

The little library hadn't been on the corner yesterday.

I'm certain of that.

I've walked this route every evening since the funeral—same leaning stop sign, same empty patch of grass beneath the streetlamp. But tonight a small wooden box stands there, glass door glowing faintly, as if someone had left a light on inside.

I stop walking. My breath makes small clouds in the October air, and I pull my jacket tighter against the chill. It's been three weeks since Mom died, and I've walked this route every night. I know every crack in this sidewalk. Every porch light. Every tree dropping its leaves. This corner was empty.

The library is simple—just a small wooden box on a post, painted deep blue with white trim. The kind neighbors build to share paperbacks and children's books. *Take a book, leave a book.* Except I've never seen one appear overnight.

My feet carry me to the glass door before my mind catches up. Through the pane, I can see a single book on the shelf. Plain brown leather. No title. My hand finds the brass handle. I hesitate. This is ridiculous. Someone installed it during the day. That's all.

I open the door.

The book is warm when I touch it. Not the kind of warmth left behind by sunshine. The kind of warmth that comes from being alive. I pull it out. It's heavier than it should be.

I open to the first page.

Blank.

I flip forward. Blank. Blank. Blank. Page after page of white emptiness.

I turn back to the first page and gasp. Words begin appearing, as if someone's writing them, right in front of me.

*What took you so long, Pip?*

Breath freezes in my lungs. I know that handwriting—Mom's. The same looping cursive from old birthday cards. The 'w' always too large. The 'i' never dotted.

My eyes burn. If this is someone's idea of a joke...

I watch as more words form on the page.

*You always went walkin' when your brain wouldn't settle.*

My hands are shaking. I look around the empty street, half-expecting someone to jump out. But there's only the wind moving through the trees, only the distant sound of a car on another block.

"This isn't real." I know the words came out of my mouth, but they're hoarse, almost unrecognizable.

I look down at the book. A tear spills over onto the page. New words form slowly, like an invisible hand is writing them.

*Isn't it?*

I drop the book. It hits the sidewalk and falls open. The words are still there. More are forming just below.

*I know this is scary, Pip.*

"No." I back away. "No, this is—I'm tired. I'm not sleeping enough."

*When have you ever?*

I can't move. A rushing sound fills my ears. My pulse pounds. My skin goes cold, then hot, then cold again.

*Is this what a breakdown feels like? Is this my mind trying to rationalize itself into madness?*

Three weeks without real sleep. Grief squeezing my throat. And now words are appearing on blank pages. *I'm losing it.* But even as I think it, I know—with a certainty that terrifies me—that this is real.

*Remember what you said to me that last day?*

I do remember. Of course I do. I'd held her hand, paper-thin and cold. "I'm not ready," I'd said. She'd squeezed my hand. Her lips moved but no sound came out. The cancer had taken her voice.

*Well, I wasn't ready either, kiddo.*

I wipe at my cheeks with the back of my hand, then kneel and pick up the book.

"Mom?"

*It's me.*

"How is this possible?"

*No idea, but does it matter?*

"Mom, you're dead. I watched you die. I've been trying to sort through your things, dealing with insurance paperwork, and I—"

The words appear faster now.

*And you've been out walking every night because you can't stop worryin' over things you never said.*

I sink onto the curb and set the open book in my lap. "Yes."

*So say 'em now.*

"It doesn't work like that. You can't just—" I stop. "This isn't real. It's just grief doing something to my brain."

*Maybe. Or maybe, Lord knows, some things just have to be said.*

That's exactly how Mom talked. Cut straight to the point and then surprise you with something that sounded almost like faith. She'd been a nurse for thirty years — she believed in science, in what could be measured and proven. But she'd also believed there were some things science just couldn't explain.

I think about my apartment seventeen floors up in the city, the clean lines of it, the view I'd worked so hard for. The job with the title that impressed people at parties. The life that looked, from the outside, like someone who had it figured out. I'd built it deliberately, piece by piece, a world away from double shifts and making do and the particular exhaustion of never quite having enough.

Mom had never once made me feel guilty for leaving. That might have been the hardest part.

"I should've asked you things," I say finally. "About your life. About Dad leaving. About what you wanted."

*I wanted to be a painter.*

"Really?"

*Watercolors. Landscapes mostly. I was good at it.*

A pause.

*Better than good, if I do say so. Never said that out loud when I was alive. Didn't want to seem full of myself. But I don't really care about that anymore.*

"Why did you stop?"

*When your daddy left, I had to get serious for the both of us. Nursing school. A steady paycheck. A future. And then you became my whole world and I told myself that was enough.*

A pause.

*Most days it was. But some days I missed the life that didn't happen. Not that I lost anything, really. But there was a life I never got the chance to have. I never told you because I didn't want you thinkin' it was your fault.*

I think of all the times she'd come home from double shifts and still made dinner. Still asked about my day. I'd thought she was invincible. I'd needed her to be invincible.

"I'm sorry."

*Don't be. I'm only telling you because I don't want you makin' the same mistake. I spent thirty years pretending life was just peachy. That I didn't have regrets. And I think it made it harder for people to know. Even you. I think it made it harder for you to be honest with me about your own worries.*

Every time something went wrong—a bad quarter, a failed relationship I'd never let get that far—I wanted to call her. But I'd see her, strong in her refusal to let the world touch her, and I'd think: she raised me alone. She never complained. What do I have to complain about?

*I knew, you know.*

The words appear before I've finished the thought.

*I knew you were doing that. Measuring your problems against mine and deciding yours didn't count.*

I look up, as if I could find her face somewhere in the dark. "Why didn't you say something?"

*Because you would've pulled away. You were always so quick to pull away. A pause. You got that from your daddy, and I never knew how to say it without it coming out mean.*

She's right. I know she's right.

*I should've found a way. That's on me.*

I try to shake off a burning that's started in my belly, but now that it's started, I'm not sure I can get rid of it.

My fists clench. "You were only sixty-three," I say, and my voice doesn't sound like mine. It sounds like someone trying not to scream.

*I know.*

"That's all you're going to say?"

*What do you want me to say?*

"Tell me it was unfair."

*Of course it was unfair. Ridiculously unfair. I wasn't finished. I didn't want to go. But I didn't get a say. I fought like a banshee to stay there with you.*

"You did?"

*As sure as the sun rises.*

We stay in that for a moment — just the two of us, sitting inside the unfairness of it together. It's the first time since she died that the grief doesn't feel like something I'm carrying alone.

"I'm scared I'm going to forget you," I say finally. "Your voice. Your laugh. The way you smelled like lavender soap."

*Lord, that soap. A pause, and I can almost feel her smiling. Your Aunt Bev gave me a case of it one Christmas. Used it for years because I felt too guilty to throw it out.*

I laugh — a real one, surprised out of me. "You didn't like it?"

*Heaven's no. Always smellin' like a patch of dirt.*

The laughter fades slowly, gently.

*You'll forget some.*

"Don't say that."

*You won't remember the specifics. The exact sound of my voice. You'll reach for it someday and it won't be there. It'll hurt somethin' terrible, I won't lie to you. But the shape of me—the way I moved through the world, what I taught you without teachin' you—that stays. It becomes a part of you.*

"You really think so?"

*I do.*

"Did I make you proud?"

*Yes. No hesitation. But I want to ask you something, and I want you to really hear it.*

I wait.

*Why does that matter so much?*

The question catches me off guard. I open my mouth to answer and close it again. What kind of question is that?

"Because you're my mother."

*Yes. And I love you more than I know how to say. But I think you've been waiting on my say-so to believe in yourself. I can tell you I'm proud until these pages run out. You know it won't fix that, right?*

I do know it. I just hadn't expected her to say it.

"Are you sure you're trying to make me feel better?" I say, half-laughing through tears.

*No. But it's what you need to hear, kiddo.*

I look down at the pages. There aren't many left — maybe four or five. The paper's thin enough that I can see light through the last few pages. Whatever we have left to say, we're almost out of time to say it.

"Were you scared?" The question comes out before I can stop it. "At the end."

*More than I've ever been in my life.*

The honesty of it lands like a fist to my gut. Mom never admitted fear — not during the diagnosis, not during treatment, not when the doctors said there was nothing more to do.

*But I wasn't scared of dyin'.*

"Then what?"

*I was so tired from worryin' over you. Of leaving you before you could figure out who you are. Of all the things we'd put off sayin'.*

"We were good at that."

*We were. That's on me.*

A silence settles between us, easy and sad all at once.

"I'm a mess," I say. "I'm barely holding it together."

*Fall apart if you need to, Pip, but do it fast. You've got living to do.*

"And if I can't put myself back together?"

*You already survived the worst of it. You just don't know it yet.*

"I'm not sure I'm strong enough, mama."

*You don't have to be strong. You just have to keep moving.*

"I don't know how to do this without you."

*Yes you do. You just don't trust yourself yet. That's the work now — learning to.*

"I'm not ready to say goodbye."

*We already said goodbye. Remember? You held my hand and cried. This isn't goodbye.*

*This is me making sure you know you're not alone. And then you need to close this book and get to work.*

"That sounds hard."

*Do it anyway.*

"I wish you could be there to see it."

*I'll be there. You just have to look for me in the doing, not in the feeling.*

I turn to the last blank page. My hands are shaking.

"Is this it?" I ask.

*Yes.*

"What do I say?"

*Whatever you need to say.*

I stare at the empty page, at the space waiting for my final words. There was so much. Too much. How can I possibly say everything that needs to be said in one last page?

But then I realise there's really only one thing left to say. The only thing that matters.

"Thank you." My voice barely makes a sound.

"Thank you for everything. For raising me. For loving me. For showing me how to be strong and how to be soft. For every sacrifice you made. For every time you put me first. For being exactly the mama I needed, even when I didn't appreciate it. Thank you for finding a way to give me what I needed one last time. I'll carry you with me. Always."

I say the words fast, barely taking a breath, like I'm running out of time.

Because I am.

I wait, watching the last blank space.

Mom's handwriting appears one final time.

*It was the greatest pleasure of my life, Pip.*

I press my hand flat against the page, like I can feel her through it.

"I love you, mama."

*I love you too, baby. Now close the book.*

I sit there, staring at those words until they blur. Then I close the book.

The moment the cover shuts, I feel it. A shift in the air, a drop in temperature. The book grows lighter in my hands, and when I look down, it's just a book. Plain brown leather. No warmth. No magic.

I open it anyway.

Blank. Every page.

"No." I flip through frantically. "Come back. Please."

But there's nothing. Just empty pages and the sound of wind through the trees.

I look up at the little library. It's already fading — not all at once, but gradually, like a photograph left in the sun. The blue paint pales, the wood grows translucent, and then—

Gone.

Just empty grass beneath the streetlamp, the same as every night before.

I sit on the curb with the blank book in my lap and I sob. Not the tight, desperate tears from before. Something more raw than that. The kind of crying that empties you out.

When it passes, I feel scraped clean. Hollowed. And underneath that — something quieter. Not peace exactly. But the first breath after a long time underwater.

I stand up slowly. The book feels wrong in my hands now, like something that's finished its purpose. I carry it to the trash can on the corner and stand there a moment.

Then I let it go and walk home.

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Three days later I'm driving to the grocery store when I see it.

The little library.

Different corner, three blocks from my house, same blue paint and white trim, same faint glow behind the glass even in daylight.

I pull over.

Through the glass I can see a single book — red cover this time, not brown.

A woman comes around the corner while I'm standing there. Fifties, maybe. Gray threading through dark hair. She's walking slowly, shoulders drawn in, like she's bracing against something no one else can see.

She stops when she sees the library.

I take a small step toward her — some instinct, like I should warn her or explain or prepare her somehow. But then she reaches out and touches the glass with trembling fingers, and I recognize that gesture. I know exactly where she's about to go.

I step back.

I watch her open the door, take out the book, sink down onto the curb. I watch her face crumple as she opens to the first page. Her lips begin to move.

I get back in my car quietly and pull away from the curb. In the rearview mirror she's still there, bent over the book, one hand pressed against the page.

I turn the corner and she disappears from view.

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That night I go home and open the boxes I've been avoiding.

I find the watercolors near the bottom of the third one — tubes barely used, brushes still in their packaging, a pad of watercolor paper with the first page started and abandoned. A landscape, rough and unfinished. Her handwriting in the corner, just a date.

I set everything on the kitchen table and look at it for a long time.

Then I open the pad to a fresh page, squeeze out some paint, and begin.

The colors bleed wrong. The shapes are clumsy. None of it looks like what I see in my head.

But I keep going — because she wanted this and gave it up, and I can't give her more time or undo what was lost, but I can do this. I can pick up where she left off.

I paint until my back aches and my fingers are stained and the sky outside the window starts going gray with dawn.

When I finally stop, I look at what I've made. Messy. Imperfect. Probably terrible.

But it's mine. And it's hers. And maybe that's the same thing now.

I clean my brushes and go to bed.

For the first time in three weeks, I sleep.