

At once, I'm transported back to the night when the image of what I thought was our perfect family erupted like a raging volcano. We were seated at our dinner table for Sam's fifty-fifth birthday. The smell of freshly baked lasagna floated through the air like a scrumptious cloud atop our laughter, and the aroma of my spiced apple tea greeted my nose with its irresistible fragrance.

Up until a few months prior, Sam and I were having our fair share of marital issues as well as intermittent difficulties from his untreated PTSD that lingered on, so we decided to restore our love for each other to get our relationship back on track and inject some happiness back into our bond. Except for a few hiccups, which were to be expected, I truly believed we were on the path to regaining what we'd lost.

Filled with a renewed commitment to strengthening our marriage, I anticipated his birthday with such eagerness that year. To that end, I commissioned a surprise gift specially made just for him. I purchased a watch he had been ogling, and had it engraved with the words, "When I met you, time stopped," with the date of our marriage underneath.

We sang *Happy Birthday*, and when I went to the counter to cut his birthday cake, instead of placing a slice on his plate, I positioned the box with the sparkling bow on it instead. With zeal, I requested he open it. He unwrapped the dazzling box, his robust hands deftly undoing the multicolored ribbons. As he revealed the treasure, his eyes lit up brighter than a star in a glittering night sky. When he read the engraving, a smile emerged like gold on his face. I fastened the watch on his wrist and kissed his lips, which tasted of red wine.

Just as our celebration was winding down, there was a knock at the door. I opened it with the plate in my hand that housed Sam's precious present a short time before. A younger woman with luxuriously long brown curly hair and emerald green eyes was on the other side, wearing a little purple dress with sunflowers and white stiletto heels. When I gazed at Sam to discern who this woman could be, his eyes glazed over, and the blood drained from his face, rendering him as white as a ghost.

"Sam, who's this?" I asked as my eyes searched his, my heart beating out of my chest.

"I'm so sorry, Katrina," was all he could say, guilt and remorse plastering his face, mixing in one ugly heap.

“Sorry for what?” I gasped, but deep down I knew, and everything I thought was true crashed down around me like meteors striking at my heart.

“Tell her who I am,” the woman bellowed as she shoved herself into our home, the aroma of her cheap perfume gagging me.

“Gloria, what are you doing?” Sam moaned plaintively, and life as we knew it shattered all around us into irreparable pieces.

“You’ve been telling me you were going to leave for years. It’s just excuses after excuses. Be honest with your family. Be honest with yourself,” she shrieked, the veins bulging out of her neck in a fit of rage, her words punching me in the gut, knocking the wind out of me.

“How could you do this to me, Sam, to our family?” I howled as the glass plate that held bliss and love moments earlier slid out of my hand, crashing onto the floor into a million pieces like our life together. My body went numb. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do, Katrina,” he protested, but the words were hollow, and I felt nothing except ice and emptiness.

“You’re such a phony, Sam. He tells me how much he loves me all the time, and how he wants to leave you,” Gloria bellowed, spitting in my face.

Billy shot up out of his chair like a blazing rocket ship.

“Get the hell out my house you pathetic whore,” he screamed ominously, in a pitch I never heard before.

“I’m your father’s whore, and he loves every minute of it,” Gloria declared with a caustic snicker.

“Enough, Gloria,” Sam retorted viciously, his eyes ablaze with anger that his secret had been unleashed into the world.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m some submissive and docile woman with no backbone like you tell me she is,” she spewed, her perfectly manicured index finger pointing in my direction. “This is it, Sam. You either make up your mind, or I’m done, and this time I mean it. Oh, and happy birthday. I hope I made it a special one,” she screamed, slamming the door behind her.

My legs buckled, and I fell to my knees in despair, plummeting into the glass shards from the broken plate that sparkled like gems, cutting my skin as I tried to push myself back up. Tears streaked down my face like a raging waterfall. I couldn’t catch my breath. I was drowning,

sinking into hell. Disbelief suffocated my brain, disorienting me as I realized what I was living before was a lie. Billy helped me to my feet as Sam sat motionless in his chair, his face expressionless and vacant, a stranger to me now.

In the months that followed, I realized that I was weak. I was submissive and docile. I couldn't let go. Instead of hating him, I started to loathe myself for not being able to leave, for loving him so much that I was willing to accept the lies, the deceit, and the infidelity. I despised my powerlessness, and in turn, I detested myself.