



The TV was silent, the kitchen and living rooms empty. A lone lamp shone next to the sofa, a habit she and Scott had formed the first weeks of their marriage—leave a light on for the one who wasn't home yet. She hadn't been out that late, but he'd evidently already retired. She put her leftovers in the fridge and turned off the lamp.

He sat in their bed, his back against the headboard, readers perched halfway down his nose as he studied the laptop screen in front of him. She leaned against the doorframe and took her fill. Those glasses always made her heart flutter a bit, reminding her of a stoic professor instead of the basketball coach she married. At only thirty-four, he was one of the youngest upper school principals in the state, and she admitted to being more than a bit proud. Where had they gone wrong?

He glanced up and immediately tensed when he caught sight of her. "Are you going to issue more ultimatums tonight?"

She shook her head.

"Good. Because this is my house, too, and I'm not leaving. If you think it's so bad, you can be the one who leaves."

So much for hoping their marriage might have a chance. She crossed her arms against her chest and tightened her lips.

“Did your parents agree with you and finally find all the bad things your dad’s been searching for about me since we met?” He shut his computer.

“Actually, they told me I needed to reconsider.” She shifted her jaw. “Mom even sent leftovers.”

“I grabbed a sandwich earlier.”

“I’m sure that tasted much better than my mom’s pork chops.”

He tossed a file onto the bedspread. “That’s not what I was insinuating. I simply wanted you to know I wasn’t hungry.”

“I really wasn’t worried about you being hungry.” She kicked her shoes off in the direction of the closet.

“That much is obvious.”

“What?” She spun around from the dresser drawer she’d pulled open.

“It’s not like you invited me to the dinner you got so mad about me not attending.” He waved his hand in the general direction of her parents’ house.

“It’s a standing date. We’ve gone to their house for dinner on Tuesday night for the last four years.” She barely kept herself from stamping her foot. “Well, I have anyway. The last almost two years, you’ve been too busy.”

“You knew I’d be busier when I accepted the principal position. But you encouraged me to take it anyway.”

“I didn’t realize ‘busier’ meant every waking hour of the day!” She gathered her pajamas and stormed into their bathroom.

How could her parents think things could be fixed? With Scott having an attitude of “I did no wrong,” there was no way he’d agree to go talk to Marty. And she definitely wasn’t going to go by herself. She stripped her dress off—one that Scott liked in the past but hadn’t even noticed the last few times

she'd worn it—and took a step toward the hamper to throw it in. A pile of Scott's clothes mocked her from the floor in the doorway of the closet. She kicked his pants closer to where they should've been but refused to put them in the basket. Why should she have to pick up after a grown man?

Comfortable pajamas on, she grabbed her toothbrush and stuck it in her mouth.

And gagged.

Reaching into her mouth to find whatever had poked her, she gagged again when she pulled out a toenail. Someone's habit of propping his feet on the edge of the bathroom counter had obviously continued this evening, with his nails flipping every which way but the sink or trashcan as he clipped them. She gargled an extra two minutes to try and erase the grossness from her memory.

Throwing open the door, she marched back across the bedroom, grabbing her hairbrush so hard that several bobby pins flew across the dresser and dove off the end.

"What now?" Scott's voice carried more than a hint of exasperation.

"Do you know what I found on my toothbrush?" She shook her brush at him. "After I stuck it in my mouth?"

"Toothpaste?" He didn't bother to look up.

"A toenail!" She hadn't meant for her voice to be that close to a shriek, but how could she help it when he didn't even care about anything to do with her anymore?

He glanced up with a raised eyebrow.

"Do you pay any attention at all to where those things fly when you're clipping them?" She practically gagged again. "It was in my *mouth*. Your dirty toenail."

"I'm sorry. It's not like I put it there out of malicious intent. It ended up there accidentally."

"If you'd quit clipping them in the sink in the first place, accidents like that wouldn't happen." She faced her mirror

again to work on the mess her hair had become through the evening.

“And where would you prefer I clip them? In the kitchen? Off the back porch? Maybe while I’m at school before I come home?” He stashed his papers and laptop into his bag and let it slide down to the floor with a thump. “I told you I was sorry. I’ll try to be neater next time.”

“That’ll happen just like you’ll actually put your clothes in the hamper.” She muttered it under her breath while working on a particularly snarly tangle. She’d considered cutting her hair, but Scott liked it longer. Maybe it was time.

“And I suppose you think yourself the neatest person in the world?” He fluffed his pillow before slamming his head back onto it.

“Neater than you.” She tossed her brush back onto the dresser and faced the bed.

“Ha!”

She froze where she was pulling her covers back. “Ha?”

“Yeah. It’s the sound someone makes when he doesn’t believe someone else.” Scott rolled over on his side, leaving his back to her.

“I was more interested in what part you didn’t believe.” Oh, how she fought the urge to throw something at him.

“The you being neater.”

“I’m neat.”

“Except your dresser, your desk, the table beside your favorite chair, and your makeup drawers.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, and your shoes.”

“At least those aren’t things that get in your way.” She refused to look at the ankle boots she’d kicked toward her closet earlier. Or acknowledge the bobby pins now somewhere on the floor.

“Not until I trip over said shoes in the middle of the night because they’re right in the middle of the pathway.” He turned

back toward her. “Or when I can’t find a stamp because they’re buried somewhere on that desk in the living room. Or if you’ve moved the remote to that black hole which used to be my grandma’s side table.”

“Heaven forbid you not be able to find the remote control!” She threw her hands in the air. “You might miss a ballgame. There’s only forty million on each night.”

“You knew when you married me that I liked sports. You even went to games with me once upon a time.” He sat up and pointed at her chest. “You get into high school football more than I do.”

“Yes. I was aware you liked sports.” She shook her head. “I just didn’t realize that was *all* you liked.”

“It’s not all I like.” He slammed his hand down on the bed.

She drew deep breaths in through her nose. She would not cry tonight. Not here. Not in front of him. If she could control her tears around her parents earlier, she could do the same now. She grabbed her pillow off her side of the bed.

“You couldn’t prove it by me.” She started toward the hallway.

“Where are you going?”

“Since you stubbornly refuse to leave, I guess I will instead.” She pulled the door closed behind her with slightly less than a slam.

Two steps into the guest room, he grabbed her arm. “This is ridiculous. What is going on with you?”

She tossed her pillow onto the full-size bed. “As if you care.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t know what I’ve done wrong.” He clasped her arm. “What started this?”

She jerked away. “Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

If only she could believe that! The stupid tears were burning her eyes and throat again, begging for escape.

“Gen, we promised each other divorce wasn’t an option. That hasn’t changed for me. And it won’t.”

“What?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“Don’t you remember?” He started to reach for her, then pulled his hand back again. “Right before our wedding, you got cold feet. You were bawling, going through every worst-case scenario you could think of. ‘What if we get a divorce?’ you asked.”

“And you said we wouldn’t because it wasn’t an option for us.” The words came out softly through her constricted throat.

“We pinky-swore.” He chuckled.

She nodded and hung her head.

“So, what changed?”

“We did.”

She didn’t turn around but sensed him stiffen behind her.

“So, that’s it, then? You’re willing to throw it all away? Just break your promises and vows? Give up?” He huffed. “That’s not the Genevieve I thought I married four years ago.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheeks. He wasn’t the same Scott she’d married, either.

“If you’re so set on sleeping in here, go ahead. I’m going to sleep in our bed down the hall. Feel free to join me if you change your mind.”

She flinched as the door slammed behind him.

“*Talk to Scott. It will help.*” She mimicked her mother’s thick Southern accent as she pulled back the comforter. “Obviously not, Mom.”

Despite having a whole bed to herself, she huddled on the side established as hers from their wedding night. A streetlight shined directly through the lightweight curtains she had hung in here. This was the first time she’d been in here after dark without the lights on. She needed to get thicker curtains if this was to be long-term.

She rolled over and faced away from the window. She

pushed her pillow into a different position under her neck. Shifted her hips to try and avoid an extra-sharp spring only to find another right beside it. Was this bed sinking in the middle? It'd been his bachelor bed before they married, and he obviously hadn't kept to one side all those years.

She shoved some covers into a bunch right next to her legs to try and keep from sliding down into the valley. That only pushed her back onto the uncomfortable coils. She flipped onto her back and flopped an arm over her eyes to block the streetlight. She'd been so tired earlier.

This room was quiet. The slight whiffly sound of Scott's snore bothered her when they first married, but now she found herself listening for it to help her drift off. Of course, it was probably going strong down the hall—in their comfortable bed with the pillowtop mattress that cushioned a person's hips from poky springs. Why was she in here and he in there? Stubborn pride. But she wasn't about to admit whose pride was more stubborn.

She needed to sleep. Why did she have to bring all of this up on a Tuesday night? Because the sight of him sitting there in his recliner doing nothing—again—had fired her up. Sometimes, the only adult thing he did was go to work every day. As soon as he got home, he reverted into a kid again.

A kid who was way too handsome in his reading glasses and striped pajamas. The tears she'd held back all evening came as a flood now. She didn't want to break her pinky promise. But how could she keep it when they couldn't even have a conversation without snapping at each other?

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THERE'D BEEN VERY few nights since they married where Scott had slept alone. Maybe a handful—when Gen had gone on ladies' retreats. And he hadn't slept well with her gone.

Had she drifted right off down the hallway with her self-righteous anger? Or was she lying awake too? Tempting as it was to go check, he remained under the covers and squeezed his eyes shut. The next day would be a busy one, and he needed to rest. Why couldn't she have had this mental breakdown over a break? When he had more time and brainpower to figure out what might be causing it.

It was like Genevieve had lost her mind or something. The most dramatic hormonal mood swings he'd ever seen.

Scott sat straight up in bed. "Hormonal."

He glanced toward the door and opened his mouth. Then closed it again. No.

Their original plan had been to start trying to have children around now, but surely she would've talked it over with him before taking that next step. Unless something hadn't worked the way it was supposed to. There was always a chance.

Could she be? Could this simply be raging pregnancy hormones?

"Surely she would've said something." He scrubbed a hand over his chin, the beard making a bristly noise in the still night. "Unless she hasn't realized it, either."

He tried to think back to the last time they'd done anything that might lead to such a possibility. But the more he strained his brain to remember, the more he couldn't. Had it been that long?

Sure, he'd been running crazy with work. And by the time he hit the pillow, he was exhausted. But still.

He flopped backward with a sigh.

So, probably not the reason she'd gone crazy tonight. He made a mental note to check out her waistline tomorrow. See if anything was different.

Because if an expanding family were the reason for the chaos that had invaded his life, at least there was a light at the end of the tunnel. The alternative was much bleaker.