

CHAPTER ONE

DR. GRANT PUSHED the curved end of the handheld Doppler probe into the gel on Maggie's engorged stomach and slid it around with expertise to outsmart a wiggling fetus. "So, you two decide on a name yet? You're cutting it kind of close, you know?"

"We still have five weeks." Jake sat up straighter, his chair nudging under his movement and squeaking against the pastel swirls of the exam room wall.

"Technically, sure, but it *could* happen at any time now." The doctor paused the motion of her hand and seemed to concentrate for a moment before moving it again, gliding the handheld heartbeat Doppler unit to the other side of Maggie's impressive baby bump.

"I want to name it after Jake's dad, Malcolm. It's a good, sturdy, *proper* name. Sounds important." Maggie winked at Jake.

"Sounds like a mouthful." Jake rolled his eyes.

"But I *like* your dad." Maggie emphasized her affection knowing Jake would get her meaning but the doctor wouldn't understand how much she did *not* like her *own* father.

"I *love* my dad, but his middle name is easier. Robert. Not such a—"

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“Maggie?” The doctor interrupted. “When did you last feel the little guy moving around?”

“Um...I don’t...” Maggie looked over to Jake. “Olympic tryouts were last night, right?”

Jake shook his head, a wide grin spreading across his face. “Nah, that was the night before. You should have seen him, Doc. You could make out his tiny hands and feet poking for freedom.”

Maggie chuckled at Jake and looked up at the doctor, her laughter stopping abruptly at the doctor’s expression. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Maggie tried to sit up and look at the monitor next to the exam table. The paper hung from the end of the machine, waiting for someone to hit print and hand over proof of life for proud parents to bring to the office and show off, or stick to the refrigerator at home.

“Dr. Grant?” Maggie’s voice cracked as she spoke, and horror filled her eyes. “What’s wrong with my baby?”

Jake stood from his chair and was at Maggie’s side in two steps.

“I’m gonna go grab the ultrasound equipment and see how he’s laying in there. I think he’s blocking the signal.” She left the room with concern rather than curiosity on her face.

The baby was *not* blocking the signal.

Maggie listened with a slack jaw as Dr. Grant told her their baby was gone. Dead. For no discernable or obvious reason. The doctor explained how these things *do* happen, even in the modern world—a horrible tragedy—and how Maggie didn’t do anything wrong and should not have any guilt. Maggie overheard other doctors and medical staff as they gathered outside her

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door and discussed her options. She vaguely registered someone speaking to Jake in hushed tones about organ donation. Nothing seemed real. And every sound for the next two hours was muffled as if she were underwater. Jake said things to her she knew she understood, but couldn't remember minutes later.

The whole time, her hands never left her stomach.

Maggie caressed the hump she had lovingly watched grow from the moment the home pregnancy stick had showed them the news. She had done everything doctors suggested. She had read all the books and swallowed all the vitamins. She had applied the lotions and played the music. She had reveled in the changes to her body, except the discomfort of her natural temperature adjusting to the blood flow demands from another heartbeat. She hadn't waited for his birth to start writing in the baby book, and had begun marking down anything and everything that could be a memory or an anecdote for later. She had filled their house with the small subtle signs of children, and spent months creating a haven for her little boy to call his nursery. She was young. She was healthy. And none of this made any sense to her.

"I'm sorry, what?" Jake's voice was sharp, and drew Maggie from her bubble of confusion and pre-grief consternation.

"Jake?" She questioned his tone as much as his words.

He turned and looked at her. She could see he'd been crying, but his emotions were a visibly twisted knot of both pain and *anger*. He looked at the doctor, and the woman took a deep breath before stepping forward to approach Maggie's bedside. Jake walked

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around the bed and grabbed Maggie's hand, his breath jagged with emotion.

"What? What's wrong now?"

"It's not that anything is *additionally* wrong, Maggie. And I don't want to say it's okay, because it's not. *None* of this is *okay* and I understand that, but *you* are okay, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Maggie's expression twisted with worry and she studied Jake, waiting for an explanation.

"They want to induce labor." Jake blurted out.

"Labor?" Maggie's face wrinkled up in confusion and she turned to the doctor.

"Normally in these situations the body kicks into labor naturally within a couple days, as a way of..." The doctor paused to choose her next words, speaking them slowly, with purpose. "...to expel the *fetus*."

Maggie didn't like the way it wasn't her son or baby or boy anymore. He had become a *fetus*, a *thing*, which had no personality or purpose. A scientific fact to be dealt with. Her guts twisted around her already aching heart and she began sobbing again.

"We have choices, Maggie. We can wait for nature, we can go in cesarean, or we can induce and put you through labor." Dr. Grant's voice became more matter-of-fact, and what Maggie had felt was a friendship between them suddenly had a cold edge.

"Maggie, I—"

"Which is best?" Maggie cut Jake off and sat up in an attempt to be eye level with the doctor. The woman Maggie had trusted with her and her baby was now in charge of just one life.

"You're young and healthy, I would suggest inducing childbirth." The doctor's expression softened and showed genuine concern. "The sooner the better."

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Maggie's eyes widened and her focus swam around the room for a moment before coming back to the doctor's face.

"I hate sending people home in this situation, Maggie. Waiting for nature has its benefits if you are opposed to medications or chemicals, but it also allows you time to think about the fact the baby you're carrying..." Dr. Grant glanced at Jake and winced apologetically as she returned her attention to Maggie. "...is no longer *viable*. I think that does more damage to the emotional state of the mother, if not the father as well. Cesarean is surgery, it requires recovery and can have complications. A vaginal birth lets you heal quicker, and in the end, is the body's natural way of doing this.

Maggie nodded, the warm tears once again running freely down her face.

Two hours later, prepped and in a delivery room, Maggie was gritting her teeth and pushing with all her might. A sheen of sweat covered her—the strands of hair plastered to her forehead and neck were tendrils of visible exertion. Her face reddened from effort, and her jaw ached from clenching. She gasped several gulps of air, as the whirl of pressure increased again and pulled her down into its grip.

"Bear down now." The doctor spoke through her mask.

The top of Dr. Grant's head appeared over the small white sheet meant to shield Maggie's view. She glared at the colorful surgical hat on the doctor. She focused on the doctor herself, as if she could blame the woman, but quickly felt bad for doing so. Instead, Maggie grit her teeth and did as she was told.

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Jake held Maggie's hand, wiped her forehead, and offered encouraging words just as they'd practiced in classes. "You're doing fantastic, hon. Almost there." The expression in his eyes was worry and sorrow, rather than anxiety and hope, and Maggie's heart ached knowing the difference.

He never left her side. Throughout the process, Jake had never faltered, never been anything other than exactly what she needed, and she knew she couldn't blame him either. She offered him a weak smile, her eyes burning behind the exhaustion of strain.

The physical pain of labor had been incredible at first—the pinching of muscles, the sudden breathtaking sharpness of her body's reaction to hormones, and the brief moments of relief when the contractions subsided. She had spent the first half hour curled up as tightly as she could in response. After only a few rounds of screams and agony, lashing out at anyone close enough to take the blame, she agreed there was no need to stick to her original plan for a drug-free childbirth and welcomed the epidural. A large male nurse administered the spinal, and Maggie's pain subsided. Physically.

She quickly regretted the decision, as she realized the absence of physical pain meant her mind was free to cause her a different type of agony. At least the excruciating misery of labor had made it impossible to think about the circumstances, to know what they were doing and why. With the pain under control, Maggie's mind wandered. Her guilt flourished, her sorrow blossomed, and her mental anguish began to carve a home into her psyche.

Maggie was abjectly frustrated and wished for the ability to change fate. Her heart demanded a different outcome. Her inside voice screamed and yelled and

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wanted to pray to beings she didn't believe in, to beg and plead to wake up from the nightmare truth. Her mind spun and her chest hurt. Her throat was dry from sobbing. Her eyes burned from crying. Her body had turned against her own child, and now she was forcibly ejecting what she had spent months anticipating, preparing for, and joyously awaiting. This was supposed to be a day filled with jubilation, but everything had gone so horribly wrong in the space of a heartbeat—or rather, the lack of one.

I'm giving birth to death.

She couldn't get the idea, the phrase, or the *truth* of it out of her mind. It twisted around and repeated, grew stronger, and became a force of its own.

"Give me one more good push, Maggie." The doctor's muffled words floated up to her and Maggie looked at Jake for direction.

He nodded. "Deep breath, honey. Inhale, inhale, inhale...And push, two, three, four..." He counted at pace like in class. He kept eye contact, exactly as they'd taught him.

In response, she tightened her grip on his hand, grinding the bones of his fingers against one another and causing his expression to flash pain before twisting into acceptance. She pushed. She pushed as instructed—as if she were forcing her insides out. She pushed harder at the end of his count, as if expanding the effort in one last burst. And she felt a release of pressure followed by a strange chill. She looked down to see the doctor spin away from her briefly, covering the bounty in her hands with a small towel, before turning back to Maggie.

"Good girl, now give me one more push. Nice and strong." A hitch in the doctor's voice let Maggie

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know the professional hated the outcome as well, but hid her emotions behind a surgical mask and the practiced ability to use scientific terminology to protect her own composure.

Jake gasped and Maggie turned in time to watch his expression of horror change to confusion and let her know he'd forgotten about the placenta. The placenta. The last little bit of the baby Maggie wouldn't be bringing home. Maggie drew a deep breath knowing the worst was done—the *birth* was technically over.

Their baby hadn't come into the world kicking or screaming. No amount of suctioning its nose or slapping its tiny butt would clear its airways or startle it into sucking for breath. No flurry of nurses measured or weighed or administered inoculations. No little blue blanket and matching hat were pulled from the warmer. No naked newborn had been laid across her stomach to allow Jake to cut the cord. She'd given birth to silence personified, and even the machines bowed their heads in respect, with their screens of information on muted display.

No tiny wails would be heard in her delivery room. There were no shrieks other than her own, and she let loose. Knuckles white as she gripped the bed railing, Maggie opened her mouth and released her physical pain, her mental agony, her broken heart, and her stained soul into the white walls around her. The feral scream was a cry to the universe itself, and she bore down one more time.

CHAPTER TWO

JAKE PULLED TO a stop in the yawning shadow of the two-story house and cut the Honda's engine. The sudden absence of the squealing fan belt created a loud silence Jake could almost believe was the universe itself, holding its breath. In the passenger seat, Maggie slept, clutching the baby blanket meant for the child they had buried before it could be bundled.

Jake exhaled, slow and controlled through pursed lips, and studied their new life. The late afternoon sun stretched the landscape ominously across the grounds, causing pre-dusk darkness on this side of the tall colonial. The Honda Civic felt small and insignificant in the wide driveway leading to the oversized two-car attached garage. Scanning across the multi-paned windows of the home, Jake's gaze fell to the unkempt garden—its flowers and manicured bushes had gone wild, untamed and untrimmed. Weathered statues stood within the forgotten foliage with dead leaves of the previous autumn clinging to them, modest clothing meant to hide their alabaster flesh. The massive garden hugged a visible sunroom on the left side of the house, bookending the home between it and the driveway where Jake sat. Large stately oak trees, hundreds of years older than the home itself, dotted the yard. A thin row

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of shorter, younger, birch and pine lined both sides of the property and disappeared around the back, where Jake knew they continued and connected in a thicket that all but blocked the view of neighboring homes.

It was a lot to take in—the house, the garden, the grounds themselves—but Jake had no regrets. He took a deep breath and exhaled through a smile filled with hope. Maggie hadn't seen the house yet, but she had trusted him to handle it while she struggled, fetal in her grief. He knew she would love it. Eventually. When she allowed herself to love again.

He turned to her and his smile broadened. She looked peaceful, so young and innocent in her sleep, as if the world's pain had never touched her, and her heart had never been broken by the loss of a child.

A skid mark in the grass on her side of the driveway let him know the moving trucks had come and gone, and Jake hoped the movers had been more careful with his belongings than they had the lawn. According to the hand drawn map of the house and instructions he'd left for them, Jake expected to find the furniture and boxes in the right rooms.

Four hours beforehand, after a large breakfast, because his mother knew no other way to make them, he and Maggie had left their old town, their friends, his folks, and their jobs behind to start anew. It was far enough to avoid everyday reminders of their pain and hopefully help with the healing process, yet close enough to visit his family on a whim. Maggie had given up her position at the daycare, but continued to run into parents she knew—their children alive and well, and her awkward sadness at their existence had made even leaving the house difficult for her. Federal Credit

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making a position for Jake at the Monroe branch not only helped he and Maggie relocate, but let him know he had the full support of his coworkers, boss, and even corporate. “Make yourself indispensable,” his mother had always said, and apparently he had.

Jake looked back up at the house, noting the way the late afternoon darkness made it seem as if someone stood in the window of the room above the garden, the reflective glass marred with a matte black shadow of sorts. He knew from the walk-through and inspections that the windows were in great shape, *all but new*, as the real estate agent had claimed. The interior, the bones, from structure to pipes to electric were all solid, and unexpected, according to the inspector. *Every house has a little hiccup*, he had said, but then found none. All the major appliances and equipment had been replaced within the last ten years, and even the outlets had been brought up to code, making the century-old home a modern convenience in a sturdy turn-of-the-century beauty. The exterior, however, was going to need a coat of paint soon and a new roof before long.

He rolled his window down and inhaled, smelling the fresh air of his new small town. He nodded, pleased with the relative silence and how welcome it felt. He and Maggie could use a little peace. A single car drove by and reminded Jake he was indeed in a residential neighborhood—it was simply less populated and landscaped for privacy.

“We can afford this?”

Jake turned to find Maggie had blinked awake and was leaning forward against her seat belt, eyes wide as she stared through the dirty windshield at the house in front of her.

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“We can.” He reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. “Turns out, the cost of living over here is much lower, and the housing market is kinder for it.”

Maggie gave him a side-eye glance, and he saw the worried, unspoken question in her single raised eyebrow.

“Yes, my paycheck remains the same, so we’re fine. And I only dipped into savings a little bit more than we intended, but I think it’s worth it.”

“It’s beautiful, Jake.”

He could hear the weariness in her voice, even after the two-hour nap in the car. She hadn’t slept well for months, but often claimed she did better at naptime, as if sleeping for short bursts during the day was easier on her mind—meaning she had fewer nightmares during the day. But it still didn’t quite make up for the sleepless nights, and he could hear it clearly in her voice.

“I’m glad you like it.” His hand moved ever so slightly as he caressed her back, watching her take it all in.

“It’s not a *mansion*, but it’s definitely bigger than the rental. We may have to actually *buy* things to fill the space.” She grinned at the house rather than at him. Her eyes moved up to find the small balcony deck above the garage, and then left across the blue and white colonial’s upper gables. Turning to look out her window, her eyes widened. “How big is this yard? Is that *all* ours?”

“All the way to the tree line on both sides, and it wraps around back to a little copse of trees a kid would consider a forest.”

She blanched at his use of the word *kid*, and drew her shoulders closer to her body reflexively, her knuckles whitening as she tightened her grip on the blanket.

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He grimaced. He knew better. She turned toward him but looked past him rather than meeting his eyes. He could see the pain in their blue depths, hiding behind her tightened lips.

She furrowed her brows at something in her view.

“Oh wow, *that* needs help.”

He turned, following her gaze and knew she was talking about the garden.

“It’ll give me something to do I suppose, to keep my mind and hands busy and occupy my time.” She nodded more to herself than to him, and he watched as her eyes narrowed at what he imagined was the statues poking out of the tangled mess.

“Shall we?” Jake waited for her to make eye contact, both for communication, but also to temperature check the damage of his comment. She nodded and smiled at him, not showing her teeth in the thinly stretched grin, but letting him know all was well.

The front walk, a curved cobblestone path from the driveway to the door, showed signs of age and replacements, furthering the patchwork effect of it. Miniature lilac bushes along the street side of the walk were beginning to shake winter and unfurl new green leaves. Flowers that would fill the air with wonderful springtime scents had yet to bud or blossom.

Stepping up to the stoop, they looked at each other, the anticipation in Maggie’s eyes outweighing any sorrow normally housed there. Jake unlocked the front door and swung it inward, sweeping his hand out in front of him to indicate she should enter.

“Ohhh.” Maggie wrinkled up her nose. “How long was this place empty?”

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“A couple years, but they hired a crew to come clean the whole thing, top to bottom.”

“They missed the garden.” Maggie’s flat tone would have been taken differently if not for the smirk on her face. “It’s a bit stale in here. Can we open the windows up?”

“Sure.” He looked to the multi-pane window left of the front door. “Oh, the real estate agent must have taken the screens off, I’ll have to find them. Probably in the garage. But yes, once I do, we’ll crack it wide open.”

Stepping through the threshold, it was Jake’s turn to take pause, as his eyes found the pile of boxes in the front foyer, left in the wrong location by the movers. Sighing, a quick scan told him there was no writing on the boxes and the movers had had no choice but to leave them there. *I’ll deal with ‘em later*, he thought. *First things first.*

Jake reached out and found Maggie’s hand, pulled her toward him, and grinned. “Let me show you your new castle, my queen.”

Maggie returned his smile, as true and heartfelt as the day they met.

They may have lost a child, they may have gone through hell in the process, and they may have damage from which they would never heal, but *they* were not broken. Counselors and doctors had told them this type of trauma often broke a relationship, but not theirs. As sure as he knew how much he loved her, he was confident in her affections for him.

She leaned into him and kissed him. “Yes, please.”

“And then we’ll order Chinese and have a picnic, as one does for the first meal in a new house. And then watch a movie and maybe...” His voice trailed off.

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He had thought about suggesting they christen the home, but she hadn't been particularly amorous over the past few months and he didn't want to push her before she was ready.

Maggie nodded, eyes wide and seemingly unaware of his unspoken insinuation, as she tugged on his hand to pull him along. "On with the tour already, mister."

The lilt in her voice and playfulness in her actions warmed Jake's heart, but he could still see the exhaustion in her eyes. Above and beyond the lack of sleep, there was a layer of mental exhaustion from the last several months tearing her up inside while she healed the loss of their child. And yet, the ability to be excited, and the wide-eyed levity made her barely more than a child herself. *God, I love this woman*, he thought as he allowed himself to be pulled along.

"It's so spacious, Jake." Their path had taken them in a strange zigzag through the house, from living room to upstairs and back down. "We don't have nearly enough photos and art for the walls, we'll have to fill holes. And so many bedrooms..."

As her voice trailed, he recollected her excitement in the master bedroom—with its own full bath and French doors leading to a small balcony deck above the garage. He had seen the jovial sparkles in her eyes change slightly upon entering the first spare room, the one she called the *avocado suite* due to the sage green carpet and trim. But when she entered the second spare—juxtaposed to the muted green with its festive, bright blue and beige striped wallpaper running from the chair rail to the floor—her mood had changed, her eyes saddened.

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“Well, I figure we can have friends visit, and my parents, obviously.” He drew a cautious breath, trying to ease her discomfort while gently moving them forward beyond her damaged heart. “And eventually, maybe, we’ll add some permanent occupants.” He offered her a weak smile. They hadn’t actually discussed trying again or more babies or anything even remotely family-future related.

She nodded and raised her arm, gently placing her open palm against his cheek. “You’ve thought of everything.” She spun in the kitchen and headed toward the sunroom, calling behind her as she went. “We’ll have to move some things around. I don’t like where the movers put—”

She stopped, mid-step into the sunroom.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, taking in the large well-lit room, its walls made up of glass windows and doors, the clear ceiling an arched half dome.

Even in the late afternoon sun it was bright in this corner of the house, though looking up, Jake imagined a thunderstorm would be a stunning visual from this room.

A wide antique wicker chair near the double window on the back wall drew her attention, and she looked back at Jake with an arched brow.

“Previous owners left it. Or staging from the real estate agent, maybe?” He shrugged. “There are a couple things like that.”

She looked up at the sky through the glass, her smile beaming but her voice small, frail. “I love it, Jake. I truly love it.”

Jake, thrilled at her reaction, was delighted he’d pleased her, and relief washed over him. She could heal here. They could move on here.

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Maggie cocked her head at the garden. "That is going to take some work though, isn't it?"

CHAPTER THREE

JAKE USED A utility knife to slice the tape on an empty box and flatten the cardboard before adding it to the growing pile in the foyer. The bathrooms and linens were done—unpacked, put away, and waiting to see if Maggie would decide to move them around as she saw fit. He closed the knife, slipped it into his back pocket, and headed for the kitchen. The open cupboards were still empty except for the grip liners he'd cut to size that morning. The glasses, dishes, and cookware were still haphazardly grouped on the countertops where he'd left them.

Knowing Maggie would want the kitchen and bathrooms done first, he had suggested they split the duty, but she had simply taken the suggestion with indifference and curled up in the sunroom's wicker chair, baby blanket in hand. It was the same pose she'd had for the last several weeks, only the location had changed. It saddened Jake, but he was also a realist and understood new walls weren't going to erase the pain overnight. He had *unpacked* the kitchen, but purposely left it all out for her to put away, hoping she'd take on the task of organizing. He didn't *need* her help so much as he *wanted* it. It wasn't about her being proactive in

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their new life, but about her occupying her mind with something other than loss. Something other than the baby blanket. Stupid and simple as it sounded, the doctor had said settling into a new home came with enough tiny details to hopefully pull her back into everyday activities.

He sighed and picked a glass from among the crowd on the left side of the sink, before proceeding to the fridge to fill it with filtered water. He noted the refrigerator's digital control panel had two ice settings, crushed and cubed, and touched the first option. A swoosh of ice chips and gentle hum of the motor spitting them out filled the silent room and he looked around.

It's too quiet.

He tried to remember which box he'd put his headphones in, as he held the glass under the water dispenser. Jake glanced at the interior French doors between the kitchen and sunroom, hanging wide open, and wondered if Maggie had moved at all in the last few hours.

He noted she'd turned the chair so it faced the garden, leaving her back to the kitchen. Walking normally—hoping a creaking floorboard or the shuffling fabric of his jeans would give away his approach—he tried not to startle her as he entered the sunroom. She looked back at him and he could see she had been crying. Though her face was dry now, the redness in her eyes betrayed her stoic façade. He set the glass of ice water down next to her journal on the cardboard box she was using as a makeshift table, and kissed the top of her head.

“Whatcha thinking?” Jake was unsure if this was one of those times when she wanted to talk or be left alone, and he held his breath waiting for the answer.

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She sighed, her shoulders shuddering under the baby blanket she had draped across them. “I don’t know.” She returned her gaze to the overgrowth beyond the windows.

“What do you think of the garden? Should we hit Home Depot and get you a full wheelbarrow of tools and toys for out there?”

She replied softly, sounding weak and weary. “I guess. When it’s warm enough, I suppose I’ll go out and see what I can do with that.” She pulled the blanket tighter and held the corner against her face, inhaling what Jake knew was fabric softener rather than the tender smell of an infant.

Warm enough? He glanced over at the indoor/outdoor thermometer next to the sliding glass door and noted it read sixty-five degrees, in April. *It’s plenty warm.* He wondered if part of her tone was acknowledging the excuse for what it was—an excuse.

“Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you a sandwich?” He rested a hand on her shoulder.

She shook her head. “I don’t think we have anything anyway. I need to go to the grocery store. We have almost nothing, outside of condiments and a couple boxes of mac ‘n’ cheese.” She sighed heavily, stared straight ahead, and flattened her voice. The monotone suggested she was running through the motions of caring, but had somehow forgotten how to *sound* genuine. It was eerily robotic, like she had been the first week after they had lost the baby—when the tears initially slowed and the silence began. “Is there anything in particular you’d like this week?”

He shook his head even though she wasn’t looking his direction to see it. “No, you know me. I’ll eat

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anything you make—except that pink gravy thing.” He brought up the creamed cauliflower and tomato soup failure, hoping to lighten her gloomy disposition, as they had both laughed about it for *months* after the recipe mishap, and it was still a topic that made her giggle. *Usually*. Today, he got no reaction at all.

“Spaghetti, stir-fry, the norm?”

“Sure, hon, whatever you wanna make.” He could feel the grief coming off her in waves and knew she didn’t really want to cook, let alone go to the store. *Hell*, he thought, *she hasn’t even put the kitchen stuff away*.

“You know, Maggie, I’ve got to go hunt down a mechanic to fix Cindy’s squeak.” He paused, waiting for her usual chastising of the name he’d chosen for their car. She said nothing and he continued. “Why don’t I go to the store for you while I’m out? Make me a list of must-haves, and you stay here and settle in more.”

Maggie nodded without words, still staring straight ahead.

“You look exhausted. Bad night’s sleep?”

Maggie shrugged. “Fitful, I guess. I didn’t really wake up at any point, but I didn’t really sleep. You know? I’m so tired, Jake.”

Jake nodded, “Yeah, I know what you mean. Restless. And we’ve been busy, what with packing and moving and picking up our lives and leaving town. Even visiting with my folks for a couple days can be tiring. It all takes a toll. But we’ll settle in and things will be wonderful.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something but closed it again.

“Do you really like the house, Maggie?” He tried to change the subject.

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“Oh I do. I do. I’m just tired. I absolutely love it.” She curled her lips into a forced half-smile, looking ahead rather than at him. “You did good, Jakey.”

He rolled his eyes. He hated when she called him that, and she knew it. *Which might be a good sign*, he thought. *Perhaps, tired or not, her playfulness is starting to come back.*

“I’ll get the groceries, you can stay and rest.”

“Thank you.” The relief in her voice made him feel a little better.

“Maybe go back up to bed, or lay on the couch in the living room?”

“No, I like it here. It’s peaceful.”

Something in the comment tickled the back of his mind, bothering him on some level, and he looked around the room in an attempt to understand why. The room was all but empty.

No memories on the walls? Jake wondered and breathed in the space for a moment, trying to get a sense of Maggie’s peace.

Midmorning light made the room *seem* warm and cozy. Even with the overgrowth in the garden, the green views of grass and trees outside made it feel inviting. But the glass gave the room a slight chill compared to the rest of the house and he wondered if maybe that was what she found comforting. She’d been so hot and miserable during her pregnancy. Perhaps she found unknown solace in the cooler air. He couldn’t remember if she’d complained about the cold or not during the mild winter they’d had, but then again, she hadn’t left the house often either. He debated lowering the thermostat for the house and seeing if it helped her disposition at all. It was something to consider anyway.

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If it makes her happy, then so be it.

“Alright. Whatever works for you, hon.” He pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the NOTES app. “What do we need?”