'll draw Daddy a card so he won't be sad on the plane.»

Anna smiled through the tears welling up in her throat.

«That's a wonderful idea.»

She helped her daughter wash up, fed her dinner, watched the cartoon, and put her to bed. Sophia fell asleep clutching the card, on which she had written in large, childish letters: «Daddy, come home soon. I love you.»

When Anna left the nursery, the house seemed too quiet and empty. She walked into the living room, where the set table still stood. The candle in the center had almost burned down, leaving a frozen puddle of wax on the pristine white tablecloth. Anna blew out the flame, and the room was plunged into semi-darkness, illuminated only by the soft light of a table lamp.

She sat at the table, looking at the empty seat opposite. Five years ago, they had sat here for the last time before their wedding, discussing their future plans. Maxim had held her hand then and promised to build their dream house. And he had. This house in a prestigious neighborhood, with a view of the park, with the kitchen she had dreamed of, with the office where she now worked as an interior designer. Everything was perfect. Or almost perfect.

Anna stood up and went to the bedroom. Her gaze fell on Maxim's suitcase standing in the corner of the walk-in closet. She moved closer. The suitcase was closed but not packed. No signs of a rush. No document folders, no fresh shirts on hangers, no travel toiletry kit he always took on business trips.

Strange. For an urgent dash to the airport, he had packed far too little. Anna opened the suitcase. Inside were just two work shirts and a pair of trousers. That was it. No toiletries, nothing else. As if he wasn't planning to be gone long. Or wasn't planning to leave at all.

She closed the suitcase and returned to the bedroom. Her heart was beating faster than usual. Anna tried to calm herself: maybe he really was in a hurry and planned to pack the rest at the office. Maybe it really was an urgent trip. But deep down, she felt it: something was wrong.

She went to the bookshelf and took out a worn, leather-bound diary. The pages were filled with her handwriting – sometimes neat, sometimes nervous and illegible. She opened it to a blank page and started writing, feeling each word tear a piece from her soul.

«He has become a stranger. Or have I stopped seeing him?»

Her hand trembled, and the ink smudged on the paper. Anna put the pen down and closed her eyes. Questions swirled in her head, answers she was afraid of. Why had he started working late so

often? Why did he take hours to reply to her texts? Why had he lately been touching her as if he were afraid she might break?

She remembered how he had come home with flowers just yesterday. «Just because I love you,» he had said. But his kiss had been superficial, as if his thoughts were far away. She had felt him drifting away but pretended not to notice. Because admitting that something was wrong meant admitting that their perfect world could shatter.

Anna opened the diary again and continued writing, trying to piece together the fragments of her thoughts.

«Tonight I made everything just like our first evening. Everything except him being here. Sophia asked if Daddy was leaving. I said „yes“ because I can't lie to her anymore. But why does it hurt so much to see her sad? Because I know it's my fault? Or because I can't protect her from this pain?»

She stopped to wipe away the tears that had finally broken through the barrier. How many times over the past months had she caught herself thinking that Maxim looked at her like a stranger? How many times had she noticed him hiding his phone when she entered the room? How many times had he apologized for «work stress,» though he had never before let business affect their relationship?

Anna remembered their recent conversation when she asked why he was always on his phone at dinner.

«Just checking work messages,» he had replied, not looking at her.

«You never used to check them during dinner,» she had pointed out.

«Work has gotten more complicated, Anna. You understand.»

She had nodded, but inside, something had snapped, like a thread breaking. Something had changed, and she couldn't figure out what.

The diary lay open before her on a fresh page. Anna picked up the pen and continued writing, as if each line could draw the pain out of her.

«Sometimes I look at him and don't recognize him. His smile is different, his touch feels foreign. But I keep pretending everything is fine. Because admitting something is wrong means admitting: I'm not good enough. That I couldn't keep him. But is that my fault? Or has he simply stopped loving me?»

She closed the diary and put it aside. The room was quiet; only the ticking of the wall clock reminded her that time couldn't be stopped. Anna went to the window and looked into the darkness. Outside, in the garden, the roses Maxim had planted on their first anniversary were blooming. He had said each rose would symbolize a year of their happy life together.

Five roses. Five years. But today, one of them had wilted.

Anna returned to the bed and lay down, curling into a ball. She tried to sleep, but her thoughts gave her no peace. Where was he now? With whom? What was he hiding? She closed her eyes, trying to banish the obsessive thoughts, but they only grew stronger.

Suddenly, the phone on the nightstand vibrated with a notification. Anna's heart skipped a beat. It was from Maxim. She grabbed the phone, but the notification disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. She opened the app – it said «New Message,» but there was no text. Strange. He always texted when he arrived at a hotel.

Anna lay down again, but sleep wouldn't come. She thought about how just a few months ago they had chosen wallpaper for the living room together, how they had laughed at her idea for a graffiti-style accent wall. How Maxim had promised they would go to Italy someday to see real frescoes. But the trip never happened. «Later, Anna, we have our whole lives ahead of us,» he used to say.

Now she understood: «later» might never come.

In the morning, when Sophia woke up, Anna was already in the kitchen making breakfast. She smiled at her daughter, trying to hide her fatigue behind a mask of calm.

«Good morning, sunshine,» she said, handing Sophia a cup of hot chocolate in her favorite unicorn mug.

«Is Daddy back?» the girl asked, looking around.

«No, sweetie, he's still on his trip.»

Sophia nodded, as if this were a normal occurrence, and sat down at the table. Anna watched her, her heart breaking with pain. Her little girl was already getting used to her father's frequent absences. When had that started? When had they stopped noticing that something was going wrong?

After breakfast, Anna took Sophia to the garden. On the way, the girl held her hand and talked about the card she had drawn for her dad.

«Maybe he'll come back today?» Sophia asked as they reached the kindergarten gate.

«I hope so, sweetie,» Anna replied, kissing her daughter goodbye.

As Sophia disappeared through the door, Anna walked slowly back home. She needed to prepare for a meeting with a client, but her thoughts refused to focus. She opened her laptop and tried to work, but every time the phone rang, she flinched, hoping it was Maxim.

By lunchtime, she couldn't take it anymore and dialed his number.

«Hello,» he answered after a few rings.

«Hi,» she said, trying to hide the tremor in her voice. «How's the trip going?»

«Fine,» he replied curtly. «Negotiations are tough.»

«Will you be back today?»

«Not sure. I might be delayed another day.»

«Okay,» she forced out. «Be careful.»

«Anna,» his voice softened, «I love you. You know that, right?»

«Yes,» she whispered, though in that moment, she wasn't sure at all.

After the call, she sat at the table and opened her diary. The pen shook in her hand as she wrote:

«He says he loves me. But words without actions are just wind. When was the last time he looked me in the eyes and said those words? When was the last time he kissed me like I was his whole world?»

Anna closed the diary and looked out the window. Outside, life went on as usual. People walked down the street, laughing, talking. But for her, everything had changed. Today, for the first time, she felt that their perfect world was just a facade, hiding cracks beneath the surface.

She remembered how just a week ago, Maxim had come home smelling of another woman's perfume on his shirt. When she asked about it, he said he'd had a meeting with a female client who wore strong perfume. But Anna knew that scent. It was too familiar, too feminine. She hadn't asked another word, but since then, every time he touched her, she could smell that foreign perfume between them.

Now, sitting in the silence of her perfect home, Anna realized she could no longer pretend. Something had gone wrong. And she didn't know if she could fix it.

That evening, after Sophia was asleep, Anna approached Maxim's suitcase again. She opened it and thoroughly examined the contents. No signs of a trip. No work documents. Nothing to confirm his story.

She sat on the bed, holding the shirt he was supposed to wear today. The fabric was clean, without a single stain. It didn't look like he'd worn it yesterday. It didn't look like he'd planned to leave at all.

Anna closed her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. Was she going crazy? Were her suspicions just figments of her imagination, born from the fear of losing what she had?

But deep down, she knew the truth. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

She opened the diary and wrote the last words for the night:

«He has become a stranger. Or have I stopped seeing him? Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between. Perhaps I was afraid to see what had been right in front of me all along. But now I can't close my eyes. Now I have to know. Even if the truth shatters me into a million pieces. Even if nothing remains of what we called home.»

Anna closed the diary and went to bed, but sleep didn't come. Instead, images flashed before her eyes: Maxim laughing at something on his phone; Maxim kissing Sophia goodbye for a little too long; Maxim hiding his phone when she entered the room.

She didn't know that the next day would change her life forever. She didn't know that tomorrow she would find concert tickets to Paris – for the dates of his «business trip.» She didn't know that tomorrow her world would come crashing down.

But today she felt the first crack in their crystal castle. And she understood that she could no longer pretend that everything was alright.

Chapter 2. Tickets to Nowhere

The morning began with an unfamiliar feeling of emptiness – not a physical one, but the kind that arises when you realize something has broken irrevocably. Anna lay in bed, staring at the ceiling where the morning sun's reflections danced, trying to piece together the fragments of the previous evening. Maxim hadn't returned. He had sent a short text around midnight: «Negotiations dragged on. Don't wait up.» No kiss, no «love you,» none of the things he always used to add. Just a dry notification, as if she were a colleague, not his wife.

Sophia was already running around the house in her pajamas, humming a tune from last night's cartoon. Anna got up, feeling the pain in her chest tighten with every breath. It was Monday, a regular workday, but for her, it started with a question she didn't want answered: where was Maxim?

She made breakfast – an omelet with tomatoes and basil, just how Sophia liked it, and coffee with milk for herself. Her hands were shaking, and as she poured the milk into her cup, the white liquid spilled over the table, leaving trails that looked like tears.

«Mommy, is Daddy coming back today?» Sophia asked, dipping her toast into the yolk.

Anna looked at her daughter, and her heart clenched. How do you explain to a five-year-old that Daddy might not come back at all? How do you tell her that the world she believed was unshakable was built on sand?

«Daddy is very busy with work,» she replied, wiping the table with a napkin. «But he'll definitely be back.»

The words sounded hollow even to her own ears. Sophia nodded, as if accustomed to such answers, and Anna felt a lump of pain form in her throat. When had this become normal? When had her daughter stopped believing that Daddy would come home?

After Sophia left for kindergarten, Anna returned to the bedroom. Her gaze fell on Maxim's suitcase, still standing in the corner of the walk-in closet. She moved closer and opened it again. Nothing had changed since last night. Two shirts, a pair of trousers, nothing more. No toothbrush, no razor, not even a spare belt. For a man who spent at least a week on business trips, this was strange.

She closed the suitcase and went into the living room, where the set table stood. The candles had been put away, the tablecloth replaced with a new one, but the wax stains still showed through the fabric. Anna ran her finger over a spot, remembering how she had set the table last night, believing that in an hour, Maxim would be with her. Now she didn't know where he was or with whom.

Her gaze fell on Maxim's keys lying on the dresser in the hallway. He usually took them with him, but yesterday he had left them. Anna picked them up, feeling the cold metal. Keys to the house, the car, the garage. Everything that gave him access to their world. Or perhaps, everything that allowed him to leave?

She thought about checking the car. Maybe there was some evidence there that would confirm or refute her suspicions. Anna put on a jacket and went out into the yard. The morning was cool, with a light breeze carrying the scent of autumn leaves. She walked over to Maxim's black BMW and opened the door.

The interior was clean, as always. Maxim took care of his car like a child, and Anna had never seen a single speck of dust inside. She started her inspection with the glove compartment. It usually contained documents, insurance papers, sometimes a small notebook where he jotted down clients' phone numbers. But today, when she opened it, her fingers stumbled upon something unexpected.

Tickets.

Two tickets to a concert in Paris.

Anna pulled them out, feeling her heart start to beat so fast she could hear it pounding in her temples. The date... The date was yesterday. That very Saturday when Maxim said he was leaving on an urgent business trip to Moscow.

Her hands trembled as she saw the details: a concert by the band they had both adored at the beginning of their relationship, first-class tickets, a reservation at Le Meurice hotel – the very same one where they had spent their honeymoon. It was all too familiar, too personal, to be a coincidence.

«It's a mistake,» she thought. «Maybe he bought them for me? Wanted to surprise me?»

But the thought immediately dissipated. Maxim knew she didn't like the Eiffel Tower. She had told him how, during their trip to Paris, the tourist crowds and the cold wind had ruined her impression of the most romantic place in the world. He had remembered that, just as he remembered all her preferences. So why tickets to a concert there?

Anna sat in the passenger seat, clutching the tickets to her chest. Her breathing became shallow, black dots swimming before her eyes. She tried to calm down, remembering the breathing techniques from her yoga classes: inhale for four counts, hold, exhale for six. But today, the technique didn't work. Today, her world was crumbling.

«Why didn't I trust myself sooner?» flashed through her mind.

She remembered their conversation a week ago when he had come home smelling of another woman's perfume. She had asked him about it then, and he had said he'd met with a female client who wore strong perfume. But Anna knew that scent. It was too familiar, too feminine. Now she realized it was Ksenia's perfume – the young architect from his company, with whom he was working on a new project.

Ksenia. Anna had seen her a few times at corporate parties. Slender, tall, with a short haircut and bright makeup. She laughed loudly, spoke confidently, and was always near Maxim. Anna had thought they were just colleagues, that Ksenia was helping him with the project. But now everything fell into place.

She got out of the car, holding onto the door to keep from falling. Questions swirled in her head: How many times? For how long? Why hadn't she noticed? But the most terrifying question was: «Who is she to laugh at you?»

Anna went back inside, her legs feeling like lead. She put the kettle on to keep her hands busy, to avoid thinking about what came next. Because she knew: she had to check his email. She had to see what her heart already felt.

When the kettle boiled, she sat down at Maxim's laptop. He always left it unlocked, saying, «We have no secrets between us.» Today, she used that, feeling goosebumps run down her skin from the betrayal she herself was committing.

«Just to make sure he's not sick,» she repeated to herself like a mantra.

She opened his email and started looking for messages from Ksenia. Her first attempt was successful. Dozens of emails sent after work hours, with subjects like «Project» or «Important.» Anna opened the most recent one, sent last night, right around the time he was supposed to be «flying to Moscow.»

«I'm so sorry we had to leave so early. Yesterday was magical. Thank you for the Eiffel Tower and for everything else. Can't wait for our next meeting. Kisses, Ksenia.»

Anna felt nauseous. She opened the attachment and saw a photo. Maxim and Ksenia hugging at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. He was laughing, and she was snuggled up to him as if they had been together for ten years, not ten minutes. His hand was on her waist, his fingers slightly digging into the fabric of her dress. Anna recognized that touch – it was how he used to touch her in the very beginning, when every gesture was filled with passion and tenderness.

Her heart clenched so tightly she couldn't breathe. A lump formed in her throat, her eyes stung with tears, but she couldn't cry. She just sat there, staring at the photo, feeling the world collapse around her.

«That's not him,» Anna tried to convince herself. «That's not my Maxim. My Maxim would never do this.»

But it was him. His smile, his posture, his eyes shining with the same light she had seen in their first years together. Only now, that light wasn't meant for her.

She closed the email and started looking for others. More emails, more photos, more proof that her life for the past few months had been a lie. She saw them in the hotel, saw them dining at the restaurant she and Maxim had visited on their wedding anniversary. Each photo was a knife to her heart.

When Sophia returned from the garden, Anna was still sitting at the laptop, holding Maxim's phone, which she had taken to check his call history. She didn't notice her daughter enter the room until she heard a small voice:

«Mommy, are you crying?»

Anna flinched and tried to wipe her tears, but there were too many. She dropped the phone into the sink, where she had just been washing the lunch dishes. The water sizzled as the metal touched the liquid, and Anna watched as the screen went black, like the last hope dying.

«Mommy,» Sophia came closer, her small hands touching Anna. «Why are you crying?»

Anna knelt to be level with her daughter. She wanted to say something comforting, something that would protect Sophia from this pain. But the words stuck in her throat.

«Because adults make mistakes too,» she finally said, stroking her daughter's head.

«Daddy makes mistakes too?» Sophia asked, and her voice held such sadness that Anna wanted to die.

«Yes, sweetie,» she whispered, pulling her daughter close. «Daddy makes mistakes too.»

She held Sophia tightly, feeling her small body tremble. Her daughter, her most precious being in the world, already sensed that something was wrong. She had seen Daddy leave, seen Mommy cry at night, seen their home fill with silence instead of laughter.

After Sophia fell asleep that night, Anna returned to the laptop. She opened her diary and began to write, feeling each word tear another piece from her soul.

«Today I found the tickets. Tickets to Paris for the date of his „business trip.“ I checked his email because I could no longer pretend everything was okay. And I saw their photo by the Eiffel Tower. He was laughing. The way he hasn't laughed with me in a long time. I didn't scream. I didn't break any dishes. I just sat and stared at the screen while my world crumbled around me.»

«Sophia asked why I was crying. I said adults make mistakes too. But the truth is, I'm not mistaken. I see. I always saw. The look in his eyes when he thought I wasn't watching. His hands that no longer touched me the way they used to. His words that had become empty. I saw it all. And I still didn't believe it.»

«Why didn't I believe? Because I was afraid of losing what I had? Because I was afraid I wasn't good enough? Or because it was easier to live in an illusion than to face the truth?»

«I don't know how to breathe anymore. I don't know how to look him in the eye and pretend nothing happened. I don't know how to protect Sophia from this pain. But I know one thing: I can no longer pretend. I can no longer close my eyes.»

«Now I know what the end looks like.»

Anna closed the diary and looked out the window. Outside, life went on as usual. People walked down the street, laughing, talking. But for her, everything had changed. Today, for the first time, she felt that their perfect world was just a facade, hiding cracks beneath the surface.

She remembered their first meeting when Maxim came to her friend's party. He was wearing a black sweater that hugged his athletic frame, and he smiled in a way that took her breath away. They had talked all night, laughed at silly jokes, danced to music that was too loud. At the end of the evening, he had walked her home and kissed her so deeply her head spun.

«I'll never let you go,» he had whispered then.

Anna closed her eyes, trying to push the memories away. But they only grew stronger. She remembered their wedding, how he had looked at her as if she were his entire universe. She

remembered him holding her hand while she gave birth to Sophia, whispering, «You're the strongest woman I know.»

Now she understood it had all been a lie. Or maybe he had truly meant it in those moments. But the love that had once been their entire world had disappeared. Or perhaps it had simply faded away, and he hadn't noticed until he found someone new.

Anna opened the laptop again and started searching for information about Ksenia. Her social media profiles were private, but Anna found a few photos in public groups. Ksenia looked younger, slimmer, more confident. She smiled widely, laughed loudly, dressed in fashionable clothes. Anna looked at her own reflection in the laptop screen and saw a tired woman with bags under her eyes, disheveled hair, wearing an old T-shirt.

«That's why he left,» she thought.

But she immediately dismissed the thought. It wasn't true. Maxim had loved her for who she was. Or at least, he used to.

She closed the browser and opened her diary again. The pen shook in her hand as she wrote:

«I compare myself to her. I look at her photos and think: what can she give him that I can't? Maybe she's a better cook? Maybe she isn't tired at the end of the day? Maybe she doesn't ask why he's always on his phone?»

«But I know the truth. He didn't leave for her. He left me. Because I stopped being who I was. Because I became a mother, a wife, a homemaker, but I stopped being myself. I dissolved into our family, forgetting that I have a right to happiness too.»

«But does that give him the right to betray me? Does my fatigue justify his lies?»

«No. No amount of fatigue justifies betrayal. No amount of pain justifies lies. He could have talked to me. He could have told me how he felt. Instead, he chose secrecy and deception.»

«And now I have to decide: what to do next. Forgive him? Leave? Stay and pretend nothing happened?»

«I don't know. Today, I just can't breathe.»

Anna closed the diary and went to bed, but sleep wouldn't come. Instead, images flashed before her eyes: Maxim laughing with Ksenia by the Eiffel Tower; Maxim kissing her in the car; Maxim lying to her every minute for the past months.

She didn't know that the next day would bring new discoveries. She didn't know that tomorrow she would overhear Maxim's phone conversation with Ksenia. She didn't know that tomorrow her world would collapse completely.

But today she understood one thing: she could no longer pretend that everything was okay. She could no longer be blind. Because the truth, no matter how painful, was better than the sweetest lie.

When Maxim returned late that night, Anna pretended to be asleep. She felt him kiss her forehead, heard him whisper, «I'm sorry.» But the words meant nothing. Because now she knew the truth. And the truth was as bitter as black coffee without sugar.

She lay with her eyes closed, listening to him move around the house, put his suitcase in the closet, check on Sophia. And for the first time in their five years of marriage, she felt like a stranger in her own home. As if everything she had believed was hers had turned out to be an illusion.

In the morning, when Maxim sat down for breakfast, he smiled at her as if nothing had happened.

«Good morning,» he said, as if returning from a regular business trip.

Anna looked at him, and her eyes held no anger, no pain. Only emptiness.

«Morning,» she replied, pouring him coffee.

And in that moment, she understood that the game had begun. A game she no longer wanted to play but from which there was no escape. Because now she knew the truth. And the truth changed everything.

Chapter 3. The Diary of Silence

The silence that had settled in the house after Maxim's departure on another «business trip» was of a different quality. Before, the silence had been full – echoes of recent laughter, the ghost of shared conversations, the anticipation of his return. Now, it was an emptiness, ringing like an empty glass vessel. And in this ringing void, Anna's thoughts sounded too loud, too intrusive, too painful.

She could no longer keep them inside. They were eating her alive from the inside, like acid. She needed to pour them out somewhere, give them form, make them tangible. To prove to herself she wasn't going insane. To make these tiny, piercing shards of suspicion form a single, albeit horrifying, picture.

She took down a thick volume in dark blue leather binding with gold embossing from the top shelf of the bookcase. A gift from Maxim on their first anniversary. He had joked then: «For your great literary creations, my muse.» She had laughed and put it away, preferring to jot notes in her phone. Now, this book seemed the perfect sarcophagus for their dying love.

She sat at her desk by the window, pushed aside the sketches for new projects, and opened the first page. Clean, smooth, ruthlessly white. She took her favorite fountain pen – another gift from him; he always knew how to pick the perfect, expensive things – and wrote at the top in a sweeping, forceful script: *Diary of Silence*.

Why silence? Because she couldn't utter aloud any of the questions burning her soul. Because her silence was the only defense she could pit against his lies.

And she began to write. Meticulously, methodically, like an accountant tallying losses.

«October 16th. Said he was delayed by a meeting with investors. But at 3:30 PM I called Olga Petrovna (his secretary) to ask about the electricity bill. She said the meeting was in the morning, at 10:00, and had long been over. Where was he for those 5 hours?»

«October 18th. Came home tired. Said he was „snowed under at work.“ Went to sleep, turned toward the wall. I smelled of my new jasmine cream. He always loved that scent. Today, he didn't even notice. Or pretended not to?»

«October 20th. Woke up in the middle of the night – he wasn't in bed. Found him in the study, sitting by the window in the dark, looking at his phone. When he saw me, he quickly turned it off. Said: „Can't sleep, thinking about work.“ What thoughts glow on a phone screen at three in the morning?»

Each entry was a drop of poison. Each date – a headstone on the grave of her trust. She wrote and felt her heart icing over. It was a strange, masochistic ritual – day after day sticking the needles of her own suspicions into herself, to finally kill off any hope.

But the most tormenting part wasn't documenting his lies. It was the constant, obsessive comparison. It started spontaneously. After she looked at Ksenia's social media profile for the hundredth time, pieced together from bits found in mutual groups and friends' tags.

She couldn't help but compare. She studied photos of that woman – young, well-groomed, with a confident, defiant gaze. And she transferred that gaze onto herself – in the mirror, in shop windows, in her own old photographs.

«She is younger. Not even thirty. She has smooth skin without the crow's feet I got last year when Sophia was sick and he was away.»

«She is slimmer. Clearly goes to the gym. I never have time: work, home, child. „You could lose a little weight, Anya,“ he joked once at dinner. Was it a joke?»

«She works at his company. They see each other every day. Shared interests, shared projects, shared victories. And me? I ask how his day was, and he brushes me off: „You wouldn't understand, it's nuanced.“ Have I become „clueless,“ distant from his world?»

She wrote these words, and her pen dug into the paper, leaving ragged, ugly marks. She hated herself for this weakness, for this pettiness, but she couldn't stop. It was like picking at a wound: painful, but impossible to resist.

One night, she woke up to a thought of her own. The room was plunged in darkness, rain was lashing against the window. And in that oppressive dark, her consciousness, unshackled by daytime conventions, delivered the most terrible, most shameful question. It sounded in her head with frightening clarity:

«Would I want to be her? Young, free, desired? Or do I just want him back? Want us back?»

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to banish this treasonous thought. To want to be the one who destroys your family? It was unthinkable, disgusting. But the seed of doubt was sown. What if he left not because she had become worse? But because that one was better? New, fresh, unburdened by everyday life and children? And if she could become like that too... maybe then everything would go back to the way it was?

She recoiled from these thoughts in horror, but they had already seeped inside, poisoning her with their venom.

In the morning, she was wrecked, sleep-deprived. Her hands shook as she poured coffee. Maxim, on the other hand, looked fresh and energetic. He was humming something cheerfully as he gathered papers into his briefcase. His good mood cut her to the quick. Her world was falling apart, and he was singing.

She set her cup down on the table and, with an awkward movement, brushed against the edge of her diary. The heavy volume fell to the floor with a dull thud, splaying open on the very page where she compared herself to Ksenia.

Anna's heart sank. She froze, expecting an explosion, a scandal, questions.

Maxim bent down, picked up the diary. His gaze skimmed the open page, covered in her nervous, angular handwriting. She saw his eyes scan the lines. A second. Two. Something flickered in them – surprise? Irritation? But then he simply closed the book softly, almost casually, and handed it to her.

«Here,» he said, his voice calm, even light. «Take care of your 'great creations'.»

And then, looking at her pale, frightened face, he asked with the most genuine, sincere concern:

«Anya, is something wrong? You've been so nervous lately. Maybe you should see a doctor?»

In that moment, Anna understood everything completely. He had seen. He had read. He had understood. And his reaction – this indifferent, light remark and false concern – was worse than any hysterics. It meant he didn't care. That her suffering, her torturous doubts, her pain were merely an annoying inconvenience to him, «nerves» that needed to be treated by a doctor.

She silently took the diary from his hands, pressed it to her chest like a shield. She looked at him but didn't see him. A stranger stood before her. Handsome, successful, utterly alien.

«It's nothing,» she whispered, and her voice sounded hoarse and unrecognizable. «Everything's fine.»

He nodded, satisfied with the answer, plastered his morning smile back on his face, kissed her on the cheek – a quick, dry, ritualistic kiss – and left the house, whistling the same cheerful tune.

The door closed. Anna stood in the middle of the kitchen, clutching the diary – the only silent witness to her collapse. And her silence in response to his question was not weakness. It was the declaration of a war. A war she had declared on him. And on herself.

Chapter 4. The First Lie

Morning arrived not with the first rays of sun piercing the cracks in the bedroom shutters, but with an icy heaviness on her heart that woke Anna before dawn. This heaviness was alive, pulsating, like a huge, immovable stone pinning her to the bed, preventing her from taking a full breath. She lay motionless, staring at the ceiling, where the passing cars' headlights painted fleeting, meaningless pictures. Pictures of her life. A deafening hum still filled her ears – the hum of the silence that had followed yesterday's discovery, drowning out even the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room.

She heard every beat of her own heart – loud, slow, like a death knell. It was sounding the alarm, trying to warn her of the impending disaster, but it was too late. The disaster had already entered her home, her life, spreading through the rooms like an invisible, poisonous fog she now had to breathe. Anna turned onto her side, toward the cold, untouched half of Maxim's bed. The sheet was smooth, perfectly made. He hadn't slept at home. Again. «Urgent business trip.» Those words now sounded like the most cynical and cruel mockery.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force the image from her memory: the tickets in the velvet box, two seats in the stalls, the name of the concert hall in Paris. And the photo. Black and white, slightly blurry, apparently taken by a random passerby. Maxim and that other woman. Ksenia. They stood embracing against the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower's intricate metalwork, and he was looking at her in a way he hadn't looked at Anna for years – with adoration, delight, with the very fire that had once made her believe in fairy tales. And then there was his car's glove compartment, where she had found those cursed tickets, and the kitchen sink, where his phone had fallen when her disobedient, trembling fingers had typed «Ksenia Petrova» into the search engine and stumbled upon her social media profile. The profile was private, but the avatar showed that same smile, that young, self-assured face, with the caption: «Architect. Love Paris and its atmosphere.»

Anna rubbed her eyes fiercely with her fists, trying to erase these images. But they were burned into her retinas, searing her from within. She had to pull herself together. For Sophia. Her little daughter must not see, must not feel, that the crystal castle of her childhood had cracked, and icy water from the real world was about to come pouring through.

Like a robot programmed for a perfect life, Anna got out of bed, took a shower – too hot, almost scalding – put on a soft bathrobe, and went to the kitchen to make breakfast. The coffee maker hissed, filling the air with a bitter, invigorating aroma. Yogurts, cheese, and fruit for Sophia came out of the fridge. Her hands performed the habitual actions automatically, while her mind raced in a vicious circle: «Why? For what? How could I not have noticed?»

«Mommy, is Daddy coming back today?» a sleepy little voice came from the doorway.

Anna started, nearly dropping the plate of sliced banana. Sophia stood there in her unicorn pajamas, clutching a worn-out teddy bear Maxim had given her for her birthday. Her large, clear eyes, so like his, looked at her mother with a quiet, unchildlike question.

«Of course, sunshine,» Anna's voice sounded hoarse, foreign. She forced a smile, bent down, and hugged her daughter, burying her nose in her silky hair that smelled of baby shampoo. «Daddy's just held up at work. Come sit down for breakfast.»

She poured herself a cup of coffee but couldn't take a sip. A lump in her throat made it hard to breathe. She watched as Sophia neatly ate her yogurt and thought about how many more such morning lies lay ahead. How many times she would have to lie to the most precious person in the world to protect her from a truth that now seemed ugly and dangerous.

Suddenly, the familiar sound of an engine was heard outside – Maxim was home. Anna's heart stopped, then began to beat so violently she felt faint. She grabbed the countertop to keep from falling. The blood drained from her face, leaving her skin icy.

The key clicked in the lock, the door opened. And he walked in. Not travel-weary, not tired after a night flight, as someone returning from an «urgent business trip» should be. He walked in looking fresh, shaven, smelling of the expensive cologne she herself had once chosen for him. And in his hands was a huge bouquet of roses. Scarlet, perfectly shaped, as flawless and deceitful as his smile.

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