

The Space Above

Aging white stucco crumbled off the side of the house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Inside, the living room smelled of dust and instant noodles, the beige couch sagging toward the center of a stained gray rug that suffocated the hardwood floor underneath. A 30 inch TV hung crooked above a fireplace covered in layers of ash. Floral mustard wallpaper crowded the walls, its bird-patterned canopy watching silently, their glassy eyes fixed in a constant watchfulness. In the hallway, the attic trapdoor sagged in the ceiling, its dangling string, brittle with age, swaying slightly whenever the heat kicked on.

Abby had told herself the place was temporary. That was five years ago.

Abby first heard the footsteps at night, lying rigid in bed as something above her shifted, slow, deliberate. Not squirrels scuttling on the roof, not branches scraping the shingles. Weight. Her mind raced through every true crime show she'd ever watched, every podcast episode that began with *She thought she was alone*. She imagined a body in the walls, someone waiting, watching. Someone studying her routines. Learning her patterns.

In the morning, her face was puffy and eyes heavy from her lack of sleep. She stood on a kitchen chair, stretching up to press a strip of clear tape across the seam of the attic entrance. It felt ridiculous, but necessary.

"Just to be safe," she muttered, though there was no one there to hear it.

She checked it twice before leaving for work.

The woman in the attic waited until the house emptied. Winter still clawed at the shingles, its cold fingers seeping through the cracks in the house. Her stomach churned violently. She pushed the trapdoor open, carefully climbing down the ladder, slipping inside to use the bathroom before the nausea overtook her. Unbeknownst to her, the tape had torn clean through. She rinsed the tub and slumped to the floor with relief, but when the front door suddenly opened, panic buzzed through her ears. She bolted back up into the attic, carefully closing the trapdoor so as to not make a single noise.

Abby found the broken tape that night. Her chest tightened, nausea rising with the feeling that she wasn't alone. As she opened the door to the bathroom, she discovered a faint lingering acidic smell despite the clean porcelain. She reached for her phone, her hands shaking as she pulled up the keypad. Hesitating, her fingers hovered over the 9. Could she be imagining things? Was it worth getting the police involved? She closed her eyes and shook her head as she slowly

rose, returning her phone to its spot in her jeans pocket. It was probably just her mind playing tricks.

She didn't sleep that night and was distracted at work the entire day. That evening, Abby decided she had had enough. She dragged a chair beneath the trapdoor. Fear overtook her mind as she reached up and yanked the string.

It snapped.

She hesitated, rethinking her decision, then hit the trapdoor with her fist. The old rotting wood gave way and fell open, flakes of paint raining down onto her hair, like the flurries of snow outside. She slowly climbed her way into the attic, phone flashlight trembling in her hand. "I'm calling the police," she said to the dark room, voice thin, swallowed by the shadows.

A woman's shape shifted in the corner. Startled, Abby watched her scramble backward.

"Please," the woman whispered hoarsely, hands raised.

In the quivering beam of the flashlight, she came into focus piece by piece. She couldn't have been much older than Abby; mid-twenties, maybe, but exhaustion had carved years into her face. Her dark hair hung in matted clumps as if it hadn't been brushed in months, greasy strands clinging to a sunken complexion. She wore an oversized gray sweatshirt, stretched thin at the neckline, one sleeve torn at the wrist. Beneath it, a stained white tank top strained over her swollen stomach. Her leggings were thin and pilled at the thighs, one knee ripped open exposing bruised skin blooming purple and yellow. She was barefoot; the bottoms of her feet blackened with attic dust.

Her face was gaunt and a fading apple-sized bruise marked the side of her throat. She held one arm protectively over her swollen stomach, fingers splayed wide as if shielding it from an invisible blow. The other hand shook in the air between them, not in threat, but in surrender.

The stories in Abby's head collapsed all at once. No murderer. No monster above the ceiling. Just a woman who had run out of places to go. Abby lowered her phone slightly, the weight in her chest changing, not gone, but altered. The woman swallowed hard before speaking, her voice rough like sandpaper from dehydration. She spoke of a boyfriend whose apologies always came after the blows. Of slaps to the face and hands at her throat. Of the test, and how those two pink lines confirmed her worst fears. Of the decision to leave, her mistakes would *not* burden her child. Of leaving while he was at work, with nothing but the clothes she was wearing. Of spotting the broken attic window just five days prior when the house had sat dark and empty.

“I wasn’t going to stay,” she said quickly, panic creeping back into her eyes. “I just needed somewhere temporary.”

She pressed her palm more firmly against her stomach, as if reminding herself why she had left in the first place.

“Please,” she said again, the fear replaced with something softer. Something hopeful. A mother’s plea.