



# The Gap Between Forever

A love story

Jane Vergara

# **The Gap Between Forever**

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Other Books by the Author:

Breaking the Scroll

One Night, Nine Months, and Thirty-Three Years Later

Enchanted Hair

Amy and the Dogs (series)

Blue Rose

The Writer

For God.

For my family.

And for the girl with the imaginary birthmark in her butt.

# PART ONE

## Chapter 1

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“INSIDE IS WHERE healing begins,” the sign hanging on the door of the clinic said. Emilia Smith’s eyes lingered on the words, hoping that what was said was also true for her. She pushed the door and entered.

The first thing that she saw was the stack of medical books neatly arranged on an old oak bookcase. At the bottom was a set of hardbound encyclopedias, all twenty-six books with golden embossed titles. To the right wall was a grandfather clock and on the side table was an old family picture in a wooden frame with the tiny heads all smiling up at her.

“Please have a seat.”

Emilia took the chair in front of Dr. Alex Jones’s desk. She stopped fidgeting with her fingers when she noticed that one of her nails had a chipped polish, and took to twisting her handkerchief as an alternate. She had been up all night wondering what she should do in case it was bad news. Her hands were now daintily spread out on her lap, stiff from fear.

She looked at Dr. Jones’s pig eyes, and she was immediately side-tracked to the past month when she consulted the internet for a list of oncologists. She had worked with a woman that was diagnosed with breast cancer, but she didn’t bother getting her oncologist’s name because she wanted to keep her consultations secret.

The coughing, the back and the chest pains, coupled with shooting pains in her legs were what brought her to heel to set an appointment with Dr. Jones.

“Do you smoke?” he had asked, to which she had nodded, trying to

recall when she started the gruesome habit. It was with little thought that she accepted an offer of a cigarette from a colleague, not really believing that it was addictive. She reasoned that if so many of the sales agents smoked and the smoking sessions were what brought them together, it wouldn't hurt to puff on a few sticks. The problem was, the habit stuck.

Dr. Jones leafed through the results of Emilia's test results; the doctor's thick fingers grazing the pages. Dr. Jones wet his forefinger with saliva twice before turning to the next page. His forehead creased as he studied the papers. Then he closed the file and swallowed. He opened his mouth as though to say something, but shut them again like he wanted to not say anything anymore. Probably buy more time, which he did by sanitizing his hands first before he looked up to meet Emilia's gaze.

Today's the fourth time that Emilia consulted with him; and each time, her heart raced, afraid to hear the news.

"The cancer nodes are present in both lungs, and I'm afraid the cancer has metastasized to other organs."

Emilia hung onto her composure. She'd prepared for the worst and although she'd rehearsed this scene many times in her head, hearing the words coming from the doctor's mouth was still shattering.

Dr. Jones was trying to read her; his calm words were spoken slowly.

"They're all the same," he said, shaking his head. "I'm really sorry. It's Stage IV. You have to start with the treatment plan immediately. I've prepared one for you—chemotherapy cycles. I've also included radiation therapy. However, you must know, there are no promises. The success rate's low, but these treatments will help you cope better daily. Also, I would suggest..."

Dr. Jones continued speaking, rambling on and on about cancer, but Emilia's brain had frozen, and all she heard were drones.

When she was diagnosed with Stage II cancer a month ago, she had researched over the internet, skimming pages and websites about cancer. What were the things she should do? How could her life be prolonged? At one point, she even considered joining a support group, and in a mocking tone, she'd practiced saying in her head, "Hi, my name's Emilia and I've been diagnosed with cancer of blah-blah-blah." She knew it was crazy, but she's badly edgy and didn't know what to do. Once again, she wished that she'd told her husband about the cancer and that he's here with her inside Dr. Jones's clinic.

She'd been sure about one thing though—she believed that every day, miracles could strike; and she clung to the hope that one of these days, she'd wake up with none of the chest pains, back pains, and coughing, and she wouldn't have to consult a physician anymore; and this diagnosis would just be a bad dream, barely remembered. So, why bother her husband about it? To her, not telling him was stupidly logical.

"How did it happen? I've read about it. That there are instances that it progresses faster but..."

The words came out as a croak and she regretted having spoken out.

"What we initially found was not where most of the cancer cells were. When the test result of the recent scans came back, the cancer nodes were present on both lungs. And they're already huge," he paused. "It has metastasized to other body parts. You see, non-small-cell lung cancer is difficult to detect during the initial stages and..." Dr. Jones continued explaining, but Emilia's mind was already flying.

She sat rigidly and put her arms around herself, but the coldness from the air conditioner still found its way into her body, wiggling through her layers of fabrics. He had told her bits and pieces of all this before—about non-small-cell lung cancer.

"Emilia," Dr. Jones said. "Emilia," he repeated.

"Yes? I'm sorry. Did you say something?" She stirred in her seat,

annoyed that she was caught not listening to him.

Dr. Jones looked at her, concern etched on his plump face. “Will you be all right?”

“What kind of a question is that?” she said. Then, shaking her head, bit her lips to avoid venting out on the doctor.

There was silence afterward.

“I’d like to discuss with you the treatment that I prepared—”

“No,” Emilia said. Shaking her head, she continued, “Please, I need time to take this all in.”

Dr. Jones stared at her, studying her. He wouldn’t have guessed that she had cancer if he met her on the road, or brushed against her in the mall, or been behind her in the counter of a pastry shop. She looked healthy. Her blond hair was arranged carefully in a ponytail with some stray curls that she had to tuck behind her ears habitually. And although her physique was on the lean side, it had not taken on the sickly-thin level yet.

“Of course,” he said hesitantly. “But you have to come back soon. If tomorrow isn’t OK with you, how about the day after that? Or a week from now?”

“Yes, I will.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Why?” Emilia asked. “Do doctors do that? Check on patients, I mean.”

Dr. Jones stared at her and lifted his wire-rimmed glasses. He shook his head slowly. “Not usually, but if I don’t I’m not sure when I’ll see you. And you have to see me soon.”

“What makes you so sure?”

He hesitated before answering, “Your shoulders. They have a proud, I don’t know, bearing. They kind of give away a somehow stubborn streak.”

Emilia nodded, blinking back her tears, the soft lines on the corner



of her eyes showing.

“I should leave now,” she paused, “There’s something I have to attend to.”

Emilia stood up so abruptly that her purse almost fell to the floor. She headed toward the door, but she was stopped by Dr. Jones’s words.

“You don’t have to take off your wedding ring each time you visit me, Emilia,” he said. “The test results are all in confidence, and I’ll leave it to you to discuss this with your family—with your husband.”

“How did you know?” Emilia asked and then looked at her ring finger. Sure enough, there was a mark where the ring had always been. She looked at Dr. Jones and tilted her head to one side. She couldn’t bring herself to open her mouth and say another word so she turned away and headed outside the clinic.

On the exterior, there were no noticeable signs of her fortress breaking, but inside, the turmoil had started, spiraling out of a control like when the clouds blend with the air, and together they kiss the ground, building into a tornado that would eventually crumble her facade. The apprehension was brought about by one question—how would she tell her husband?

The thought lingered inside her head as she closed the clinic’s door. *One uncertain step at a time, she told herself. In time, the blur will be gone.*

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Emilia called her secretary and advised that she would be taking the week off. She continued walking along the streets of New Jersey, floating in her sea of insecurity.

When should she start the medication? She’d read that chemotherapy would make her weak, and she could be wasting time in bed rather than spending her days with her family. The stories were scary, telling her that the effect of chemotherapy could vary depending on the person, stage of the cancer, gender—there were too many

factors—and she wondered what they would be on her.

Knowing that the result of her treatment plan was going to be a gamble left her all the more indecisive. Treatment or live her last days normally? But she wondered if her life would ever really be normal again.

She wanted to fight the cancer, but that meant that she would undergo the medication, which was guaranteed to be painful and could result in her wasting precious time in bed.

All her worries shy when her biggest fear came to mind though. Her heart started pumping rapidly when she thought about her husband, and she asked herself again why she hadn't already told him. If only she could go back to that first day when she paid a visit to Dr. Jones, she would take David with her so there would be no secrets between them. Somehow, she felt she had lied.

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Emilia had met David when they were in college. She was a business student, while he studied fine arts. There were activities during college that made their paths cross, but neither paid attention to the other as they were both in relationships. Coincidentally, when Emilia broke up with her boyfriend during her sophomore year, David stopped dating his long-time girlfriend.

Their paths crossed again, and this time, it wasn't because of a university event. It was Emilia who approached David. It didn't take long after that first meeting before they entered into a committed relationship.

When they graduated from college still madly in love, they decided to tie the knot.

David had wanted a son immediately after marriage, but Emilia argued that they're still young, and she didn't want to get pregnant soon. She wanted to be a CEO, she would tell him, and he would just laugh at her. Although this was true, more than anything else, Emilia

was terrified of sporting stretch marks across her stomach.

Fifteen years had whiled away as they pursued their careers and started making names for themselves, but it was only from two years ago that what David had been praying for materialized.

Emilia was about to be assigned to a branch in Middletown, and when David heard about it, he said that the commute would be difficult for her. She argued that it wouldn't be since going to Middletown was not part of her daily itinerary. Regardless, David didn't relent and said that she has to get an apartment there, if only for a few months. He insisted on coming with her.

Emilia pointed out that it was just until she could close the contract on a project, and it'd probably take only a few months, so there'd be no need to move out of New York. Still, David wouldn't listen and said that they'd move together to Middletown. He then quit his job in advertising and focused entirely on painting.

David had not pictured himself living anywhere else, but the decision was a no-brainer because he knew that his place in this world was beside his wife, no matter where her being a sales agent would bring them. He said that as an artist, he's more amenable to relocations, since a fresh start somewhere else could always give him new ideas.

Emilia was deeply touched when her husband gave in to what her career was demanding of her. And thus, when they were finished unloading their boxes from the trucking services and into their new apartment, she told him, "I will give you what you've always wanted."

David had raised his eyebrows at her, waiting for the gift that she'd give him but none came. When Emilia moved toward him and started kissing him, he suddenly understood and chuckled softly. The kiss had begun tenderly, the kind that made one feel weak and strong, and giving and insistent at the same time.

The boxes were cluttered all around, and the bed was not yet assembled. David was laughing when Emilia became aggressive and

started undoing the buttons of his shirt, kissing him on his chest and tracing a finger down his spine.

David kicked some of the boxes that were getting in their way. He returned her kisses more passionately this time. When Emilia took her blouse off and teased him by slowly dancing against him, he grabbed her and carried her to the table after realizing that the bed was not yet set up.

To his dismay, he saw that boxes were also piled up on the table. He put Emilia back on her feet and looked for a place unoccupied by boxes or furniture. At that moment, Emilia took David's hand and pulled him to the floor.

The years of togetherness had not lessened their desire for each other, and they lay on the floor satisfied after a few minutes.

Three weeks later, Emilia started having morning sickness. There were times that she had to cancel a meeting with customers or phone in sick due to nausea. There were mornings that she'd go running to the bathroom to throw up, but nothing ever came out. After a week, she bought a pregnancy test kit.

That was just two days away from their twelfth wedding anniversary. When she saw what the result was, she carefully wiped the plastic strip and wrapped it with Japanese paper, smiling to herself and wondering if she should sanitize it with alcohol. Knowing what a neat freak David was, he'd probably flip when he opened the gift and found himself touching the plastic strip—that was, if he had an idea what it was.

Their anniversary had come, and they were sharing delivery food in their new apartment. The scent of braised beef filled their nostrils.

"Here you go," David said as he handed Emilia his gift. "Happy anniversary, darling."

"Oh, thank you," she said. "This is huge—"

Emilia ripped the wrapper and found herself staring at a painting of herself. She remembered the photo it was copied from; it was taken a

few weeks ago when they moved to Middletown.

David grinned, proud of himself for finishing the painting in just a few days. There were still some areas with fresh paint on the canvass. Fearing that he wasn't able to perfectly capture the scene, he made sure that he got the perfect frame. As an artist, he knew that the frame was as important as the painting itself, so he took his time choosing a four-inch-thick wooden frame in its natural color with carvings of lilies on the edges.

The painting showed Emilia standing outside the apartment. Her back was mostly to the camera, and she was framing their newly rented place. David took it at an angle that caught her chin a bit upturned. It's as though her face was painted with a big smile; there were stray blond curls falling down from her ponytail. She was wearing a clean, white long-sleeved blouse, tucked into fashionably faded jeans.

"Thank you," Emilia said, leaning over to his side to kiss him. "This is fabulous."

David grinned. "Great! You didn't notice that I had to work my way to hide some muffin tops—"

She pinched him. "I have none!"

David laughed.

"The painting's nice." She smiled at her husband. "But," she paused, "just this once, I think I got you a better gift."

"Really, now?" David feigned dismay and put his hands on his chest and said, "How's that ever possible?"

He frowned, then smiled again so quickly that Emilia knew all was said in jest.

"Quit playing around and open your gift," Emilia said, enjoying her husband's antics.

She handed him her gift. It was a small box made of recycled paper, which she had picked out from a local store in town. Inside, she placed a card with her message and put the plastic strip, wrapped in paper, on

top. As a finishing touch, she put a blue ribbon outside the box.

David took the gift with arched eyebrows. “Darling, you didn’t have to propose—”

“It’s not a ring,” Emilia said just before David winked at her to indicate he was kidding.

She rolled her eyes at him.

David shook the box, all the while smiling at her. “It’s so light I doubt if this gift will ever top my masterpiece,” he added jokingly as he pulled the ribbon and opened the box.

David’s lips thinned, his eyebrows creased in tilted quarter-moons. “Two lines,” he said and looked at her with a question in his eyes.

“There’s a card underneath,” Emilia said.

David checked inside the box again and saw what Emilia was referring to. He pulled the card and read it out loud, taking the time to savor each word coming out of his mouth.

“To the man in my life. You’ve been a friend. You’ve been a husband...” David stopped reading the card and looked at her; his eyes grew serious. He stood up, and knelt in front of her, kissing her where his lips could reach her—on her knees, legs, hands. Then he embraced her and in her ear, he continued reading the card, “And now you’re a soon-to-be dad.”

Quickly, he stood up and before she could protest, he lifted her from the chair. He twirled her round and round, all the while laughing.

“Thank you, my darling. Thank you.” He was still laughing. “Definitely better than my masterpiece!”

“Stop it. The baby,” she said. “Whirling me up in the air could be bad for the baby.” She was laughing too.

“I love you, my exquisite darling!” David kept saying repeatedly.

“Really? Exquisite?” Emilia said, laughing, to which David no longer replied.

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After several weeks, David had asked her over breakfast, his face peering from the newspaper he's reading, "Darling, why didn't you tell me immediately about the baby?"

Emilia couldn't respond. She thought it over. In her heart she knew that if there was something good going on, she would share it with David as soon as the news unfolded. But if she wasn't yet sure if the matter was good or bad, she'd keep it to herself.

When she discovered she was pregnant, she couldn't decide at first. She was ecstatic—true. But she was also afraid because she wasn't certain if she's ready to become a mother.

"I wanted to surprise you, baby," she said instead.

It was a good answer, she thought, because David smiled at her and continued reading his newspaper.

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Emilia spotted a coffee shop. She had to clear her head. How would she tell David now? It had been a mistake to not tell him about the cancer, but that was a mistake that could be corrected now. She knew she couldn't just spill the bad news, not after keeping it from him for so long. And she was scared. He would be mad at her.

She crossed the street and immediately entered the coffee shop. There were a few occupied tables. She selected one a table away from the bar thinking that the café would be a good place to clear her head.

## Chapter 2

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LOST IN HER thoughts, Emilia looked at the leather-bound journal that was widely open in front of her. Her notes occupied the two pages; some Post-it notes added color to the otherwise dull sheets.

She had been sitting in the coffee shop for two hours already and her legs had gone numb. She stole a glance at her watch, feeling uneasy over how time flew. At two in the afternoon, the coffee shop was almost empty. She noted that none of the patrons that she saw when she entered were still there. New customers had come in instead.

She browsed her notes again, leafing through the journal's pages. Random questions were running in her head, and she was irritated that her time in the coffee shop didn't seem to help at all.

Sighing, she stared blankly at the counter and got that funny feeling someone was watching her. Her eyes slid to the left and true enough, the waitress was staring at her. Their eyes locked for a brief moment. It was Emilia who broke it.

Emilia urged herself to focus on the notes in her journal although she also knew that right at that moment, she wouldn't be able to come up with something rational.

In bold black letters, she wrote down what she wanted to do and frowned upon realizing that it was a bucket list she's looking at. *Isn't it what people who find out they are sick usually do?* A closer scrutiny revealed though that her notes comprised mostly of mere necessities she had to attend to.

For one, she listed as her top priority "meet relatives." This had to be done—she believed—at least so that a proper goodbye could be made. It was almost similar to the other two items in her list: "spend more time with mom and dad" and "say goodbye to friends."

The other items on her list included converting David's and her joint



account to be under only his name. Review her insurance plan.

Emilia's eyes clouded as she read the last item—*review memorial plan*. David had objected to her getting one, but now she realized that it was a good move. When she's gone, she wouldn't want David to have to handle every painful detail of arranging for her necessities.

Emilia tapped her pen on the table as she sorted out what was still missing from her already three-page long list.

*Acceptance.* It dawned on her that she needed an activity to help her accept her fate. Although a part of her raged against it as it meant she was accepting demise, maybe unnecessarily. Still, she began writing it down—acceptance. Then she stopped short as a thought crossed her mind.

*Doesn't acceptance usually come after she has gone through the other emotional stages like anger, sadness, or desperation?* she thought. Acceptance usually would come at a much later stage.

Regardless, she knew that if she had to make the most of her time, she had to accept sooner. She wouldn't stop believing in and hoping for miracles, but she had to be prepared.

In slow movements, her left hand grazed across her journal. She was careful that her left palm didn't come in contact with the still wet ink or she would have a hard time removing the smudge. Being left-handed has turned her from a sloppy writer to a careful one. Upon finishing, she stared at her words: *Go away for two weeks.*

*No, that's too long,* she thought. *Maybe two to three days. Spend some time alone to accept and... just accept.* She looked at it thoughtfully as she fought yet again another foreboding of unshed tears.

In her head, she conjured the picture of her husband when she left him at home earlier. He was wearing a crew neck shirt and faded denims and she knew that he would probably spend the entire day painting. He had kissed her before she left, and he had brushed his hand over her hair tenderly. Their son Jeremy had been asleep.

Emilia shook her head, shut her eyes tightly, and clamped her mouth shut. It's not yet time to go back to the beautiful picture of their home. She needed to accept her situation first so she'd be more composed when she tells her husband. *All the more reason that I should go away for a few days*, the thought taunted her.

She folded the journal and put it inside her bag.

At that point, she noticed that the waitress had started walking toward her. The room reverberated in silence and only the footsteps of the waitress who approached her broke it.

"Refill?" the waitress asked.

Even in the placidity of her tone, the question manifested concern and for that Emilia was grateful. Her gaze fell upon the white letters on the woman's nametag, which read Betty. An appropriate name for what seemed like a kind lady.

Emilia wondered if it would be overly dramatic if she jumped to her feet and hugged the woman for showing the tiniest shred of affection toward her notwithstanding that on other circumstances, she would have hated being talked to in her private moment. A speck of attention in anonymity broke what she'd been trying to bury inside her chest and she sighed sharply.

"Yes, please. And some water," Emilia said as she studied Betty.

The waitress's hair was in a bob with some orange highlights. Her forehead was raised high over round eyes. By simply looking at her, Emilia felt a certain level of comfort. Something altogether familiar like what one feels upon accidentally meeting old friends in the street.

"Sure," Betty said.

Betty strutted away and proceeded to refilling her coffee. Each movement of hers was rushed and measured like it had been rehearsed.

Emilia kept her caramel brown eyes fixed on the stranger she first talked to after the diagnosis sank in. She remembered the visit to the doctor earlier. A visit that put an end to hoping that the diagnosis

would not be so harsh. She shivered as her hand darted up in the air in a sudden movement to tuck her blond curls behind her left ear.

“Here you go,” Betty said. Then as though she read what Emilia was thinking, continued, “It’s going to get better.”

Emilia’s lips parted slightly as though to say something. Her shoulders quickly moved as she heaved another sigh. This time, it was longer.

“I’m that transparent, huh?” she asked.

“Yup.” Betty put the coffee cup and the glass of water on the table before pointing to another empty chair and asked, “Do you mind?”

Emilia shook her head. Since leaving the hospital, she had been in deep thought. Looking at Betty, she wondered if a stranger to open up her thoughts to could be what she needed. She refrained from heading home, afraid of telling her husband about the cancer.

“Usually people come in here to meet friends, wait for lovers, talk... You know the type.” Betty stopped before adding hesitantly, “while some just sit here, sip on their coffees, and remain silent for as long as they can bear it.”

Betty was hinting that Emilia belonged to the last category. She decided to let the comment pass, uncertain of whether or not she should share her story.

“I don’t know,” Emilia said after a while. Her usually confident voice came out soft and uncertain. “One day, I woke up coughing horribly. My lungs were burning. I waited for the coughing to stop and when it did, I dressed to go to the office, worked as I always had for the past fifteen years. Then seeing that I have free time on my hands told myself that maybe it’s high time I get a consult.”

Betty pinched her lower lip as she listened intently.

Emilia wondered if it was right that she spilled this out on Betty. She seemed to be genuinely concerned, but what did it matter anyway?

Emilia reached for the sugar bowl. She paused for a moment before

adding the two sugar cubes to the coffee. Then she took a sip. She felt acid rising in her throat but ignored it.

“A day passes. Two. Everything’s the same except that now, the test results from the clinic came out.”

Betty stared at her, unmoving.

“And,” Emilia paused. “You know how one day everything was all right and then the next day, nothing seemed to matter? Because nothing really does anymore.” Her voice broke.

If Emilia surprised Betty with her revelation, the woman did a good job hiding it. But she touched Emilia’s hand. Emilia’s eyes slid to the hand that was comforting her, wishing that instead of the hand with manicured nails, it was her husband’s hand. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t beside her. Had he known, Emilia was sure he’d go through all the tests with her.

Emilia’s eyes began to water, but she blinked them back by focusing on the callused hand of the woman in front of her instead of the tenderness that came with the touch.

“It’s OK to cry,” Betty said quietly. For the second time that day, she managed to read through Emilia.

“Oh no, I’m not going to cry,” Emilia blurted out, faking a laugh. “This isn’t—really—I mean—”

She stopped, her hands moved crazily about in the air. In one fluid motion, she sent her cup of coffee toppling down the table.

“Oh shit!” Emilia stood up abruptly. “I’m sorry I’m being so jerky—”

“Hey, it’s OK,” Betty said, forcing out a smile.

Emilia’s eyes rolled and she cursed to herself. She collapsed on the chair with her feet spread as widely apart as her skirt would allow her. She was usually more composed than this, she thought.

She was mentally chastising herself for her clumsiness when Betty returned with a mop and cleaned the spill. The woman bent and

retrieved the cup with the broken handle, frowning slightly.

“Oh well, this one’s got to go. I should have put your order in a paper cup. It’s just that you’re so dainty, I thought you could never break porcelain,” she said. Then she glanced at Emilia and offered a weak smile.

Emilia surprised herself by giggling. “I’ll pay for it, don’t worry.”

“At least I managed to make you smile,” Betty said. “You should keep on smiling, really, you’ve pretty eyes.”

Betty left with the mop in her right hand and what remained of the broken cup on the other.

Emilia stopped laughing and straightened herself on the seat, murmuring to herself that she was a formidable woman and no amount of bad news should be able to shake her. Being in the Sales Department with deadlines to beat and sales targets to achieve, and meeting and dining with the big bosses for the past fifteen years had made her that.

When she was still a sales agent, she used to ride pickup trucks, haggle and discuss numbers with clients so that by the closing of a quarter, the sales volume would not be stricken out as insignificant by her boss. The days she had spent under the scorching sun not only gave her the tan she so wanted to have, but also honed in her the patience required to succeed in the field that she had chosen to pursue. Thousands of cases of condiments sold later, which translated to three years of her life, she joined another company and engaged her hours dealing with doctors and pharmacists. If she thought that selling condiments was like standing on the edge of a sword, dealing with the doctors and pharmacists was like tiptoeing on icepick.

She’s done with that chapter in her life now. With the change in her job function, she had begun spending most of her time flying halfway across the world to market the software their company carried. She was grateful with the advent of the internet and teleconferencing that resulted to her less frequent fly-ins.

Emilia recalled those days of unparalleled challenges and silently applauded that she never winced at the hardships she encountered, which was why she's having a hard time figuring out the reason her emotions were out of whack today.

"Here you go," Betty said. "I know there's nothing I can say to make it better, but no one has ever resisted our carrot cake. It's on the house." Betty smiled slightly in an awkward manner.

"Oh," Emilia said, surprised. "It's so nice of you, but you didn't have to."

"Don't be too quick to thank me. It's been in the counter for a week," she said in jest.

Emilia laughed although her heart wasn't in it. She had hated carrot all her life. Maybe if she liked it in the first place, she wouldn't have gotten cancer.

A few minutes later, after Emilia finished half of the carrot cake, she gathered her things and stood up.

*The acceptance part has got to start. Now, she thought sadly.*

## Chapter 3

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### **Back to the present**

OUTSIDE, THE WIND blew softly, and Emilia appreciated the chill that coursed her body. It kept her grounded and prevented her mind from flying elsewhere again. When she calls David later, it is important that her voice retains the usual easy-going tone that she uses when she talks to him.

She stood in front of the coffee shop and was frustrated that she had stayed in that position for several minutes already.

She took out her mobile phone, selected David's name from the address book, and pressed the phone icon to make the call.

"Hey, baby, my schedule's a mess," she began as she tried to speak calmly. There was a brief tremor on her last word, but she prayed that the static concealed it.

"Hello, darling," he said.

Emilia's face split into a huge grin as she listened to her husband's voice. *Every time*, she thought to herself, *his voice still sends that warmth through to her, enabling her to dream with eyes open*. If there was an aftertaste in words, she bet that David's was warmth. She imagined his dark hair, which she loved to touch; his soft blue-gray eyes, which melted her every time they look at her; and his chiseled jaw, which only accented his masculinity. He was the kind of handsome that mothers delighted at, but not good-looking enough for Emilia's contemporaries to envy her.

She could hear the smile in the tone of his voice. The familiar endearment tugged at her heart. Calling her darling started off as a joke when during the early months that they were dating, she let it slip that she had a thing for men with British accent. David told her that the best he could give her was to call her darling, to which she had laughed. The

joke died, the years came by and passed, but the term of endearment lingered.

“You’ve only been gone a few hours this morning and you’re already missing me?” David asked. He was teasing her as usual. “We both know your schedule’s a mess. What’s up?”

Emilia’s grin faded into a thin smile that left the dimple on her left cheek visible as though a nickel was pressed against her cheek.

“I need to fly to California tonight to meet with a client. I wasn’t supposed to do this, but Paul, my agent, called in sick last minute. There’s no one else who could replace him in such a short time.” She paused and ran through in her mind what she just said and hoped that David didn’t hear the lie in her words. She bit her lip as she waited for his response. Her hands became clammy.

“Are you sure it’s a client you’re meeting and not some spunky surfer?” he teased again, and Emilia laughed. “Give me a ring when you get there, OK?”

Emilia smiled. He hadn’t caught on her lie. *California? Fly to California?* She had no intention of going there. It was some sort of a last-minute, I’m-not-accustomed-to-lying lie. She would probably check into a hotel in New Jersey, and lock herself in a room for three days or a week at most to get acclimated to her fate, to be rational about it, or probably to sulk!

*It doesn’t matter how long it takes. I need to clear my head.*

“OK, babe. Got to go now,” Emilia said.

“Love you,” David murmured. He always took a childish tone every time he said those words.

Emilia’s left cheek flashed a dimple as she smiled again. Even after all these years, David never forgot to be endearing.

“I love you, too,” she whispered. This time, the smile had left her lips.

Initially, it was his dark hair and blue-gray eyes that won her over,



but as she looked back now, she realized that David's character was what enchanted her.

She waited until David ended their conversation. She listened patiently until she heard the soft beeps of her phone indicating that the connection was cut.

For the first time, she wasn't the one to hang up.

## Chapter 4

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VEHICLE AFTER VEHICLE roared on the street causing Emilia to jolt as they passed by. The weather did not help in her decision about where she should head next. Although the coffee shop was not busy, being back on the street proved that the city wasn't sleepy either.

Emilia wanted a change in scenery, some more of that peace and quiet. Or perhaps not. Maybe distraction was what she really preferred. Or needed.

Looking at the cars passing in front of her reminded her that life would go on for her regardless of the bad news she heard earlier. The decision she had to reach was simply whether she would choose to wallow in sadness or live life the way she wanted to. The way she knew she deserved to.

Indecisiveness was not one of Emilia's traits. In fact, she had a huge dislike for people who couldn't make up their minds immediately. But right now, it was only a simple question that stumped her—where to?

She admitted to herself that she couldn't answer that question.

She crossed the street. At least that for her was a start.

The street on the opposite side showcased a line of boutiques, and she stopped to gaze at the displays in the windows. There were items on sale, and while on another occasion she would have rejoiced over them and immediately would have taken a peek in the store to search for good buys, today she was pensively not in the mood to do so.

She jerked her head away from her reflection that was mirrored on the glass panels, not wanting to see her reflection. But the sky was beginning to get cloudy and so the darkness that suddenly veiled the street made her image translucent against the smoked glass walls of the shops. She didn't feel any differently than she had when she got dressed that morning and yet there was something pulsating, a random

undefinable feeling that just hung at her back, which could take her so easily if she would allow her fear to grow wings inside her heart.

Emilia's caramel brown eyes gazed back at her. Some of her blond locks were hanging loosely behind her ears so she removed the scrunchie holding her tresses in a ponytail. She shook her head, loosening the strands, and brushed her hair with her fingers. Satisfied, she started walking again. The wind that made her hair dance comforted her.

If she would not be going home for the next few days, perhaps she should check out new clothes. She's been playing with the question of whether she should go back to her place to pick up some stuff, or to just buy new clothes. Should David ask why she didn't pick up some clothes, she'd tell him that since the trip was urgent, she had to go straight to California and buy a new set of clothes there.

Emilia left the coffee shop an hour ago, she realized, as she checked her watch, yet she still felt as though she was in a special place where nothing seemed to touch her—no emotions, no sense of responsibility, no familiar people. She was thankful for the cloak anonymity offered her, but she had to break past the bubble she created around herself so she could come up with better decisions. She found it ironic that when time's running out, she couldn't make her mind about her destination.

She clutched her purse tightly to her breasts in an attempt to stop herself from yelling. The day was so frustrating for her, and confusion tore at every corner of her mind. There was severe taunting inside her head; voices telling her to stop and cry. On the other hand, there's an even stronger voice that kept on pushing her to walk on, to not give up, and to start believing in miracles.

But cancer? If it wasn't Stage IV, maybe she would believe in miracles. But it was Stage IV and no matter how optimistic she had always been, she felt an unfamiliar emotion ripping her across the chest. It was sharp and left her wincing in pain. It wasn't the pain though that

made her breathless and confused; it was in knowing that all of a sudden, everything—her life—could end.

She came across a woman carrying her son and Emilia was immediately reminded of Jeremy. A man wearing a hat to her looked a lot like David. A car that passed in front of her right before she crossed the street taunted her of the road trips she would miss out on. The amber traffic light that turned red mocked her that time would soon be cut short for her.

It was a wild morning and no matter how hard she tried to fight the daunting images in her head, she still stumbled on an epiphany of sorts. Her right hand closed tightly on her purse, and she glowered at the half-moon dents that her nails left on the leather strap.

The wind tousled her blond curls once more, and this time she was irritated. She wondered if the wind usually blew this often or it's just her being overly dramatic about her surroundings. It's either that or she's been watching too many soaps. The only thing missing right then was her theme song. In her mind, it would have to be a melancholic infusion of different stringed-instruments blending with a deep vibrato and the growl of a seasoned artist. But should any music play right now, she swore that she would end up in a heap on the sidewalk, weeping. So she pushed the thoughts aside.

Emilia looked around and found herself standing, with the wind cutting sharply against her flushed face, in front of a street sign that was already loose on its hinges. It kept on swaying back and forth.

Oddly, the sign pointed to the left. Emilia dismissed the urge to laugh at the sign “giving her a sign” of where she should go, but she helped herself to a grin at the thought. *David would have a fit laughing if he heard me saying that out loud*, she thought.

She crossed the street yet again and continued walking. This journey on foot took her to the other side of New Jersey that she wasn't familiar with. It amused her that there were still some areas that appeared new

to her. Her job was in Sales, and it's always been important that she knew local geography by heart. She blamed the lack of knowledge though to the decreasing field assignments she's had over the years.

An old church stood several yards away from her; its door was opened wide and welcoming. Its wall paint had peeled off. The structure looked dilapidated and yet, as is usual with churches, the soft chirping of the birds that resonated inside enticed her to enter.

There was no mass being held; in fact, there was no one inside, so she walked until she reached the front row. Not having been to church in a long time, she felt strangely at home. The wooden pew felt cold against her skin beneath the fabric of her dress.

What was she doing here anyway? She didn't even know what to ask of Him. He was the one who could make this—this sickness—go away. Should she dare? Should she ask Him to give her a miracle?

Emilia sat silently on the first pew. As she closed her eyes, a tingling ran down her spine—a tingling that continued down to her fingers and toes. It remained a mystery to her, how being in a place one hadn't frequented in a long while just because it's a place of worship brought comfort to whoever was seeking solace. It's like the feeling one gets upon hearing a child's words for the first time. A consolation when one feels defeated. A spark of a candle lit during a storm.

After a few minutes, Emilia knelt and her knees hit the cushioned wood. She racked her mind for the prayers that were taught to her as a child and couldn't remember an appropriate one for today. She inhaled sharply and closed her eyes. *Do not fear*, she remembered reading from the Bible.

"Dear God," she paused. "It's been quite a while." She stopped again as though cautious that she would be chided about a bad behavior. After a few awkward moments, it all rushed out like a flowing river.

"Dear God, I know I don't have the right to question you. I have my faults. I've sinned. And I know that I had a hand in what's happening

to me now.” She winced. “I’m afraid,” she said, choking on the last word. “I’m very afraid.”

“My words may seem scattered. And they are—because at this moment, I don’t glean anything good is about to unravel before me. I have this pain in my heart that only You can take away. If it is any other challenge that involves me, only me, I can handle it. But to know I’ll hurt the people I love, that they’ll hurt when I leave... I’m not sure if I’m ready for this.”

There was nothing but silence.

“Please, please, please—give me strength.”

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. There was still no one inside the church but her. A few birds flapped their wings overhead, and she gazed up.

“Dear God, I pray for a miracle,” she whispered. “I pray for a miracle so that I’ll get to spend more time with my husband and son. I don’t want to leave them. What will become of Jeremy when I’m gone? Will he grow up to be a good kid?” Her voice broke into tiny pieces that to any ears but God’s would seem inaudible. “It’s not right for me to leave him with my husband, alone, especially when my Jeremy’s still so young and he needed a mother to care for him.”

Afraid that she would cry, Emilia stood up. She put her hand on the wooden backrest of the pew to steady herself because she didn’t trust her knees just yet. Life seemed such a huge blessing that was being robbed from her, and she felt cheated that she had a taste of how good life was only to then learn that it would be taken away from her so soon.

She longed to see the days ahead and to work alongside David until they retire. To watch Jeremy go through school, get married, take on a job, and make beautiful kids. The possibilities clawed at her mind, a future that she knew would find itself materializing, but without her to even take snapshots of the memories. In her mind the future was now

simply equated to dreams and because there seemed to be no way for her to be a part of them, the images she conjured with an honest desperation would always be just dreams to her.

She bit her lower lip and surprised herself by shouting, "Give me a miracle!"

She was on the brink of breaking down, of giving in to the constant yammering in her head, to the taunts that pulled her down, pinning her to confusion. Her chin quivered with her outburst.

The birds' fluttering became louder, disturbed by her voice. Then they swooped down, flapping their wings noisily before flying out of the church.

She stood motionless in an awkward position of being half-bent toward the backrest of the pew. She had no energy to at least straighten herself and she felt cold as though drenched in freezing water. Her cheeks flushed and her heart started pounding faster. Guiltily, she muttered softly, "I'm sorry, dear God, if I offended."

Then she threw her head back and laughed at the silliness of her actions until tears caressed her face. She wiped them away in an irritated manner. *Not yet.* She shook her head and told herself that the tears were not manifestations of her heart's pining, but rather a result of laughing too much.

Before she could think again, she ran outside, her strength returning. Forgetting that she was already in her mid-thirties, she laughed as she ran while tears glistened against her cheeks like small diamonds on mountains of hope. She disregarded the fact that she was wearing a skirt and a pair of four-inch-heeled shoes, and each stride she took would only harden the calluses on her feet.

For the first time in her life, she didn't care if anyone saw her in that state: a child rushing after the birds and laughing half-crazily at the world. She clutched her purse to her chest tightly while her blond curls blew wildly in the air.

And through all this dancing with fate, she prayed fervently for a miracle.



## Chapter 5

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EMILIA COLLAPSED ON the side of the road with eyes squeezed tightly, trying to catch her breath. *How silly of me to run like that!* She chastised herself. *As if my lungs don't already have issues. Now I'm gasping for breath. Oh, please not now. Not yet. Please not yet.*

After several minutes, when her breathing returned to normal, she stood up and immediately hailed the first cab that passed.

The cabdriver was an old man. His head was almost entirely bald and wrinkles that reminded Emilia of shriveled apricots covered his face.

"Where to?" he asked.

"The mall." Emilia removed her feet out of her shoes and stared at her reddened ankles. Only sneakers could save them now from developing boils. She leaned on the backrest and found herself staring at the driver's head.

The old man peered at Emilia through the rearview mirror.

"Are you mentally picturing me with hair, kid?" he asked before laughing.

"Oh." Emilia felt abashed. "I wasn't..."

She couldn't find the words to explain herself. How would she tell him that, yes, she was trying to imagine how he looked when he still had hair because she wanted to somehow manage her expectations once her blond curls become affected by chemotherapy cycles.

"I was teasing you. There's no need to blush," he said. His smile stretched wide across his face, reminding Emilia of the way she drew a boat on paper when she was still in grade school. The old man's pointed nose was angular, a perfect triangle hovering above his boat-shaped lips. Smiling, his wrinkles grew more prominent around the edges of his blue eyes.

“I’m not—,” she cut in.

The old man studied her from the rearview mirror, squinting.

“I’ve been in this business all my life. I can read people, you know. Some actually say I’m a psychic, but hell, no—I’m just really good with people,” he said. “You seem to be a lovely young woman—”

“I’m not so young.”

“Well, you see, kid, being called young is relative so don’t take it too positively,” he said, chuckling.

“Now we know how fast you can turn a compliment into something insulting,” Emilia retorted.

The old man laughed and his nostrils flared with each sound that escaped him. He raised a hand and scratched his bald head.

“As I was saying,” the old man continued, “I’ve been in this business a long time. I’ve met a lot of people, talked to them, discussed the weather with them, politics... but nothing is more rewarding to me than to meet troubled young people, and somehow share a bit of wisdom—a bit of wisdom I keep on acquiring as I age gracefully.

“You see my bald head and wrinkled face? This is me aging gracefully.” The old man laughed at his own joke, enticing Emilia to join in.

Emilia offered a weak but sincere smile and a dimple appeared on her left cheek.

“I don’t know. I think I should have reservations sharing with you, but there’s no sense keeping it in. I have Stage IV cancer.” She paused for a while and waited for his reaction.

The old man continued to stare ahead as he drove. He appeared to be listening intently to her. When there was no reaction from him, Emilia fought the urge to repeat what she just said. Admitting to others that she had cancer was momentous to her and in her head she could almost hear a symphony that was written only for her begin to play. But contrary to what she expected, the old man didn’t manifest the

slightest alarm and she was left wondering if sympathy was the reaction she preferred.

“This may be the first and last time we meet. You know, you should brace yourself because if I die here in your backseat, that’ll spell trouble for you.” Emilia wanted to feel his concern toward her because that would confirm that she was not so insignificant. That she would be remembered. At least, in a way.

Surprisingly, the old man chuckled. “Not today, kid,” he said, shaking his head. “Not today. You’re stronger than I am. In fact, I should tell you, in case I’m the one that gets a stroke, I believe you can carry me single-handedly to the hospital.” He laughed at that.

Emilia’s mouth opened, and the symphony playing in her head came to an abrupt stop, drowned out by the old man’s laughter. Her eyes glared through her long lashes.

“Cheer up, kid.” He glanced at the rearview mirror. “It’s bad enough that we could be losing another beautiful face in this planet in the future. But to lose it now by frowning is just horrible.”

This time, Emilia laughed until her sides hurt. Then she was back to her reality, in the cab, escaping her fate. Upon realizing that, she stopped laughing.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Hell, why not?” the old man asked. “What are your fears?”

He took a turn and gassed up a bit. The view outside was breathtaking, but the more Emilia thought about it, the more she realized that it was really just as it usually was. Trees lined up the sidewalks, and occasionally, modern-design houses with huge lawns littered the town.

She found it amusing how everything seemed to glow and to look frosted upon knowing that it could be the last time she would enjoy such sightings.

“I don’t know,” Emilia said.

“Come on, share it with me,” the old man insisted. “I’m telling you, better face it early while—” He stopped short. Instead of finishing his sentence he feigned a cough.

“While it’s still early? While I still have some time left?” Emilia asked. “Why didn’t you finish your sentence? Suddenly you’re this old man that’s so sensitive about what I’ll feel if you rub it in my face that I’m running out of time? How dare you?” she seethed.

Her entire life, she’s been able to temper her emotions, but now, one stupid remark from a stranger ticked her, making her blurt out her anger. And to top it off, she had no idea where her surging plethora of emotions was coming from.

Then what she was trying to avoid all week happened. In the backseat of the old man’s cab, she wept until her shoulders shook. It didn’t take long before she had difficulty breathing. She didn’t notice that the old man had already pulled over and had opened the car’s back door.

“Come on, kid. Move your butt,” he ordered. “Don’t be a charlatan pretending to be this weak girl when I know how strong you are. Move your butt,” he repeated.

Shocked at how the old man was addressing her, Emilia followed. She was still choking on her sobs as she wiped her tears with her handkerchief.

“Blow your nose,” the old man commanded.

Emilia was annoyed, but she knew that he was right in telling her to empty her nose. So she did while she wiped her tears.

They were both standing outside the car with Emilia avoiding the old man’s gaze and him trying to catch it. The long road stretched far until the two sidewalks meet in a single point. Occasionally, a few cars passed by.

A loud revving of an engine sounded and a young man called out, “You rock, old man! Nice chick.” And then he whistled.

Emilia and the old man doubled over laughing; that was the moment the ice was broken.

“Come on, kid,” the old man said.

Emilia frowned. “Why do you keep on calling me kid? It’s annoying.”

The old man just chuckled and Emilia wanted to hit him at the back of his bald head.

They crossed the road, leaving the cab with the hazard lights on. The wind was blowing like crazy.

“You see, kid. From where we are standing, we can’t see the end of this road. Well, we can see it, but it’s just a dot.” He pointed ahead. “But we drive on knowing that it’s the way to go. We have our destinies set for us. The only question is, are we ready to face it? And seeing you, I know you aren’t.” He paused before adding, “At least not yet.

“But we could stay here all afternoon and watch the stars cover the sky. Sit around and watch the sun rise. Still, we know where we should be heading. Linger here doesn’t change a thing.” The old man put stress on the word *should*. “What are you afraid of?” he asked.

Emilia thought for a while. “I don’t know. Perhaps it’s the pain of not knowing what I would be missing in their lives. I have a husband and a son.” She looked at him straight in the eye as though helpless, but attempting to be as courageous as a soldier approaching the war’s frontlines. Her eyes clouded once more and tears started rolling down her cheeks.

“Pray for a miracle,” the old man said softly.

Emilia smiled wanly despite her tears. “Funny you should say that. I already did.”

He moved closer to her and stretched his arms as though to welcome her. He looked old and dusty and unattractive, but the embrace he offered was very appealing. And his oceanic eyes calmed her.

Slowly, Emilia moved toward him to accept his embrace. Like a child, her crying turned into sobs. She choked on her tears, but she let them all out because she couldn't hold them in any longer.

"You'll have your miracle," the old man whispered in her ear. "Don't worry."

"You say it like it's true," Emilia complained.

The old man chuckled. "Well, if you believe it maybe it will happen."

For a moment, a dash of serenity spread through Emilia's body. She sucked in air, willing herself to stop crying.

When she was calm enough, she met the old man's gaze. Her skirt stretched tightly against her legs as she sat down on the patch of grass a few yards from the sidewalk. The old man grunted as he stooped, his back perfecting into a curve similar to the arc of an eyebrow in a motion that looked precise and yet too painful to be beautiful.

Upon seating, the old man took something from his pocket. He opened a flip-top box, pulled out one stick, and lit it.

"From where I came from, what I'm about to do will be frowned upon." Then he offered her the pack.

"One for the road?" he asked, smiling.

Emilia took one and held the foreign cigarette in her hand. It felt odd now. Her eyes softened as she lit it up and said, "Yes, probably one for the road."

She shook her head at the irony before she puffed out the smoke.

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Upon arriving at the department store, Emilia scouted for a pair of jeans, a new set of underwear, tees and sneakers. Then she excused herself from the cashier upon realizing that she forgot to grab a few socks. She checked her watch and sighed. It was almost eight in the evening.

Her feet dragged after her as she went to the nearest restroom to

change.

Inside, Emilia checked out her reflection in the mirror, and finally decided on brushing her hair and tying it with the scrunchie. Stray curls hung behind her ears, but she no longer bothered to redo her hair knowing that the strays would find a way to stick out again. Besides, David had always complimented her hair saying it was stylishly disarrayed.

Her hand went up to her collar bone, grazing the protrusion, wondering why she didn't notice how fast her weight had dropped. If David hadn't known how conscious she was of her body, he would have raised eyebrows at her thinning figure.

Her brows furl as she remembered that she needed to call David or he would start worrying. That was something she wanted to prevent because when he does, he will bombard her with phone calls.

She closed her eyes as she listened to his voice. The familiar feeling of knowing that he was just on the other line calmed her. For the second time that day, Emilia waited for David to hang up.

Although her stomach was not yet complaining, she decided to find a good restaurant to dine in. She went to the concierge and asked for any Japanese restaurant listed. There was none. She remembered though that there was a Japanese restaurant she passed two days ago. Watanabe's, if she remembered correctly. It was a few blocks away from the mall and since it was starting to get late, she quickly headed for the mall exit.

## Chapter 6

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YESTERDAY, WHEN DAVID Smith visited the house, the front wall was still untouched by paint, but as he surveyed the house now, it looked just the way he wanted it—covered in gleaming white paint. The house was located two miles away from the apartment that he and Emilia were renting.

David's soft, sleek hair, combed back and framing his high forehead held firm even as a strong gust of wind blew and made the leaves of the few trees in the yard shake. He scanned the house and wondered if he made a good decision in closing the purchase. His thick lips curved into a faint smile and he touched his chin unconsciously, feeling the stubbles against his fingertips.

The house had two stories; and it was covered in white paint. The roof was red, which broke the monotony of the otherwise bland façade; white picket fences surrounded the lawn. This wasn't exactly how it looked when he initially laid eyes on the property though.

David had seen the advertisement over the internet when he became serious about looking for a house. The white walls and the huge lawn caught his attention, and although there were some aspects about the house that he didn't like, he knew that it would only take some renovations to convert it into Emilia's dream home. He said *Emilia's dream home* because it had been a long-running joke between them because every time they discuss about getting a house, his wife would ramble on and on about what she thought would make for a perfect abode. Yes, that was how she referred to it—the *perfect abode*.

He contacted the agent and inquired about the details and in a span of three months he was able to complete the transaction. As soon as the documents were signed, he knew that the hard work was just about to start.



It had been almost six months since he started working on the renovations. The first things to go were the windows that were three feet high and five feet wide with blue shutters and steel frames. He replaced a bank of them with a wide panel of glass that allowed sunlight to luxuriously illumine the living room. He gave instructions to scrape off the white-paint-turned-ecru and give the walls a nice, fresh coat of white. It had also been his idea to have the roof re-shingled red, to give it a warmer touch.

Inside, the house partitions were completely removed. He instructed the construction agency to adopt a layout he had pictured inside his head wherein the living room became narrower to allow for an island-counter in the kitchen.

When they had their baby Jeremy last year, he had wanted to leave the apartment immediately and move into a home more suitable to raising their son. Although he didn't make a lot from his profession, he had some family money, which contributed to his finally closing the deal on the property.

David entered the house and inspected the white walls and a speck of satisfaction crossed his angular face.

He and Emilia had argued over wall paints in their conversations before because he didn't want white to cover every wall, but Emilia pointed out that nothing could go wrong with white; and if they needed to redecorate or accent the house, all they would have to do was change the furniture, the curtains, and replace decorative items.

David would simply end the argument nodding and mumbling like a child, *Yeah, like Emilia's dream abode.*

To which Emilia would snap her fingers excitedly and yell, *Exactly!* Followed by, *Now, you're learning, little boy.*

David smiled fondly at the memories, at each argument they had. He couldn't wait for Emilia to come back from her client visit. He was looking for a way to tell her that he wouldn't be home for the next few

days. A plausible lie that he had thought of, much as he hated the thought of lying to her, was that he would be visiting his mother to spend a few days with her. He couldn't tell Emilia his real reason—that he would be working extra hours to supervise the finishing touches on the house since the house was to be his anniversary gift to her. So even though he hated lying to her, he reasoned that *the end would somehow justify the means*. But now, there was no need to lie as it seemed like the world had conspired with him to allow him to deliver the perfect anniversary gift. So when she called him earlier about the fieldwork, he couldn't contain his excitement.

"Please move it a bit to the left," David told the deliveryman. He was pointing at the coffee table. Most of the furniture that were already in the house were new because he didn't want Emilia to notice that the things in the apartment were slowly disappearing. He would worry about where to put their old stuff later on. Besides, they would have a huge garage now where they could temporarily store their old furniture while sorting out what items to get rid of and what to keep.

But he would keep the *barrel*, he maintained. Emilia would frown, but the barrel had a history with him. It was the only memory he had of Curly.

Curly was the cat his mother gave him as a boy, and Curly had used the barrel as a scratch post. When Curly died, he vowed to take the barrel with him anywhere he went. To remember the sweet ball of fur. Yes, he told himself, he would keep the barrel. It doesn't matter if Emilia would taunt him and call him little boy for being sentimental. He. Will. Keep. The. Barrel. End of discussion.

David pointed at the wall. "Will you hand me the drill?" He reached out to take the tool and his muscled arm flexed.

Rey handed the drill over to David. Rey had curly, medium-length brown hair that was beginning to look less wavy as he grew it out, which contrasted with his clean shaven face.

When Rey stood up, his average height and muscled frame became noticeable. He'd been in the construction industry after dropping out of college.

"Here you go," he said.

David pulled the stepladder and placed it beside the wall. He examined the spaces to his right and his left, carefully gauging the distance and if he correctly estimated the wall's center in the living room.

"Is it in the center?" he asked.

Rey looked at where David was pointing the drill.

"I suggest you measure it, man."

"Nah, I think this is good enough," David said, chuckling. He proceeded to drill the wall.

"Can't wait to move in, huh?"

"I'm excited about it," David answered.

Rey took a hook and handed it to David. David passed the drill back to Rey and firmly installed the hook in place. A few seconds later, he came down the stepladder and looked up at where he placed the hook.

"Perfect," he whispered. David had planned on putting his painting of Emilia on this wall. He could only imagine the look of astonishment on her face when she walks in here two days from now and sees the painting. And he wondered, will she still hate surprises? She had always claimed she did. But sometimes, when his timing is impeccable, he manages to make her smile.

Regardless, David had always worked on surprising Emilia, remembering that he had made a promise to himself the moment he laid eyes on her that if he can have her, he will never let a moment pass by without reminding her how much she means to him.

### **Memory of their first meeting**

The sun was hiding behind the thick cottony cloud formations,

shielding David from sun-burn. It was hot enough to affirm that he'd made a good decision to continue using oil in his painting.

David took out two stools from his pickup truck. He set up the easel and put the canvas on it. On the first stool, he arranged his painting tools, laying down the oils and paintbrushes. He sat on the other one.

He took out his painter's hat and wore it. His hand brushed against a lock of dark hair that fell to his forehead. He pulled the other stool closer and picked the palette. Whistling, he began squeezing the oil paints from the tubes in a semi-circle on the palette. He studied the details of the School of Business building, and he was proud of the image that had started to come out in the canvass. With just a few finishing touches, he knew that he would be able to capture its old baroque architectural design.

He had been working on the painting for hours, not minding the heat, when he realized that there were several college students surrounding him. He reached for his hand towel and rubbed off some of the oil paints that were staining his fingers.

When he looked up, he laid eyes on the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She was wearing a light blue, tropical-print sundress, and cream peep-toe pumps that highlighted her red toe nails.

He had seen a lot of women with curly blond hair, but nobody had ever captivated him so fast in the past. He studied her face, her caramel eyes, and her wide lips, but he couldn't figure out what it was that made her stand out. Where his eyes touched her, she seemed to glow and he wondered if it was what seeing one's soul mate was like. But before he made the stupid mistake of blurting it out, he looked away from her.

The other students started leaving and David went to packing his things. He noticed that his hands were shaking slightly because he could no longer focus on what he was doing. Instead, from the corner of his eye, he watched her, wondering to himself what he would do if she

should turn away and leave.

“It won’t dry up fast in this weather,” she said.

He looked at her as she walked toward him. She walked carefully, avoiding the few large stones in the field. He smiled at her, and when she smiled back, he noticed that she has a dimple on her left cheek.

“That’s why I brought the pickup. I’ll wait for it to dry back there while I eat my packed lunch. If it’s still not dry when I’m done, then I’ll put it in the passenger seat.”

“Did you use a lot of turpentine? It’s going to stink,” she said.

“No, just cooking oil from my mother’s kitchen—”

The girl laughed and David relished in the sound she made.

“So you know about painting,” he said.

“A little about it.”

“I’m David.” He extended his hand to her.

“Emilia.” She took his hand. “I read about it. I’m interested in painting, but I never thought of it as a career. So whenever I feel like I need a fresh sense of art to capture my soul, I go to museums.” She was still smiling.

David didn’t know what to say. Here he was, standing in front of a beautiful girl, and he couldn’t think of a way to keep her interested. He put his hands inside his pockets just as he habitually does when he’s uncertain how to approach a situation.

“How long do I have to stand here before you ask me to dinner?”

David laughed, thankful for her bluntness. “I’m not usually like this. I’m funny, you know,” he said.

“Um, claiming you are totally negates it,” she said.

David laughed until the laughter turned into strange choking sounds. “I,” he said, searching for words. “Will you go out to dinner with me?”

Emilia laughed.

“If you can find me.” She turned her back to him and started walking away. “I’m not difficult to locate, I stay on campus, in one of the

dorms. Eight o'clock, sharp." She waved and turned away again, giggling.

David was left standing beside his pickup truck, desperate to find out where she was staying.

At seven o'clock that night, he started his search. He went to three dormitories but couldn't find her room. At one point, he considered stopping the seemingly senseless search, blaming himself for not getting her last name. As he was walking outside the fourth dormitory, somebody shouted from the second floor.

"Hey, artist!"

He turned around and looked up. She was framed by the window of her room, wearing her nightgown; her hair was undone and the wind was playfully tossing her curly hair. She was a mess, but what he thought at that moment was that she couldn't have been more beautiful.

"I didn't know you would actually look for me," she shouted gaily.

"How can I resist?" David shouted back.

She laughed. "Wait for me. I'll be down in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

David laughed, too.

Emilia didn't make him wait for long. When she came down, she was wearing a cardigan over a tank top, her neck was covered with a scarf, and her blond hair was worn loose. She looked lovely.

"Dinner with a stranger?" he asked.

"I assumed it would be fun," she said and looked at him. He was still smiling.

"It would be," he promised.

David took her to a local diner, carefully picking out a table in the corner. The whole time, he couldn't take his eyes off her, even when she asked to be excused and went to the restroom. When she came back, his eyes were still fixed on that area where she disappeared, and

his gaze accompanied her until she was sitting in front of him again.

“It didn’t seem like you moved,” she said.

David grinned. “Couldn’t help it. You’re too much of a delight to look at.”

“Are you always this—”

“Flirty? No. Sweet? Definitely.”

“Ugh! Cheesy line,” Emilia complained, but her voice gave away the flattery she felt.

David asked for the bill and settled it. He stood up and followed Emilia as she walked out the door. He slowed his pace and grabbed her arm.

“Hey,” he said.

Emilia looked around, brows raised.

“I hurt my knee playing football...”

“Oh. I’m sorry, you should have told me earlier.”

David laughed. “Actually, I just want you to walk slower so I could be with you for a little longer.”

“And you had to lie when you could have easily asked me.” Her eyes were glinting with amusement.

David smiled and didn’t let go of her hand as they started walking to the dorm again.

But it was so near that he soon found himself standing outside the building, towering over Emilia and feeling like an idiot for grinning at her the entire night. But he had donned a smile and her mere presence wouldn’t allow him to wipe it off.

“Good night,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” she said and nodded. She looked at her toes and then looked up at him again. She was wearing a very playful grin. “I love you.”

David almost choked, but instead ended up laughing. “What?” He kept laughing until his sides began to hurt.

Emilia was looking at him, a smile frozen on her lips.

“Oh, please stop already,” she said, sounding offended.

“Why would you say that to a complete stranger?” he asked.

“We spent an evening together. Shared a lovely time over dinner. I could sense—ah, let me rephrase that. I know that you like me. So I told you I love you.”

“But why?” David asked. He couldn’t understand. He was looking intently at the unbelievably sexy, crazy, beautiful, high-spirited girl in front of him.

“I have this theory—”

David laughed all the more. “OK, let’s hear it.”

“That if I say it first and don’t mean it the first time I say it, it will work for both me and my partner later on.”

David’s eyebrows met, growing more confused.

“You see, if something happens, whether we separate later on, he realizes that he’s in love with someone else. Or let’s say, in case of sudden demise,” she said, laughing, before she continued, “both of us won’t be hurt a lot if we just go back to that moment when I first said ‘I love you.’ When I didn’t mean it yet.”

“That is harsh,” David said, nodding slowly while squinting at her.

Emilia laughed. “I said it’s a theory, and you, my dear mister, are the first one I have practical application of that theory on.”

Her forefinger barely touched his chest as she said it, but David’s heart raced. He laughed, enjoying their date.

“So, good night,” David said.

“You already said good night,” Emilia said.

“Yeah, but we all know good night isn’t supposed to end with words.” David smiled mischievously at her before moving closer toward her. She stood there, waiting and smiling brightly at him, her perfect white teeth and dimple showing.

This was the moment he was waiting for. He moved closer to kiss



her on the lips. When he was only an inch away, she pulled back.

“I said I love you but I never said you may kiss me yet,” she whispered against his ear. He didn’t know if it was her lips being that close or her soft, melodious voice that sent him wanting to just grab her and kiss her. Right there. Right then. It didn’t matter if she would slap him. But then he should suppress his feelings because he believed the girl in front of him was really special.

She pulled back and turned her head to the right, showing her left cheek to him, pointing to it.

He fought the urge to touch her face and kiss her on the lips. Instead, he frowned at her and kissed the dimple of her left cheek.

He was still frowning after the kiss and Emilia noticed the dissatisfaction and said, “Oh, you’re so cute, frowning like a little boy.” Then she pinched the tip of his nose and threw her head back, laughing.

David playfully grabbed her at the waist and squeezed his face against the curve of her neck. She flailed and continued laughing.

“You’re ticklish. Just my kind of woman,” he said as a naughty smile spread across his lips.

Emilia pushed at him. “Okay, enough, buster. You’ve held me way too much already.” Then she slipped away from his embrace and with that, she went upstairs without looking back.

And that was how, David later realized, she tricked him into falling in love with her. Her spirit, her wit, her silly theory, her gloriously adorable body. And the agony of not knowing how her lips tasted like.

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The following day, Emilia found David waiting for her outside the dormitory holding a bunch of lilies that he handed to her. He walked her all the way to her building for the next class.

“The flowers come with a note,” he said as he handed her a folded paper, winking.

Emilia smiled as a delicious warm feeling spread inside her chest; she

stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek, then turned around to walk away. She clutched the lilies to her chest wondering how she could have favored any other flower over them in the past.

Inside the building, she opened the note and read it:

*Walking along, blending with the crowd,*

*Angular figure sashaying about,*

*Ever so beautiful,*

*Yet visible only to me.*

*Soft blond curls brushing the shoulders,*

*Face marked with anonymity,*

*Scent freshening as she milled around,*

*Fancy, yet known only to me.*

*With eyes closed my painter's brush perfected you,*

*Depicting a fragrant almost unknown aroma.*

*And nobody else smells you, or sees you,*

*Or becomes aware of you.*

*I see you, while everybody else exists unaffected.*

*Love stands out to only another foolish heart.*

Emilia's dimple showed on her left cheek as she folded the paper following its original creases. She tore a page from her notebook and wrote:

*Dear David,*

*I don't know what to make of your poem. It's a good thing you were fascinated by me. But really, am I supposed to be flattered by this? Are you saying that nobody else sees me as beautiful?*

*And yet, what can I expect from an arrogant painter?*

*Looking forward to seeing you,*

*Emilia*

David laughed as he read the note and knew then that he's got to win her over. He pursued her relentlessly and his efforts were rewarded when one day, as he was cleaning his paintbrushes, she moved closer to

him, took from him the brushes, and started removing the stains from each of his fingers. He had stood watching her, fascinated with the grace of her feminine movements. When she looked up and saw him watching her, she leaned forward, lips slightly open. He didn't hesitate and instead, met her lips in a kiss that he hoped would last forever.

### **Back to the present**

David looked around at the house and mentally went through Emilia's checklist for the ideal home—white, spacious, with a lawn, and with him there to wait for her. The place was, by her standards, magnificent.

Now it's time to go back to the apartment and check on Jeremy and his nanny Susie. David was glad that he and Emilia were able to find the stout, fair-skinned woman in her early forties. Susie had often boasted that in the past, she had taken care of four kids, and that she had a lot of experience when it came to child rearing.

He checked the time. It was almost eight. Emilia would be calling him soon to let him know she had arrived in California. True enough, as he was driving back to their apartment, his phone started ringing.

“Hey, darling, missed me much?”

## Chapter 7

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OUTSIDE THE MALL, Emilia decided between hailing a cab and walking to get to *Watanabe's* restaurant. Yellow streetlights lit the road and she occasionally saw couples walking so she decided to do the same, convincing herself that she made the right choice because it would give her time to process her hazy thoughts.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she never had a decent lunch. Her knees had gone weak, too, and her mouth started to water just thinking about sushi.

She checked her leather-strapped watch that loosely dangled from her left hand and sighed upon seeing that it's thirty minutes past eight in the evening.

She never used to be this conscious about time except when she had booked meetings with clients. Things were changing though and she had to ensure that her every activity could be squeezed into her now very "tight" schedule.

Emilia passed by an outdoor bench where a couple was seated, arguing over something. The woman slapped the man's face. She expected the man to retaliate, but instead he simply touched his face to feel where his lover's hand left an ugly red mark.

Emilia continued walking.

"I said I'm sorry," she heard the man say.

*Life is short*, Emilia thought. Any misunderstanding should be discussed properly instead of being slept over, unresolved. Otherwise, a lot of things could be missed. Seeing the couple together made her think of David again. She missed him and instinctively, she wrapped her arms around her as though the act could maybe make her remember his touch.

She stole a glimpse at the couple she passed by and she could almost

picture David having a discussion with another woman. She's sure he would have someone else when she's gone, and the thought saddened her. It just wasn't fair. What if, when she's gone and she visited him from heaven, she sees David looking at another woman in the way that he used to look at her? Will she be able to handle it? She dismissed the thought. It wasn't chilly that evening, but she got goose bumps so she rubbed her palms against her arms.

*What does David like? He may have a thing for blondes, she thought, because I am.* But it would be annoying to find David later on with someone that somehow resembled her. She wanted to stop the images pirouetting their wings inside her head.

She saw the sign to *Watanabe's*. It was about fifty yards from where she was. She longed to sit inside and stretch her legs. Maybe there she could escape from the images. Hurriedly, she crossed the street. Only a few more steps and she would already find herself—

Her eyes widened as she craned her neck behind her and saw the flashing lights of an approaching vehicle. Whoever was driving the car might not have been looking.

The tires squealed, and in that moment, everything seemed to drag painfully. The car was just a few yards away now; and she stood rooted to the spot. She stared at the approaching vehicle as though she could conjure it to vanish.

"Miss, watch out!" she heard someone scream.

She managed to turn away from the approaching car, but its bumper hit the back of her legs, making her fall to her hands and knees. The impact wasn't strong though. The driver was able to maneuver the car into a quick stop in the last seconds.

Emilia squinted around her. Everything was veiled in white, and then nothing, until all she could see was darkness as though an artist poured black paint around her.

She strained her ears to hear anything, but no sound came, and she

wondered if she passed out. But she could still feel her knees and palms pressed against the pavement.

A few seconds ticked by, but to her they seemed like hours. She blinked, but her eyes registered nothing. She raised a hand to feel her head.

Slowly, her vision started returning. It was blurry at first like when mist covered the mountaintops. Then her eyes focused. She bent her head down to prevent nausea from sweeping over her, and found herself on all fours, staring at the pebbles and the rough pavement under her.

She was still in a crawling position, trying to figure out if she was hurt when the sounds became clearer. She looked up and met the eyes of the passersby looking aghast at her. In their faces, she could see the concern.

The restaurant seemed to dance as though there were several overlapping images of it before the image solidified. The sound of the car door opening and the rushed footsteps of someone approaching disturbed her.

"I—," a man mumbled. "I'm sorry, miss." He crouched beside her. "Are you all right?" A pair of blue-gray eyes veiled with worry stared at her. "Let me help you."

Looking at his eyes made her remember David once more.

"You weren't looking!" she yelled at him. "I was crossing the street and you almost killed me."

The young man opened his mouth as if to say something but closed it again. His face paled as he studied her.

"Help her up," someone said.

"Go take her to a hospital," somebody added.

"Oh, for Christ's sakes, go carry her!"

"I got it!" the young man kneeling in front of her shouted back at the spectators.

A group of people rushed forward and formed a circle around the two of them. Hurriedly, Emilia stood up, took a step and winced.

“Ouch!” she blurted out.

A few spectators moved closer, but the young man was quick on his feet. He took Emilia’s waist, put her arm around his shoulder, and shouted, “I got this. Thanks everyone. I’ll handle this.”

When everybody else was out of earshot, the young man told her, “I’m a doctor.”

“You’re what?” Emilia asked.

“Doctor,” he said. “I’m a doctor.”

He helped her to the passenger seat of his black sedan and closed the door. Then he climbed in the driver’s seat, turned on the ignition, and started driving.

“My name’s Michael. But you may call me Mike.” He paused, as though wondering why he gave out his nickname to a stranger.

Emilia couldn’t find her voice again.

“Does anything hurt?” he asked.

“I think it’s just my ankle,” she answered. “Where are you taking me?”

“The hospital. It’s very close, around three miles from here.”

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that,” she said in a panicked voice. There shouldn’t be any record of this accident. Mike was about to object, so she quickly added, “I thought you said you’re a doctor. Then put bandage on my ankle and let’s get this over with.”

She frowned as her gaze fell upon her legs. Her jeans had a tear and there were scratches on her knee. There was very little blood, but the flesh looked raw. From the looks of it, the bruise would get ugly in the next days. She examined her palms and noted the scratches. She exhaled heavily after determining that she wouldn’t need any stitches.

Her stomach growled loudly.

“Don’t be scared,” Mike said. His voice was softer, but the hint of

fear was still there.

“I think that’s not because of fear. I’m hungry.” She doubted what she said though.

“OK,” he said, “Let’s get food and head on home. I’ll take care of that ankle.” Mike saw that she was nursing her knee. “And that,” he said, referring to her knee. “I didn’t know you hurt your knee, too.”

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Instead of indulging on sushi and relaxing in the corner of a cozy restaurant, Emilia squeezed behind Mike at the takeout counter of a fast-food chain. The crowd had thinned.

Mike asked that she stay inside the car so that her ankle wouldn’t be strained, but she insisted on tagging along.

“Here you go,” the waitress said. “Two super-large burgers and onion rings, take away,” she said, flashing a tired smile. “Are you sure that’ll be all?”

Mike responded with a simple nod of his head. He took the paper bags, turned to Emilia, and motioned for her to leave the counter.

“You’ll like the burger,” he said nonchalantly. “The ones they make here are the real king of burgers.”

Emilia ignored him and focused instead on making her left leg carry her weight. It didn’t prevent her from limping though.

Mike glared at her right ankle. “I told you to stay in the car, but you just wouldn’t listen,” he said in an annoyed tone. “This place could use a drive-thru.”

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Mike felt guilty for answering his girlfriend’s call, which caused him to avert his eyes away from the road. It was only a few seconds, but everything happened so fast.

He looked at the lady beside him from the corner of his eye and felt another pang of guilt dominating his emotions. It had been his fault because he and his girlfriend Lea were fighting over the phone, but it



was too long a story to rehash now.

*What was this woman doing in the middle of the street anyway?* Mike frowned. He knew he was just trying to justify the incident. Sighing, he was only thankful that nothing really serious happened.

The weird thing was, after he hit her, it took him several minutes or maybe it was seconds that felt like minutes, before he got the strength to stand up from the driver's seat. There was something about her being outlined by the headlights of his car that made him lose himself for a moment. Looking at her standing in the middle of the road, he froze and continued speeding toward her. When his senses returned, he hit the brakes quickly and pulled at the hand brake. His mobile phone flew toward the dashboard and fell down to the floor.

He had to be in shock, which was altogether an unfamiliar feeling. He'd seen shock in patients brought in the emergency room, and on the faces of their families, but he'd never experienced it himself yet. Until now.

When they reached the car, he turned to her. She was leaning on the hood awkwardly.

"I don't think you mentioned your name."

The woman's lips opened slightly. She hesitated as though trying to decide if giving her name to a stranger, who had struck her with his car no less, was necessary.

"Call me Karen," she said.

## Chapter 8

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UP UNTIL NOW, Mike realized that they had not paid any attention to the wounds. Shaking his head, he said, "Let's have a look at your ankle now."

He took out his first aid kit and gestured for Emilia to sit, but she shook her head, and excused herself to wash her foot first before letting him look at it. It was one of her fetishes, not wanting to be caught dead with dirty nails, or feet, or underwear! She swore her corpse would still blush if ever any of these should happen.

"I've seen worse," he said, "dirtier feet, I mean." Mike was appalled at her insistence to wash her feet.

"This sprain is not going to kill me so indulge me," she snapped.

"Oh, for the love of God!" Mike burst out, not knowing if he would laugh at her quirk.

When she came back from the bathroom, her limp was almost gone. By the way she walked, with her right knee unbending and her shoulders stiff, Mike knew that she was trying to conceal it.

"OK, please sit now, I think we've dragged this out long enough." Mike pulled a stool in front of where Emilia sat. Once seated, he asked her to put her leg on his lap, and when she did, he began to examine her foot.

"Does this hurt?"

Emilia wiggled her toes. "No. Not anymore. Or at least not so much. I limp because I don't want to strain it."

Mike pressed the flesh behind the ankle and waited for her reaction.

"Ouch! Of course if you poke at it, it will hurt!"

"Oops. Sorry. Seems like nothing serious but I'll wrap it for support."

Mike took out an elastic bandage and started wrapping her ankle

with it. Then he stood up and got cold compress from the fridge. He handed it over to her.

“Put this on top of your ankle. This will help.”

Emilia stared at it and pursed her lips. “There’s really no need for that. I should leave. Just the bandage is fine.”

She squeezed her bandaged foot inside her right sneakers. She had to loosen the shoelace, fold it down, and step on the backside of the canvas. She left the lace untied.

“What about your knee? I can’t let you leave all bloodied.” He tried to turn it into a joke and he looked at Emilia whose expression remained unreadable.

Mike dragged the stool closer to her and started checking her knee.

Emilia watched him. He seemed younger than her, perhaps in his late twenties. Blond hair covered his head and while it’s trimmed short behind the ears, some curls hung at the back of his head.

When he started peering over her knee, locks of his hair fell across his forehead, and she had the desire to brush them back into place so he could see what he was doing clearly.

Mike looked undecided about whether to cut the knee portion of her jeans or to fold the pants’ leg up over the injury. The fact that she was wearing skinny jeans didn’t help. Emilia wanted to tell him that this was the only pair she had with her, but seeing him so undecided on what to do was almost hilarious. She would just buy another pair tomorrow.

“Just cut it,” she said, stifling a laugh.

“Are you sure? More often than not, I rip my patients’ clothes off and usually they don’t have the strength to argue. Since you’re conscious, it’s harder to decide on what the right thing to do is.” He winked at her.

He cut a bigger hole in her jeans. Then he cleaned the wound and applied antiseptic. “It’s going to get ugly as it heals,” he said.

He rubbed his hands with alcohol.

“Listen, Karen,” he started. “I’m really sorry about,” he stammered, “you know, the accident. And thank you for not creating a scene.”

Emilia flinched upon hearing herself be addressed as Karen. She didn’t know where the lie came from. The moment that Mike asked her what her name was, she only had a few seconds to think if she would give her real name. She surprised herself when she gave him a different one.

“It’s not all your fault,” she answered. Now that Emilia had felt the comfort of a couch, she realized how exhausted she was. She wanted to just scoot over and sleep regardless of the cramps she may later on suffer from for not staying in a bed. The trouble was, she also knew she had to get up and look for a place to spend the night. “I should really get going.”

She stood up and tested her right ankle by slowly shifting some of her weight to it. She heaved a sigh of relief when it didn’t throb.

“Stay awhile. There’s no need to rush,” he said. “The burgers, remember?”

“Ah, yes. The king of burgers—of course,” she mimicked.

“Never ridicule the king of burgers,” Mike cut in before handing her the food. Winking, he added, “Let’s eat outside. I have a porch.”

Mike walked toward the porch; he turned to her and nodded his head slightly, asking her to follow him.

Emilia surveyed the living room. Only a couch, a black coffee table, and a matching black side table lay before her. Then something caught her eye.

Across the room to the left, two mountain bikes were hung. A lazy smile split her face and her eyes softened as she remembered the one she had to sell years ago. It was a decision she made when she realized that she no longer had the luxury of time to join bike tours.

She moved to where the bikes were hung. She touched a wheel

while inspecting the gears of each bike. She was surprised to discover that she's no longer familiar with the models in the market.

She pulled herself away from the bikes and followed Mike outside.

Though she's in New Jersey, she felt anonymous in the place, in whatever part of Jersey she was right now. The sky was just so dark. She took the burger out of the paper bag, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

She caught Mike watching her, grinning from ear to ear, as though waiting for her confirmation that the burger actually was as good as he claimed.

"Best!" she said.

With that, Mike bit his burger and grinned widely at her.

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"Listen, Karen," Mike started after taking the last bite of his burger. "I want to apologize again—really sorry about what happened. I'm glad nothing terrible resulted from it, I just really want you to know that."

"It's nothing," she said. "I'm thirsty. Do you have anything to drink?"

"Oh right, I'm sorry I didn't offer you one sooner. I don't know where my head is tonight." He stood up and put his hands inside his pockets.

"What would you like? Coffee? Iced tea? Soda maybe?"

Mike shifted his feet in a rather cute but bothersome manner. His hands were still inside his pockets.

Emilia's mouth opened in fascination. His actions reminded her of David. God, she's missing her husband so much.

"Just water is OK," she said after a while.

Mike smiled and walked away.

The pitcher and two glasses jiggled on a tray. Mike poured some water into a glass and offered it to Emilia.

"Here you go," he said and sat down opposite her. "I can't

remember if you bumped your head on the pavement,” Mike started. “You know, when I hit you, perhaps in shock, I saw this blinding flash of white light. I couldn’t see you clearly, and yet it was as if you’re standing out. It’s like for a moment I lost my focus. After that, I saw you on all fours.”

“Exactly what happened to me as well. Perhaps that’s how it is in accidents. Those telling you that you’ll see your life flashing before your eyes, they’re wrong after all.” She chuckled, oddly surprised that she has relaxed in Mike’s presence. “What actually one sees is the flashing white light that sort of brings you somewhere else like the event is ethereal. For me, when I opened my eyes, there I was bent over like a dog.”

“I got to give it to you; you don’t seem rattled at all.”

“Rattled? Dear god, no. I don’t think anything can do that to me at this point.” Her eyes rounded as though the very notion of being rattled over a few scrapes was ridiculous.

“You seem tired.”

“You’re very observant.”

Mike regarded her concernedly.

“I didn’t get a decent meal today and my schedule’s wearied me. I should really get going.” She wanted to; only, she was uncertain where to go. David had always been her home since they got married, but she didn’t want to see him just yet.

“Let me take you home. It’s the least I can do.”

Emilia gaped at Mike as she racked her mind for a good enough hotel. She couldn’t think of one. All she wanted to do was hit the bed and sleep—that was—if she could. Though tired, she’s afraid that if she’s left alone with her thoughts, she would never find sleep.

“Stay for the night.” A smile touched his lips, and his eyes were almost begging.

Emilia opened her mouth to protest but before she could voice out

her objection, Mike spoke again.

“Come on, there’s a guest room, I won’t bother you. Gentleman’s promise,” he said, putting his right hand over his chest.

Emilia wondered if it would be OK to just stay. She was tired, and yet she didn’t know this man. And yet, her body’s begging for rest. At the last minute, she relented.

“Thanks, that’s very kind of you. I promise to be out of your hair tomorrow morning,” she said.

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The queen-sized bed covered with white linen and the two pillows on it looked inviting. There was a chrome lamp perched on a deep mahogany brown side table.

She put her purse on top of the side table and the paper bags on the floor.

The yellow light brought an almost dramatic tone, and to keep from digging into her emotions, she began fluffing the pillows and arranged them on one side of the bed. When she was finished, she flopped down on the bed.

She kicked her untied sneakers off. Then she pressed her back against the headrest of the bed, and pulled her legs tightly to her chest, her head propped above the knees.

Being alone in the room made her think of David, but instead of calling him, she opened her purse. She took out her journal and scanned her notes. With each line, her throat constricted. She choked on a sob. She was furious over a lot of things. For the limited time she might have. For feeling depressed. For being the one who got sick. It could be any person, and yet, it had to be her. She closed the journal with shaking fingers and put it on the bedside table.

Then she lay herself down in the bed against the pillows, her gaze fixed on the leather-bound journal. Sitting under the lamp, the journal vibrated with life as though it was a reminder of what she would go

through. Before she could stop herself, she ripped the bedside table's drawer open. She shoved the journal inside and closed the drawer loudly, angry at herself. She collapsed back in bed sobbing and pressed her head against a pillow in an attempt to muffle the sounds.

A thousand questions ran in her head—an infinite jumble of thoughts without any clear meaning. Before she fell asleep, she managed to utter a quick prayer that sounded more like a melancholic plea, a wish that in her absence, Jeremy would be all right, that her son would grow up well and have a good life.

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Mike took out the Bible that his father gave him when he was a child. Somehow, he felt like Karen was a long-lost friend, the kind that one meets and feels an instant connection to.

He brushed off the dust that made the Bible seem older than it actually was. Creases in the leather jacket became more visible like a bundle of artistic lines. He would hand the copy to Karen and joke that every hotel has a Bible in each room.

When he reached her door, he heard soft muffled cries from the inside. His hand froze in the air as he listened for a few seconds more to confirm if she was really crying.

When he was certain, he backed away from the door and regretted that he didn't get the chance to tell his joke.



## Chapter 9

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MIKE LAY DOWN in bed, falling face-flat against two pillows. He liked to sleep with his arms stretched out beside him, his shoulders relaxed. He shifted his head to the left for easy breathing, leaving only half of his face buried against the pillows. He was exhausted from having worked a full shift. Tomorrow and the day after though, he had no hospital duty so he could get the rest he needed.

He stared at the wall and noticed for the first time that the cleaning lady seemed to have forgotten scrubbing the spot that he inadvertently touched after he oiled the gears of his bike, and the ugly patch of black bothered him. If he wasn't so tired, he would have gotten up to rub it off, but there were more important things he had to spend his energy on.

His thoughts flew to Lea, his girlfriend for the past three years. Their story started out effortlessly—him holding her, her liking his touch, and all the silly butterflies flying inside their stomachs. The years have seen their relationship don on a more mature level where comfort and knowledge of belongingness became the key factors to keeping their relationship. It's that beautiful taste of affection that hung in his subconscious that made him buy an engagement ring. The ring though still sat hidden inside his dresser. It wasn't forgotten, *never*, he thought. But rather, had become irrelevant as the days passed by and he still kept on wondering if he should push through with the proposal.

The source of his dilemma—Lea wanted to go back to New York, which was to be expected since she grew up there. But Mike had no intention of leaving New Jersey.

He persuaded her to practice their professions in Jersey—him persuading her was because he couldn't see himself living anywhere else, her agreeing to it was because of love.

Earlier, they had a heated argument. It started as a simple conversation when Mike mentioned that he wanted to buy property in New Jersey. The other end of the phone line went quiet because she despised where the conversation was headed. And true to what Mike was expecting, it erupted into one of those quiet fights that they had become accustomed to lately. And the sore topic was always New York or New Jersey.

That was when his car hit Karen. He hated to think that because of his relationship issues, he had literally hurt someone.

Mike's thoughts shifted to Karen.

He liked Karen, but not in a romantic way. He was, after all, really in love with Lea, but there was something about Karen that immediately drew him to her. He couldn't figure out what, but after hearing her crying in the guest room, he felt a certain level of responsibility, a sense of protectiveness, over her.

Before sleep settled in on him, Mike wondered if he should make a late night phone call to Lea. He knew though that it would be better to let things simmer between them. Lea loves him, and they could work things out together. As his eyes fluttered before closing, a chill coursed through his heart for fear that it might not be true anymore. Remembering how she had gone all silent earlier made him uncomfortable. He would have preferred she shouted and argued with him again. But this time, Lea had remained passive. It was the coldness that worried him. It seemed that lately, any simple miscommunication between them could turn into a horrible fight so easily.

He fell asleep and had dreams of proposing to her in different ways. Each proposal from him varied, and only her answers remained the same—a collection of blank stares.

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The alarm clock went off, and a few seconds later the vibration of Mike's mobile phone joined in.

He reached out of his bedcovers, fumbling, and turned off the alarm. Then his hand followed a blind trail to the bedside table to locate the vibrating phone. When his hand came into contact with it, he pressed a button, and the phone went still.

Through the slits of his heavily lidded eyes, he noticed the faint light seeping through the glass panels above his bedroom door. He tried to recall if he forgot to switch off the lights last night.

Mike, irritated at having to get up from bed, knew that he won't be able to sleep again unless he checks on the living room. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were half-opened as he picked up the necklace on the bedside table and put it on. His hand grazed reverently over the pendant with a gentle tug.

The necklace had a thin gold chain while the pendant was like a golden egg with five small diamonds that sparkled when light touched them.

He went out of the bedroom without putting a shirt on.

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From the porch, Emilia heard a door inside the house close and after a few seconds, it was followed by the sound of Mike's footsteps.

Mike walked out to the porch in his pajamas, wearing nothing on top, no slippers, too. His hair was still untouched by a comb, and yet—he was wearing jewelry!

Emilia grinned as Mike came closer to where she was.

Mike, on the other hand, was wearing a surly expression.

"What in the world?" he began.

Then he remembered who Karen was and why she was here.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" he uttered. "You must think I'm a complete moron."

Last night, Mike was clean shaven but this morning, even after only a few hours, Emilia noticed that his chin and jaw were covered with stubbles. His hair was a mess of blond tangles. Uncombed, they were

as curly as her hair.

Emilia's grin transformed into a slight upward curve, but her eyes remained twinkling. Mike's necklace was so dainty, and on him, it seemed totally out of place.

"Why're you laughing?" he asked. His eyes had opened a little wider, but he was still groggy from lack of sleep.

If she didn't have the same mess of blond curls ruffled from sleep, she would have made a crack about his hair that quite resembled a bird's nest.

"Nothing," Emilia said. "Tell me about that necklace." Her eyes danced.

Mike realized what the object of her fascination was—the necklace.

"Not you, too. Give me a minute, I'll get dressed, and then I'll come back down." He rushed to his room to get dressed.

In a few minutes, Mike was back on the porch with her. Emilia noticed that his hair looked as though he had run his fingers through them. His eyes were tired, but they were definitely more alert now.

"Why are you up so early?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep," Emilia said. "I'm sorry if I bothered you. I really didn't mean to wake you. It's just that I had a hard time sleeping and I wanted some fresh air."

"Well, you did manage to wake me up. And yes, you did bother me in my sleep so I guess we're even now."

Emilia's nostrils flared as she looked at him with wide eyes, wondering if he was kidding.

"You think that's even?" she said indignantly. "Give me your car keys, stand over there," she pointed at a spot on the lawn, "and let me hit you. Then I'll go inside this house, sleep, and wait for you to sing."

She invited him to object by raising her eyebrows at him before continuing, "Then when I wake up to the unfamiliar noise, I'll tell you we're even." She put a stress on *noise*.

Mike laughed. "Are you a writer? Because you painted such a lovely scene."

She began laughing, too. "Tell me something about yourself," Mike said.

The porch had a wooden table, which was shaped like a poker table. Four wooden chairs surrounded it. Mike took the one facing the lawn.

"I," Emilia started. Mike was watching her closely as though he was really interested in what she's about to say. "I'm in sales," she continued.

Emilia figured that the less she shared, the fewer questions she would invite from him. Her concept of telling everything to a stranger vanished. She wanted to kick herself for being so inconsistent, and for not being able to put it past behind her to blame her actions on agitation over cancer.

"OK," Mike said. "You're in sales. Selling what?"

"It's not interesting. Software applications," she answered.

"Software applications? My house is graced by a geek," he joked.

"You are a terrible, judgmental person!"

"I'm kidding," he said. "I'm a huge fan of technology."

"Can we talk about something else?" Her gaze fell upon the necklace and she remembered what Mike said earlier when she made fun of his necklace. "That," she said, pointing at the necklace.

"Oh, this?" he asked, half-smiling.

"Yes, tell me about it. Earlier you said something like, 'not you, too.' What's that about?"

With the sudden shift in the topic from Emilia's job to Mike's necklace, his countenance changed; it softened if only for a few seconds.

"This is where I get my good looks from." He grinned.

"Come on, tell me a good story," she insisted.

"Hm," he said as though he was really thinking of a good enough

story to share. “There’s this one time when Lea and I were together and she spent the night with me. She noted that her face had marks the following day,” he paused. “Actually, a chain mark.” He was touching the necklace. And then he continued, “She was sleeping with her face pressed against my chest, so she got a small thin line across her cheek when she woke up. I like calling it *the chain mark* and teased her about it. We laughed, and I told her she’s lucky it’s only a thin line. It would’ve been more uncomfortable if she slept over the pendant and had the five small diamonds pricking her face. Then, that would be a diamond peel.”

Emilia laughed at Mike’s sorry attempt at a joke. But it was something good enough to laugh at.

“But you know women, they always ask for a lot,” he added, winking. “When we were already a month dating, she told me to take the necklace off before sleeping.” He couldn’t stop laughing. “It seemed that she was asking too much from me, but then I realized that it really was an odd thing to sleep with this necklace on.”

“Absolutely,” Emilia agreed.

He touched the necklace again; he was toying with the oval pendant. “So, I gave her that. But still, I never go out without it.” He grinned sheepishly at Emilia, and then he pressed his lips together. To Emilia he looked like a little boy.

“But it’s so dainty. Doesn’t anyone ever tease you about it?”

“I hide it under my shirt,” he replied quickly, his grin growing wider.

“How important is it? I mean, the necklace?”

“This necklace came from a very important person in my life. She wasn’t able to tell me a proper goodbye so she asked that this be given to me. You know, to remind me that when I feel that her love’s ebbing away, all I have to do is wear this necklace and I’ll feel her. So I won’t forget that distance will never separate us. She believed that this necklace would maybe channel us one day together.” His face changed

from serious to his usual boyish countenance. He winked at her.

Emilia grew confused because his flat tone made her believe what he said, but after he winked, she thought he was kidding her. When she noticed that Mike was smiling fondly at her, she stopped. Perhaps there was some truth in what he said.

“I’m sorry... I thought you were kidding. You really had to use the word ebbing.” A few faint lines formed on the corner of her eyes as she smiled.

“All true. What’s wrong with ebbing?”

“Nothing. Except that it sounded so classic, so old.” She laughed and Mike joined in. “Anyway, don’t tell that story to Lea—she may get jealous of this other woman.”

Mike nodded as he smiled at her in response, indulging in the crystal melody of her laughter. He liked seeing her brown eyes twinkling with amusement. It made him feel at home. The memory of her crying last night came back to him, and he tried to bring up the subject.

“Your eyes look,” he started, “I hope you won’t be offended, but they do look puffy.” Mike was watching her reaction, mindful of a twitch her eyelids may make or a pause before she gives her answer.

Emilia tensed. “I’m just tired.”

She averted her eyes away from Mike. There were very few houses in his neighborhood.

Mike’s place had two floors and a basement. The house felt too masculine with its gray walls and minimalistic interior design. The door was made of mahogany wood and covered with varnish. From where Emilia sat, the faint scent of the lacquer can still be smelled.

Her eyes fell upon the doorframe. There were carvings all across the entire length of the doorframe on its left side. The distance from each mark varied; sometimes they’re too near while at other times, the distance could be several inches away. Then the marks stopped at about two feet below the top of the doorframe.

“What are you looking at?” Mike asked her.

“Those marks on your door. Is that art or what?”

“Nah, my old man used to measure me against this doorframe when I was growing up. He said he wanted to know if he’s feeding me right. It’s funny how he used only my height to gauge that.”

“And he really had to ruin the doorframe.”

“Not exactly. Like you said, it’s art.”

“That’s a question,” Emilia pointed out, laughing. “I probably should try to catch some sleep now,” she said, standing up.

“No,” Mike blurted out. His hand quickly grasped her hand.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “No?”

“You woke me up, ridiculed my necklace, and now that I’m fully awake, you’re going to tell me you’re sleeping on me?”

“It’s still early to do anything else. Unless you have anything in mind?”

“Not really. I like to sit here and breathe in the fresh air. A good conversation’s going to make it better though.” Mike pulled down on her hand, asking her to sit again.

“I have an idea,” Emilia said. Her eyes brightened up.

“What?”

“Say yes.”

“No. Way risky.”

“Say yes.”

“Tell me what it is first.”

“Say yes, please?”

“Not without you telling me what it is.”

“OK,” she said reluctantly. “I want to go biking.”

For a moment, Mike’s eyes lit up. Then the light faded and his happiness turned to horror.

“That’s ridiculous! With your sprain and all—”

“It wasn’t exactly a sprain,” Emilia argued. She moved her right



ankle in front of her and wiggled it. She was able to do it without much effort. “I sold my bike before moving to Jersey. It’s been years since I last rode one. Please?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Look at you, you’re tired. And you have a sprain for God’s sakes!”

“Is there really no way you’d—”

“No.”

Emilia frowned and sat down, knowing that Mike wouldn’t change his mind. Maybe she could get the mountain bike from where it was hung, take a few spins, and return it back. Mike looked sleepy enough, and all she had to do was wait for him to fall asleep. She smiled to herself as she thought about it. Then her face became serious again. She broke the silence with a sigh.

“If only I brought with me more clothes, I would grab that bike off your wall and go out for a spin,” she said.

Mike studied her. She really looked intent on riding the bike. But with her sprain? What kind of doctor would it make him if he would allow her to go biking?

Emilia was leaning against the chair and watching the few stars in the sky.

Mike’s eyes lingered on Karen’s slightly puffed eyes and thought that perhaps biking would help her take her mind off whatever it was she had cried over. After all, biking had always been his and his girlfriend’s way of removing stress. It was an excellent activity to veer away from the usual pressures of their jobs.

“Lea has her biking clothes inside,” he started.

Emilia’s eyes sparkled. “Is that a yes?”

“What do you think it is?” He stood up and moved closer to her. “Let me check your foot. Does it still hurt?” He examined her right ankle. “Will you try walking without limping?”

Emilia stood up, tested her right foot, and tried to feel if it was still painful. “I can manage to pedal as long as the slope’s not too steep. Come on, I’m really psyched to do this. I haven’t done so—”

“In a long time. Yes, I know. You already said.” Mike feigned annoyance but failed.

Emilia was excited; she threw her arms around him, giving him a quick hug. Embarrassed, she moved backward. Her cheeks grew hot and she hoped that Mike took the redness of her cheeks as excitement over biking.

The bandage held her ankle well and with the right shoes, she was certain that she wouldn’t have a hard time biking. She didn’t want to miss the last chance she’d probably get to do it.

“Let’s see if the clothes and gears will fit you,” Mike said, already infected by Emilia’s excitement. He looked upward and took in the still dark sky. “It’s just the right time to go biking.”

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Mike lent Lea’s clothes to Emilia. It didn’t surprise him when the cycling clothes fit her. Even the shoes fit although wearing them had taken quite a while because of the bandages wrapping her right ankle. Mike almost retracted his approval to go biking.

A good twenty minutes passed before Emilia practically dragged him out of the house and into the street.

Mike repeatedly asked himself what it was that he agreed into. First, he hit Karen with his car.

Second, when she asked to go biking, he instantly relented. What was that about? He knew it was a crazy idea, but similar to Karen he also loved biking so much. Lately, the bikes had started to gather dust due to his busy schedule, and he was missing his adventures on them with Lea. So just a few words from Karen, and he agreed right away.

Emilia started pedaling and when she was on the middle of the road, she raised her arms upward for a few seconds and shouted. The air sent

some locks of hair that hung from under the helmet dancing. The bike wobbled and she put her hands back on the handle and laughed even louder.

Mike laughed after her and pedaled to catch up. “Easy on your ankle, please!” he shouted.

They rode in silence after that. Mike took the lead and steered them straight ahead. The sun was beginning to rise already. They took several turns and passed under a canopy of trees. Eventually, they reached a small hill. Mike dismounted and walked toward her.

“Come on, Karen,” he said. “This is as far as our bikes could take us.” He pointed to the hill. “We could still bike uphill but I’m afraid for your ankle.” He winked at her. “I don’t want to have to carry you home.”

“OK, then.” Before following him, she took the water bottle from the bike. She twisted the cap and drank, feeling the cold water as it passed her throat. Mike was also doing the same. When Emilia finished, she closed the water bottle and brought it with her as she trailed after Mike.

They walked uphill. Emilia felt a splatter of burning lump in her chest, but she ignored it. Just when she felt like she was too tired to walk, Mike walked slower, choosing a spot for them to sit on, and stopped where the green grass still covered the ground.

“Come sit with me,” he invited.

Emilia joined him. The wind was blowing softly against her skin, her hair, and the grass. She wiped the sweat that rolled from her forehead down to her face, and caught Mike brushing his gloved hands against his cheeks.

“It’s nice up here, right?” Mike said. “You would like it even better higher there, but—” His gaze fell upon her right ankle, then upon her. “Some other time perhaps?”

Emilia nodded; her eyes softened as she wondered if there would still

be enough time for that. She swallowed hard before breaking away from Mike's gaze. Thankful that she still experienced an odd sense of belongingness to the world, she turned to Mike again.

"Thanks," Emilia said with a smile.

Mike smiled back at her. "It's my pleasure."

Emilia played with her water bottle as she breathed in the fresh air.

"It's day this beautiful that makes one to simply want to bum around and enjoy nature."

"Yeah. I'm glad I did again. It's been a long time since I had an outdoor activity," Emilia realized. "So, really, thank you."

Mike beamed upon seeing how delighted she was and told himself that he did the right thing. "Yeah, it's nice."

## Chapter 10

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EXHAUSTED WAS HOW David felt as maneuvered the car into the garage of their new home. Regardless, he couldn't contain his excitement so he kept on humming an old tune. Today, he's going to do a last check on the changes of the house he told Rey to take care of.

As soon as he parked the car, he opened the trunk and a box marked 'Fragile' stared at him. He carefully picked it up and started walking toward the house.

Inside, he could smell the fresh coat of paint faintly. He asked Rey to use the water-based kind to make sure that the house would be ready for moving in as soon as possible.

Rey's friendly voice greeted David.

"We're done," Rey said, smiling proudly at him.

It was true. Every alteration David had instructed Rey to do on the first floor was finished.

"I'll check upstairs. Come on," David said.

Rey had become a friend over the six months they'd been working on the house. He was a good fellow that worked fast, and he easily picked up on just what David wanted done. There were times Rey even insisted on doing some alterations to the house and his recommendations were always good.

"What's that?" Rey asked, pointing to the box David was carrying.

"This? A light," David replied. "We're going to install it in the family room."

As soon as they were on the second floor, David inspected each room. *The place was really ready*, he thought. Satisfied, he patted Rey on the shoulder with his free hand.

"Thanks, man."

"It's customary to say that with a tip," Rey joked.

David laughed. "You won't be disappointed."

"That's just my sense of humor talking." Rey grinned.

David put down the box on the floor.

"This is a disco light," he said as he opened the box.

Inside was a disco ball two feet in diameter securely cushioned in bubble wrap. As David removed the plastic covering it, Rey reached for the bubble wrap and started pinching the bubbles. Popping sounds immediately surrounded them.

"That will have to go." David pointed overhead to the small chandelier with tiny crystal balls.

"What?" Rey said incredulously. "No way, man. This chandelier is perfect where it is. We can't take it down on a whim and replace it with," he paused, nose wrinkling, "that."

Rey said it with such distaste that David almost laughed again. He controlled it nonetheless, so that Rey would take him seriously.

"I've made up my mind. The chandelier has got to go," David insisted.

"But—"

"You can't argue on this one."

"Oh, yeah? Well, it's not right for the house."

"What's not right about it?"

"You're turning this classic beauty into an entertainment room."

Rey scowled and David could hear the frustration in the former's voice.

"We're installing the disco light there," David said firmly.

Another bubble popped as Rey pinched on it.

Rey realized that David would not concede, so he took the disco ball, and popped a few more bubbles before covering it with bubble wrap again.

"Fine. And here I am thinking that your house is already perfect." Rey put the light back inside the box and went down to get the

stepladder.

David grinned as soon as Rey turned his back. For this particular replacement in the house, he wasn't going to explain himself to Rey. This was only between Emilia and him.

When Rey returned, he setup the stepladder and went up, then took down the chandelier.

"I still don't understand. This chandelier is the right size, the right color, the right number of bulbs. It's perfect," Rey mumbled.

"Don't be such a baby about it. You have my permission to bring your ladies here and dance in my disco," David added jokingly which only made Rey sourer than he already was.

When David saw that Rey had started installing the light, he went downstairs to check on the other parts of the house, wondering how Emilia was doing.

He decided to check on her and dialed her number. After several rings, when she still hadn't picked up her phone, he dropped the call.

## Chapter 11

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GONE WAS THE dark sky and it was now replaced with the sun shyly peering above the horizon. Emilia glanced up and thanked God for the good weather and for allowing her to bike again. She realized that the gratitude had come early as her ankle started to throb painfully.

She had to stop biking and alight. Then, she bent down and adjusted the straps of her shoes, but after a few pedals, her right ankle started to hurt more. She was left with no option but to ask Mike to rest for a while so she could work on her ankle. When they found shade under a tree, he took her bike and leaned it against the trunk.

Mike was frowning at her. "I'll ride home alone and pick you up in the car," he suggested.

"No," she argued. "This will go away in a few minutes. Just give me some time to catch my breath."

"OK, but you're sweating too much that I'm not sure if it's because you're feeling pain or if it's because we biked halfway already."

"Definitely not because of pain."

"You know from here, I can see one of the veins in your head throbbing. Actually the closer I take a look, the more certain I become that it's about to pop."

"Oh, shut up. This is nothing," Emilia said, and then to prove her point, she stood up. "Let's go—Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" she blurted out, hopping.

Mike went to her side hurriedly, concerned. "You sound like a woman in labor—"

He assisted Emilia into a sitting position.

"That's it. I don't think you'll be able to bike the rest of the way home. Just wait for me here, OK?"

Emilia looked at him with resignation in her eyes. "I'm sorry for the



hassle.”

“Nonsense,” Mike cut in as he rode his bike. With a final look at her, he waved goodbye.

Emilia looked around her and noticed that the place still didn’t look familiar. On the bright side of things, she could have her moment, think things over, and be strong enough to face tomorrow. She hated it that her thoughts sounded so cliché.

David’s probably finishing up on his painting, she thought. She wanted to call him because she missed her husband, but she remembered that she left her phone in the guest room.

Sitting on the grass with her back pressed against the tree trunk, she closed her eyes and settled in the comfortable surroundings. It would still be a while before Mike gets back and she could certainly use a nap.

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Mike was panting when he reached his house. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his gloves when he noticed that there was someone sitting on the steps of his front porch. Another car was parked in the driveway.

“Lea,” he said. “How long have you been here?”

Lea stirred in her seat and stood up. She started walking toward him.

Mike adored Lea’s large, sapphire-blue eyes, which suited her bright personality. When she’s angry though, the same eyes turned into lethal slits. Her shiny, dark hair trailed after her as she walked.

Lea took Mike’s arm, unconcerned that the sweat would rub off on her. She clutched tightly at his arm as they walked back to the house.

“I was worried about you,” she said quietly. “You didn’t call me.” There was a hint of a frown as she said it, making her red lips curl into a pout.

“I’m sorry, I was—” Mike didn’t know what to say. Was he going to tell her that he had been in an accident? That would make her fume.

She would want to know why he didn't take the time to call her.

"My cousin Karen came to visit me," he said instead. "And I had to take care of her for a while."

"What is she, five?" Lea asked, her thin nose wrinkling as she voiced out her doubt.

Mike was sensible enough to catch the hint of sarcasm in her question. He knew that it was a lame excuse, but he didn't want to have to explain everything. It would only bring up more questions that he didn't think he could handle at the moment.

"Actually, she hurt her ankle last night, but she was so keen on going biking. On the way back, she had trouble riding so I went home. I'm going to get the car and pick her up."

"That's a silly thing to do, going biking when she already hurt her ankle."

"That's what I told her. Anyway, she said she was up for it so I agreed, and here we are. She couldn't ride the whole way back."

Lea followed him to the garage still unconvinced.

Mike opened the cabinet that contained the bike rack, carried it, and installed it carefully at the rear of the car.

When he finished installing the bike rack, he took the car keys and opened the passenger door for Lea.

"Let's go," he said.

"Sometimes you infuriate me, but then, you'll be your charming self and—what the heck," Lea said as she moved toward him. "I miss you," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Mike wrapped his arms around her and kissed her on the lips.

"You stink!"

That last remark made Mike all the more touchy and playful. Instead of letting her go, he squeezed her tighter and rubbed his sweaty face against hers.

Inside the car, Lea took a towel from her bag and used it to wipe the

sweat off Mike's face, and then hers. She flipped down the visor and retouched her makeup.

Mike glanced at his watch as he started to drive. A good twenty minutes had passed.

"So tell me about Karen. How come you never mentioned her before?" Lea asked.

"Karen's a distant cousin and she's got some issues that she's trying to work through." Mike didn't feel guilty about what he said because he believed there was some truth to it. Or it was, at least, close to the truth. He concluded that after hearing Karen cry last night. "You're going to like her," he added.

He spotted Karen sitting with her back against a tree.

She looked up and saw his car. She stood faster now, with no more traces of the pain as though the short time she rested did her good, Mike noted. He parked the car across the street directly opposite the bike.

"Sorry it took me a while," Mike said.

"It's not a problem," Emilia said. She was looking at the young woman stepping out of the car. She was tall and slim with long black hair. Her eyes were huge, doll-like, and beautiful. She concluded that she must be his girlfriend.

"Hi," Emilia said as she offered her hand to Lea.

Lea smiled, squinting as though she was trying to take in who Emilia really was in Mike's life. She clasped Emilia's hand.

"I have to say, when Mike told me that his cousin visited, I sort of didn't believe him. I thought that he cooked up an excuse for not calling me. But looking at you," she paused, "I actually believe him." Lea laughed genuinely.

Emilia and Mike exchanged glances. She mouthed, "Cousin?"

Mike mouthed back, "Thank you." It was a good thing that Lea wasn't looking at them during this exchange.

“Nice to meet you, er,” Emilia paused, waiting for the woman in front of her to give her name.

“It’s Lea.”

“I’m a complete moron for not giving the introductions. Apologies!” Mike shouted as he grabbed the bike and walked it toward the car. He set it on the rack.

“Accepted,” both girls replied.

“Curious thing,” Emilia began, “So now you believe him that I’m his cousin?” The answer intrigued her.

“Yes,” Lea said. “Look at him. He’s practically you.”

Emilia was shocked. “What?” Then she laughed.

“Look at him, he looks just like you,” Lea insisted.

Emilia obliged, but she couldn’t see the resemblance.

“It’s the hair. Curly tops to the point of almost being frizzy.”

“Take some of his jaw off and you could pass as siblings,” Lea insisted.

Emilia considered it. “No, it’s really just the hair,” she argued. Turning to look at Lea, she added admiringly, “I’ve always wanted to have black hair like yours.”

“You can experiment and dye your hair you know,” Lea said. She squinted to mentally picture Emilia with black hair. “I think it’d look good on you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you should give it a try.”

“All ready?” Mike asked. He was finished putting up the bike.

Emilia limped slightly as she moved toward the backseat. Realizing that she was wearing Lea’s clothes, she quickly apologized, “Lea, I’m so sorry you had to catch me wearing your clothes—”

“It’s OK. They actually look good on you.”

Emilia smiled graciously at Lea. “Thank you.”

“Are we going back to your place now?” Lea asked Mike.

“No, I know it’s a girly thing, but brunch?” Mike asked.

Emilia and Lea laughed.

“Who could resist that?” Lea answered.

Mike couldn’t, wouldn’t. He entered the car and waited for all the doors to close, revved the engine, and drove off. He was thinking to himself how nice it would be to have brunch with two beautiful women.

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Emilia ordered steak, and felt bad that David wasn’t with her as she ate the nice T-bone. She knew how he would have devoured his if he was with them.

“I’m too full to get back in the car and drive. I need some more exercise,” Mike said.

“Coffee?” Lea asked.

“Well, I don’t mind getting a second cup from a coffee shop while I work my leg muscles again,” he said as he stood and headed toward the door with Lea and Emilia following him.

Emilia glanced around Middletown. It seemed veiled with a kind of hazy eccentricity this morning. Sure, the establishments were the same, but there was something about the feel of the place that she was unaccustomed to. She couldn’t point it out though.

“Is it just me or has fashion changed overnight?” she mused.

“I don’t know. But last time I checked, what I’m wearing is still the in thing,” Lea answered.

Emilia gave Lea’s outfit a second look. Yes, definitely the same. She shook her head and let a short laugh escape her lips.

Mike stopped in front of a coffee shop with brown signage. *Allysander’s*—it read.

Emilia couldn’t remember having been here before. Yet when they entered the coffee shop and the scent of freshly-brewed coffee filled the air, she remembered Betty and the shop she visited yesterday. If she

hadn't been so preoccupied, she would have paid attention to the name.

"Just coffee for me," Lea said.

Mike looked at Emilia with raised eyebrows.

"I'll have the same," Emilia said.

"Two coffees and one cappuccino to go please," he told the barista.

"Oh, we're not having the coffee here?" Lea asked.

"Nope. Told you, got to work these muscles. Let's walk around afterward—"

"How inconsiderate! Karen's practically limping—"

"It's OK. She'll—"

Emilia didn't hear the rest of Mike's words. She was looking around the coffee shop. If she wasn't mistaken, this was the place she visited yesterday. Only, this room had wallpaper as opposed to the paint she thought she saw. She was probably mistaken. The only confirmation that it was indeed where she had been was if she could find Betty.

"Excuse me," Emilia asked the barista. "Is Betty around? Slender, hair in a bob, thin lips, nice smile, around twenty-something—"

The barista was smiling at her before almost choking on a laugh.

"I would have said yes, but I believe Betty is in her forties," she said and pointed to the woman who was busily cleaning up one of the tables. "Late forties, actually."

Emilia glanced at the woman, who was bending down, clearing up the corner table. One look at her with locks of gray hair, and Emilia shook her head. "Oh. No, that isn't her."

"Who's Betty?" Lea asked.

"Um, a friend."

"OK, so let's get moving," Mike said as he handed them their drinks.

Lea and Mike started toward the door, and Emilia followed. Before leaving the coffee shop, she stole another look at the woman. The waitress glanced up, and for a brief moment, Emilia thought the woman recognized her. A small smile formed on the barista's lips, but it was

gone so quickly as soon as it had appeared that Emilia might have imagined it.

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Upon reaching Mike's place, Emilia headed back to the guest room, took a shower, and napped. She woke up at almost four in the afternoon.

She was starting to get bored, being cooped up in the guest room, so she went to look for Mike and Lea.

"It wasn't like that at all," Mike said.

"Yup, like this place is better than all the other states."

"Oh, come on. You know that's not what I mean—"

Emilia went back inside the guest room and closed the door quietly. She found it odd that earlier, they had such a good time, then a few hours passed and now, Mike and Lea weren't seeing eye-to-eye. They tried to keep their voices down, but Emilia could sense that they were fighting over something about places.

Once in the bed, she thought of calling David to see how he and Jeremy were doing, but she didn't get to do it because her mobile phone was ringing. She quickly grabbed it on top of the bedside table.

It was Dr. Alex Jones calling her.

This was his second call for the day. Should she answer it this time? She knew what he would say. He'd start with niceties, and would proceed to remind her about the treatment plan that he prepared for her.

She didn't want to think about that yet, so she let her phone ring. She put it back on the bedside table, ignored it, and became thankful when after a few seconds, the phone went silent.

Evening had come when Emilia checked out of the room again, praying that Mike and Lea were finished with their discussion. She didn't want to intrude.

She breathed a sigh of relief when loud voices didn't greet her in the

hall. Moving to the living room, she found Lea and Mike sitting on the couch, arms entwined around each other.

Lea stood and came closer to her. She kissed her on the cheek.

"I have to go now. I'm on third shift today and I have to drop by at my place first and catch some sleep," Lea said.

"It was nice meeting you," Emilia said.

Lea smiled at her. "Same here."

Emilia watched by the porch as Mike walked his girlfriend to the car and kissed her on the cheek. With one last wave at them, Lea drove away.

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The night approached, and after Emilia and Mike dined on frozen pizza, she volunteered to make coffee. She checked the cupboards and when she found where he kept the coffee beans, she proceeded to grind them and brew up some hot coffee. Mike was grateful for the little gesture.

"There's also meat and vegetables in the fridge," he said.

"I'm not a good cook. Brewing coffee though is one thing I can do with eyes closed," Emilia replied.

"You can always Google or search for a video in YouTube."

"Oh, no. I tried and tried—but my husband won't even let me turn on the stove now. I think that says a lot about what a terrible cook I make," she said. "But then again, my husband's also such a rotten cook."

Mike laughed and went to the porch.

Emilia poured them both coffees. She added some sugar, skipped the milk, grabbed the cups, and followed Mike.

Out on the porch, Emilia handed Mike his coffee. He bent his head closer to the cup and took a whiff before bringing it to his lips and taking a sip.

Emilia decided to spend another night at Mike's. She wanted to be



alone, but didn't want to *really be alone*. How contradictory was that? The better explanation she came up with for her behavior was that she didn't want to be alone in a hotel room. At least spending time with Mike meant not having to be alone entirely. Emilia could take her moments to ponder about cancer, and when she started to get crazy with the cancer thoughts, she could just as easily get out of the room and banter with Mike.

"Lovely girl," she said, glancing over at Mike.

"Can't complain, I've got good taste," he said, smiling at her.

Emilia wondered if she should ask Mike about the argument that she overheard earlier, but decided not to pursue the topic unless it was he who opened up on the subject.

"We're having a lot of fights lately," he said.

Emilia nodded thoughtfully. That was what she was waiting for.

"It's not a big deal, not like there's anyone else involved. We're fighting because she wants to go back to New York and I want to stay here."

Mike was about to frown, but he controlled it. His lips ended up oddly contorted.

"Really?" she asked, amused. "There really is no issue that can't be resolved with a good conversation. Do you love her?"

"Of course. I was actually planning to propose to her. But when I realized that she wants to move back to New York, I decided to hold off for a while, and sift things through in my head—think it over one more time—"

"Hold on, right there," Emilia cut in. "What?" she asked.

"What's so surprising about it?"

"You're holding out on your proposal because she wants to go to New York and you don't find anything odd in that?"

"Hey, whose side are you on?"

"Don't pull that card on me, Mike. That's not a very good reason—"

”

Mike laughed. “OK. So it sounded a wee-bit odd—”

“Not a wee-bit. It sounded totally odd!”

“I have my reasons, you didn’t let me finish,” he pointed out.

“Oh. OK, let’s hear you out,” she said, her eyes a soft blend of caramel brown over the rims of her cup.

“I don’t want to move out of here,” he said.

Emilia’s eyebrows rose, waiting for what he’s going to say next.

“And?” she asked when Mike didn’t say anything else.

“That’s it. That’s the reason,” Mike said, stupefied.

“Are you serious?” Emilia asked, her eyes widening as she stifled a laugh.

“Why is that so hard to believe?” he asked. He sipped his coffee. “I don’t want to leave Jersey.”

“For someone so big, you’re so sentimental,” she teased.

Mike shot her a dirty look. “Oh, so now I’m unreasonable.”

“I’m just saying,” Emilia said, and then she laughed.

Mike just watched her.

When Emilia was done laughing, she prodded, “Really, what’s the story?”

Mike shrugged.

“I know it’s none of my business, but what’s keeping you here in New Jersey? I lived in New York for a long time, and it’s beautiful there. Sure, it’s a very busy city, but you’ll find a good place there to practice medicine.”

“For one, I’m still finishing my residency here—” Mike became quiet for a while, as if thinking things over. “I don’t want to leave my father here,” he finally said. He clasped his hands and bowed his head for a moment. When he looked up, he continued talking. “My father loves this house. He said that nothing could make him leave this place. There was a time that I tried talking him out of it, but I realized that

he's getting old, and if I want to be with him, I need to support him, whatever reasons he has."

Emilia stared at him, not believing what she heard. Mike was still looking at her seriously.

"You are such an asshole! Using your father as an excuse—"

"OK, there you go again. Why's that so hard to believe, huh?"

"You've got to be the biggest tease I've ever met. And with those eyes of yours, you actually tricked me into believing you," she said.

"I'm serious!" Mike insisted. "So I'm sentimental and an asshole. What else can you think of?"

"OK," she said. Believing him wasn't easy but after laughing so hard, she felt like she owed it to him to at least patronize him. "Does Lea know?"

He shook his head and chuckled. "No, she wouldn't understand."

"So what do you tell her when she asks?"

"That New Jersey is the place where we should raise our kids. It's quiet in this particular neighborhood, and this is where we started our careers. This could be our destiny."

"Quiet? You're kidding, right? Everybody knows that Jersey is the last place on earth that's quiet—"

"I said this neighborhood." Mike laughed loudly this time. "OK, so bad reason. Still, I like it here and my dad—"

"Very, very lame."

"This is exactly why I never tell Lea my reasons." He gave Emilia a weak smile.

Emilia wanted to ask why his father didn't want to move to another place, if that was true anyway, but figured it might be too personal.

"Honestly, if I were Lea, and that's what you tell me as an excuse, I might just tell you to go marry your father."

Mike shrugged and began running his thumb over his necklace as though counting the five diamonds on the pendant.

“It’s not that. My father’s old. He went away to visit my aunt although he didn’t want to leave this place even for a few days. My aunt said that if he didn’t come see her, she’d haunt him when she dies. Of course she was kidding, but my dad didn’t want to push his luck. So he went.”

“I see,” Emilia said thoughtfully. She’s starting to believe him, although his reasons still sounded ridiculous; and she couldn’t totally wipe the grin on her face. “But you shouldn’t live according to what your father wants. Did he even ask you to stay with him? I’m sure that if you—”

“No, he didn’t,” Mike interjected. “He wouldn’t do that. He’s a good man.”

“Oh my God, you’re impossible! I’m sure your father already wants to kick you out of the house.” Emilia gave in to the laughter that she was suppressing.

“Hey, I’m a good cook! I’m handy around the house so I bet he enjoys having me around,” he argued.

“Yeah, and I’m sure your father couldn’t live without his little boy,” Emilia said, and then she paused upon seeing Mike frown.

He wouldn’t look at her. Afraid that she’s gone overboard teasing him, she apologized.

“I’m sorry—it’s just so hard not to make fun of you,” she said. Then Mike looked at her and grinned.

“Hook, line, and sinker,” he said playfully.

She punched him lightly on the arm and laughed again. Then, after that, they fell silent. Emilia sipped on her coffee.

Mike looked at his necklace and said softly, “I guess it was a promise I made to my mom. That I would never leave my father behind.”

Emilia’s smile froze. She could feel Mike’s affection as he said those words. She wanted to make fun of him again, but there was something so palpable about how he said those words that immediately touched

her. It was a comforting thought to know that there were still promises so strong, if ever Mike's telling her the truth. Regardless, she knew he was wrong. If he's happy with Lea, and she was the one he wanted to marry, then nothing should keep him from her.

"I'm sure your mother would understand. And so will your father," Emilia said. "It's tricky, you know, promises and stuff. If you can keep the promise, then that's good, but if your parents knew that honoring your promise would eventually give you heartache, I'm pretty sure that they'd release you of it."

"It's a promise I made to my mom, but I've only ever said it to myself." Mike laughed loudly, realizing how ridiculous his statement must have sounded. "Still, it's a promise—that I wouldn't leave my father behind. Leave him alone." Like a child, he tried to justify his last statement.

Emilia's eyebrows shot up and she stood up. She raised both hands as though in surrender. "OK, one more stupid reason and I'm going back inside," she said.

"No. I know. It's preposterous. I wish I could have it my way."

"Love is a compromise. Sometimes, you have to give in to what she wants. Other times, I'm sure she'll be more than happy to oblige. Love is pretty simple if you just listen to your heart."

Mike smiled. "I always knew that the time would come that I'd have to leave my father, I just didn't want it to come sooner."

"Well, it was bound to happen anyway. And maybe that time is now."

Mike was still holding the necklace. He turned it in his hand one last time before releasing it. "What about you?" he asked.

His question caught Emilia off guard. She was in the middle of gulping the last of her coffee, and she choked. A horrible projectile of coffee followed.

"Well, it's payback time."

Emilia coughed, wiping the liquid dripping from her chin.

"I have a husband and a son," she said. Not knowing what to say next, she added, "But I have to be away from them for a few days."

Mike nodded and his eyes moved to her hands, searching her fingers.

"Ring's in my purse upstairs," she said.

"You're so defensive," he said before adding, "Were you in a fight?"

"No. That's unthinkable. My husband is perfect," she said. Then she remembered how her husband always cut his fingernails in bed no matter how many times she scolded him about it and added, "Well, not perfect but more than good enough. He's a painter."

"My father used to paint, too. He's a famous chef now."

"I love artists. They have a different way of looking at things, and they're all true romantics at heart."

Mike nodded thoughtfully. "They probably are."

Emilia glanced at her watch. Midnight was fast approaching, and tomorrow she would go back to David. It would be their anniversary and she had to be home early. She still wasn't sure how to tell him, but she knew that the time for dallying had passed.

She stood up and said to Mike, "I have to turn in now. I need to rest."

Mike nodded. Before she had walked a few steps away from him, she glanced back.

"If you have a secret and you need to tell it to somebody, how will you? Let's say it's a really terrible secret," she asked.

Mike looked up at her, carefully watching her face. "If it's a really terrible secret, I'll make sure that there aren't any guns around," he paused. Emilia rolled her eyes at him.

"No, seriously. What would you do?" she asked.

"There's no good timing to share a terrible secret. Yet if you believe it has to be done, then you should just spill the beans. I'm sure they'll understand. There isn't anything that love can't forgive or forget."

Emilia knew that even before hearing it from Mike. She just needed confirmation, that's all. She bade him good night and went upstairs to the guest room.

Mike followed her with his gaze as she left the porch.

"There's tissue in the drawer," he said.

Emilia froze. She turned around and she was about to say something cutting to him when she saw that his eyes were actually thoughtfully looking at her. There was so much concern in them that she shivered.

She nodded at him weakly before turning away.

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Emilia woke up late the following day. She was sleeping peacefully in the guest room bed with only the sun's rays that entered the room and touched her skin to wake her. It was starting to get hot.

Last night, she had been unsure how to tell David, but as the hours drew nearer, she made up her mind, firming on the decision to tell him over dinner tonight.

She took out her last clean shirt and underwear, and walked toward the bathroom. She turned the shower on and adjusted the heat; the warm water relaxed her instantly.

*Today is our anniversary and I wasn't able to get him a gift*, she realized sadly. And to top it all off, the bad news that she would share with him later gave her a queasy feeling. There was no good way to deliver bad news—Mike was right. She had to come out with it. She needed David more than ever now. She frowned, not liking that last thought—it sounded selfish.

She shampooed her hair and lathered her body with the soap. She tried to relax in the bathtub to clear her head. When she felt calm enough, she stood up, rinsed, and reached for the towel to dry herself.

On the right side of the bathroom was a full-length mirror. It was only yesterday that she noticed how much thinner she had become. And now, looking at herself naked, it became even more evident that

she was losing weight. She got dressed and brushed her hair.

When she finished, she went downstairs and saw Mike preparing breakfast. The smell of pancakes and brewed coffee filled the room.

“Good morning,” he said. “You slept like a baby.”

“Yes, I like your place. I feel at home after just two days.”

“You should be, what, with my hospitality and all. And such a charming bellboy to boot. Who wouldn’t feel at home?”

Emilia laughed. Mike seemed to be in high spirits this morning.

“Need a hand?” she asked.

“Sure, the plates are over there.” He pointed at the dish rack beside the sink. She took two plates and forks and set them on the table. Then she sat on the chair facing him.

Mike was humming a tune that didn’t sound familiar to her.

“Something good came up?” she asked.

He stopped humming. “I thought about it last night,” he began. “I’m going to propose to Lea.”

“That’s great,” Emilia gushed. In a short time, he had found his way into her heart, and she was genuinely happy for him.

“Here are your pancakes.” Mike put two on her plate and four on his. When he saw Emilia’s raised eyebrows over the number of pancakes he had put on his plate, he cocked an eyebrow. “What? I’m still a growing boy.”

Laughing, Emilia reached out for the maple syrup and whipped cream and started eating.

“Tasty,” she said and smiled at him.

Mike beamed at her like a child.

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After breakfast, Emilia gathered her things from the guest room and put them in the trunk of Mike’s car. He had insisted on driving her home but she politely declined. As a concession, they agreed that he would just drop her off at the mall.



"I hope that your ankle is better now," Mike said.

"It's almost entirely gone," she said.

Emilia's mood dampened as she watched Mike start the engine of his car. She didn't know if it was because they would be separating today, or if it was because she's dreading having to go home and tell David about the bad news.

Mike drove slowly out of the garage and onto the main street. They were still moving at a slow pace when he noticed that a cab about a hundred yards away from them was driving toward his house. He squinted to see who the passenger was.

Emilia's stomach heaved, realizing that she had not checked her phone. And worse, she couldn't remember where she put it. She began looking for it inside her purse.

*Where was it? Oh please, I hope I didn't leave it behind at Mike's place.* She didn't want to have to ask Mike to take a U-turn to pick up her stuff. She continued checking her purse.

"Just as I thought," Mike said to himself. He honked and stopped the car. Then he rolled down his window.

The cab stopped alongside Mike's car and the rear window rolled down to reveal its passenger. It was a man in his mid-sixties with hair that was all white. Regardless, traces of his handsome face were still evident.

"Dad, welcome home," Mike greeted him. "I thought you wouldn't be coming back until tomorrow."

"Well, you know me. I can't sleep well if I'm not in this house."

Emilia flinched. The voice sounded familiar, but she didn't bother to look up. She still couldn't find her phone. *Darn thing!*

"I'll drive my friend to the mall, and then I'll go back home. I'll catch up with you after," Mike said.

"Sure, I'll see you later," the old man said. He gestured for the taxi driver to move forward.

*There it is, under my dirty shirts!* Emilia thought. She took the mobile phone and turned to look at the man Mike talked with.

It was only for a few seconds. Her eyes met that of Mike's father's, and she found herself gazing at a man with receding hairline that gave his hardened features a dignified look. Even in old age, Emilia could see that he was once handsome.

Mike's father was smiling when their eyes met. Upon seeing her, the smile froze on his lips. The cab started driving away toward Mike's house, but the old man's gaze held hers.

Emilia raised her right hand in greeting and smiled. She thought that she must have seen him somewhere before, but couldn't quite place where. She gave him one last glance as Mike rolled the window up. Mike's father was still looking at Emilia, seemingly not wanting to break the connection.

"Your father seemed to be very—" Emilia thought of the appropriate word to describe him, "charming," she finally said.

"Yes he is," Mike said, "and he's the best dad there is."

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The drive to the mall was quick, and Emilia's heart twisted realizing that she would miss Mike as she had already developed a liking toward his good nature.

When Mike stopped the car, he switched the hazard lights on. He climbed out of the vehicle and opened the trunk to reach for Emilia's shopping bags.

The way they met was eccentric, but the way in which they had spent the two days together felt like any other ordinary afternoons spent between the best of friends.

Standing there, looking at each other, they were uncertain of what to do next. They exchanged smiles, and the weird thing was that neither needed to do anything more to make the other feel the affection passing through between their glances.

“I feel like I’ve known you all my life. I don’t regret the accident, as it brought me you,” he said. He quickly joked, “I hope that I didn’t sound like some kind of a maniac saying that.”

His smile was like a budding flower—light, beautiful, and refreshing. It touched Emilia’s heart directly, leaving warmth there, and sending the soft glow up her caramel eyes.

Emilia moved over to him and hugged him tightly. Pressing her cheek against his chest, she felt the cold metal brushing against her cheek.

“Now I understand why your girlfriend didn’t want you to sleep with this necklace on,” she said, grinning.

Mike laughed and kissed her cheeks. He bit his tongue to refrain from telling her that she reminded him of someone he loved, someone very close to his heart. He dismissed the thought altogether as he pulled her close again.

“Let me hail you a cab,” he said.

Before moving away from Mike, Emilia got the urge to touch his shirt’s collar where it lay folded on the wrong side and arrange it for him. Her hand moved upward before stopping in midair halfway toward Mike. There was an awkward pause and Emilia smiled at Mike. Then her hand touched the fabric of his collar, flattening it.

A cab stopped in front of them. Mike opened the car door, then stepped back to let Emilia pass through.

“So, I guess this is it, Karen.”

“Goodbye, Mike.” She hugged him one last time. Her hands tightened around his shoulders as though never wanting to let go. She smelled him and tried to take with her their memories, already nostalgic that she may never see him again. Then she pulled back and looked at him one last time.

“It was the best accident I’ve ever been in,” she said before closing the door.

Mike roared with laughter. It trailed after Emilia even as the cab started rolling away.

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Mike watched as the cab drove off, staring at it long after it was gone. He felt that he was looking at a significant part of his life walking away from him.

Opening the door on the driver's side, he climbed inside his black sedan. He flipped the sun visor and reached out to take the picture inserted behind it. Frowning, he studied the picture of his father, his mother, and himself.

He shook his head thinking how the likeness was uncanny.

## Chapter 12

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CLIMBING THE CAB, Emilia immediately recited her address to the driver. She didn't want to waste any more time. They were on the road when she noticed that the man was the same as the one she had talked with two days ago.

From the rearview mirror, he looked at her quickly.

"Hello, Emilia." The cabdriver smiled at her. "It's about time," he said.

She smiled back, brushing off what he just said. Her mind was already lost to the memories of the young doctor and his bikes. She forgot to call David last night, but he wouldn't mind as long as she appeared in their front steps. Besides, she couldn't think about that now. She needed to compose herself, prepare for what will happen when she sees her husband.

She checked her phone and saw that she had two missed calls from Dr. Jones.

She opened her purse and searched for her journal. It was nowhere to be found.

*Oh, shit!* She wanted to turn around and head back to the mall, catch Mike, drive back to his place and get her journal. It was a bad idea to put it inside the bedside table's drawer. She pushed the thought out of her mind. It only held her random musings—she could live with losing the journal. Then she remembered some of the things she listed and felt her cheeks flush, thinking about Mike with his hands on her journal and his curious eyes reading through her entries. There was no getting her journal back now. She let out a curse.

Oddly, she began to feel as though she was dreaming. She didn't feel tired, but her eyelids grew heavy. She didn't want to sleep, but she lost control over her eyes, her mind, and her body. She swayed a little to

the right as the cab turned.

Then there was nothing.

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The cab pulled over and the sudden loss of motion woke Emilia. She found herself in the backseat of the old man's cab.

"I must have dozed off," she said.

The old man chuckled just as he had two days ago. "And you snored."

"I did not!" She said defensively, but when she saw the grin splitting the man's face, she knew he was teasing her. "I can hardly believe that it's my stop already."

Emilia looked at the apartment, and an urge to run down the pathway and pull David into a tight embrace beckoned at her.

"Go on," the old man said. "It's time to face the music." The old man's smile told her that somehow he understood.

Emilia picked her purse and shopping bags and bade the old man goodbye. She handed him her fare and was out of the car in a few seconds.

As she was walking the path, she wondered if she should have asked for the old man's name. At the last minute, she turned and saw that the cab was still parked. The old man was looking at her. Something tugged at her mind.

"What's your name?" she shouted. This man helped her after she first found out her diagnosis; it would be nice to know his name at least.

"It doesn't matter," the old man answered. "We'll meet again some other time." With that, he gave her a smile and drove away.

As Emilia watched the cab grow smaller, it dawned on her—the old man addressed her by her first name. She didn't remember ever giving it to him.

The apartment she shared with David wasn't too big and they often

felt cramped inside. They liked the place though. Emilia felt warm all over just knowing that her family's inside waiting for her. But the warmth was instantly replaced by anxiousness. She inhaled deeply. Her hands and feet became cold, and with each step she took, she could almost feel her knees weakening.

Uncertain of how the day would end, she turned the doorknob.

David stood with his back to her. When he heard the knob turn, he glanced her way.

His face broke into a huge smile. On impulse, he started toward her, and upon reaching her, gave her a soft kiss on the lips.

"Happy anniversary, darling. Miss me?"

# PART TWO

## Chapter 13

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UNDER THE DOORWAY, Emilia stood and David couldn't help it, he immediately smiled upon seeing his wife. He had been waiting for their anniversary for the past two days and seeing Emilia just a few paces away from him, he realized how much he missed her. He was holding her in a tight embrace in a few seconds and nuzzling her neck when his mouth fell open at the sight of his wife's tee, her torn jeans, and canvas shoes.

"Darling, what's with the outfit?"

Emilia tensed and then her body softly curved against his again.

"I wanted to be comfortable on the flight home." She gave him a brief kiss and disengaged herself from his embrace. "I'll take a shower and be right back."

David nodded and followed her with his gaze. It was weird that she didn't ask where their son was.

He asked Susie to take Jeremy out for the day because he's going to be busy giving Rey some last-minute instructions regarding the preparations for the evening. He didn't want to be bothered by fatherly duties as he made certain everything was ready.

The good thing was David called Alice, Emilia's mother, to help him with Jeremy, and she said she'd be delighted to go over and spend some time with her grandson.

David grinned as he became more certain that tonight would be special. It's probably going to be even better than the other celebrations they had.

He smiled to himself as he dialed Rey's number to give instructions on the meal. That remained as the only loose preparation on David's



list. Whistling, he waited for Rey to answer his call.

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David was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, calling up to Emilia. “Come on, darling. It’s time to go.”

David extended his hand as he gazed at his wife. She looked beautiful in a flowing beige dress; the bodice softly curved against her body, and the cut bared her lean shoulders. As Emilia climbed down the stairs, a flash of muscled leg peered beneath her clothing.

Emilia gave him her hand.

“After a gazillion dates, you’re now having cold hands?” David raised his eyebrows and grinned. “Are you having second thoughts, gorgeous?”

“Now that your face isn’t smudged with paint, I like to see how well you’ll do on a date,” Emilia joked. She leaned against his shoulder.

“Really now. I thought the paints were what you liked,” David said. In a more serious tone, he added, “Ready, Mrs. Smith?”

Emilia’s eyes softened as she took in her husband’s words, daring her for what she believed she prepared for. She pressed her lips and nodded slightly.

“You don’t have to look so solemn about it, darling,” David teased, and Emilia couldn’t help it—she laughed.

David drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right hand holding Emilia’s. He turned sideways to look at Emilia, who was staring straight ahead. She looked tired and he couldn’t blame her; after all, she had been on a business trip, and she only came home today, straight from work.

After she took a shower, David joined his wife to pick up Susie and Jeremy at the park. And after that his wife spent almost the entire afternoon playing with Jeremy, feeding him, and getting him to sleep.

Looking at his wife now, he couldn’t help but fall in love again. To him, she was still the same woman from eighteen years ago. Emilia

looked at him with serious eyes, but they crinkled on the edges when she smiled at him.

“I know I’m breathtaking, baby, but please get your eyes back on the road.”

David laughed, amused by his wife’s cocky attitude.

Emilia fell silent after that, but David hardly noticed it because he was preoccupied with the preparations for the evening.

He turned the MP3 player on, and a song from an old album of a local artist filled the car.

A few yards away from the house, David saw someone waving at them. That someone was Rey. He had insisted on adding some drama to the surprise. David wanted to skip that part and he had been firm that there was no need for it.

As David rolled down the window, Rey said in a rushed, nervous voice, “Sir, I’m sorry to bother you but my wife’s in labor. Please help me bring her to the hospital.”

David pulled at the handbrake and let out a sigh. He wanted to punch Rey for ruining his surprise like this. It’s a good thing that Emilia hadn’t met him yet.

“Darling, this will just be a moment,” David said to her.

David was out of the car immediately, sprinting alongside Rey. Emilia stared in frustration at both of them as they go inside the house, arguing over something.

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Emilia rolled down the window and looked at the house, which was situated a few yards from where the car was parked. The house’s walls were white, and the night sky gave a dark tint to the roof, which made it hard for her to see its true color. It looked maroon to her or another shade of red.

A few trees were planted in the front yard and a white picket fence surrounded the lawn.

The first floor of the house had its lights turned on and light seeped through the windows. Somehow, the place looked familiar.

Emilia's mobile phone started to ring.

"Hello?"

"Darling, we need your help. Please come inside," David said, and before she could respond, he hung up on her.

Irritated, she turned the car's engine off and pocketed the keys. David told her that they'd be having dinner at a new restaurant in the city and their reservations were for eight o'clock. She checked her watch; it was almost eight. Regardless, she couldn't be mad at David for lending a hand to a stranger; it's just that the timing was off.

She picked her purse and alighted the car in a hurry.

When she was in the middle of the pathway, lights flooded the lawn. The trees, picket fences and practically everywhere she laid her eyes on were strung with dancing lights. Even the roof was lit; and seeing it illuminated revealed its true color—red.

She surveyed the lawn and turned full circle to take everything in, and when she completed the turn, she saw David walking toward her with a bouquet of lilies in his hands. He was smiling broadly at her. Confused, she raised her eyebrows at David, who reached her in a matter of seconds.

"Happy anniversary, darling."

She froze.

"What?"

"This is the part where you're supposed to greet me, too."

It took only a few moments before it sunk in. She laughed and leapt to his arms. David caught her and squeezed her against him.

"Surprised?" he whispered.

"Ecstatic," she told him breathlessly. She kissed him on the lips.

"You're getting heavy, darling," he teased.

"You're such a sweet asshole, you know that, right?"

“And yet you love me just the same,” he said.

She stared into his eyes and drowned in the love that reverberated from them. How could she tell him now? She kissed him once more before David put her back to her feet, grabbing her waist as they go inside the house, laughing.

White covered all the walls except for the cornices, which were a deep mahogany brown that accented the interior. Emilia looked around, and her gaze fell on the painting. It was David’s gift to her on their anniversary three years ago.

Emilia was still confused when David pulled her closer and affectionately whispered against her ear, “Welcome home, darling.”

“Home?” she managed to ask.

“This is our home now.”

Before he could say anything more, Emilia kissed him passionately.

David pulled back, grinning. “So I take it you like the present?”

“Love it,” was all Emilia could say. All this when she prepared nothing for him. She felt terribly inadequate.

“Since the lady is happy with her present, let’s have dinner,” David said, trying to imitate an English butler, and led her to the dining area.

There, she saw the stranger from earlier. He smiled at her and gave David a thumbs-up. David grinned and casually waved the man away to leave them alone in the room.

“This is all like a grand play,” Emilia said. “How did you manage to—”

“I’ll never share my trade secrets.” David winked at her. He pulled a chair and offered her the seat. “Tonight, I’ll serve you dinner.”

Emilia giggled when David removed the covers from the dishes on the table. Everything was still in paper bags. Take away food.

“I was about to ask if you had someone cater for us, knowing what lousy cooks we are,” she said.

“Nah, that’s too much. Too little time to prepare.” He began

unpacking the food. “Don’t worry about the mess, I asked Susie to join us later so we could sleep until noon tomorrow,” he winked. “I take it you like fast food?” He teasingly raised his eyebrows at her.

She couldn’t help it. This man was just unbelievable. She stood up and helped him set the dining table. In a few minutes, they were already listening to soft music as they ate. They conversed as they always had, exchanged glances as they always did, and held hands in between each spoonful.

David was in such a good mood and Emilia couldn’t think of a way to break her news.

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They were enjoying the dinner, talking about Jeremy.

Emilia realized though that her mind would drift occasionally, knowing that she had to tell David soon; and still dreaded that moment. How would she begin?

“I think this house is going to be too big for the three of us—”

“Hmm...” Emilia said, fearful of what her husband may be insinuating.

“I remember an anniversary from a few years back,” he said, “and then we had Jeremy.”

“No, Jeremy is still too young to have a sibling,” Emilia replied.

“I’m afraid you’d say that,” David said. He moved toward her, and before she could run away from him, he had already gathered her in his arms. They burst out laughing when he caught her; and then there were no more sounds as David kissed her.

David broke the kiss and studied her face. “Will you dance with me?”

“Really?” she asked, giggling. “Will your surprises never cease?” The soft gleam in her eyes told her husband how much she was enjoying the evening.

Finally, she added, “Of course. Always.”

Before she could wrap her arms around him, David loosened himself from the embrace and took her hand instead, leading her upstairs, which she hadn't seen yet.

The first thing that caught her eyes was the open area on the second floor. It was a good thirty square yards or so. There were no tables or couches anywhere. Glass fully covered the left side of the wall; and their reflections stared back at them. She turned and met David's gaze.

"I want this night to be special," David whispered in her ear. The lights go dim as he switched something. Blinking lights started to dance from overhead.

Emilia looked up and laughed loudly. "Disco light?" she said incredulously, noticing the glittering ball floating above them for the first time.

"You're the only one I'll ever dance with," David said, and Emilia touched his face tenderly. "Of course, it has nothing to do with whether or not I can dance because we both know I can. It's just that I don't want women queuing up and giving you a hard time as you wait for your turn," he teased.

"This must be why there's such a spacious room up here, so your big head could fit."

David smiled widely as he pulled her closer. She rested her head against his shoulder and felt his warm breath against her skin.

"You're so cheesy. I can't believe I'd end up with someone like you," she whispered.

"But I'm all you'd rather have," he teased back. And Emilia just stared at him because it was true. He was all she'd rather have. He was all she wanted.

Then she let herself drift into the music. It was an old tune, a ballad. She closed her eyes and let herself go back to the memory of the first time she coerced him to dance with her.

### **A memory from fifteen years ago**

David and Emilia had been seeing each other for three years already. Their friends started teasing them that they should give each other some space; otherwise they might end up like some of the couples they knew who broke up immediately after graduation. If not for falling out of love, then for becoming too familiar with each other. David and Emilia ignored what their friends said for the most part, but they did discuss the issue. They agreed that they were too into each other to even think that a time would come that they would fall out of love. The thought was highly improbable.

David knew that it was all part of a big joke: his friends teasing him to propose to Emilia the night of their graduation. It would be the perfect moment, they said. There was a party right after graduation, and David, together with their closest friends, decided to hang out at John's place.

John was a star basketball player in their university. His blue eyes, thick brows, and sandy blond hair defined him as handsome. His three-story house with six garages, and lawn that stretched for hundreds of yards made his place the group's venue for parties.

David was with John when Emilia and the other girls arrived carrying with them paper bags containing gifts, dressed ready to party.

Carla, Bernadette, Ann, Kelly, Julie, and Emilia brought with them gifts. Upon seeing that the two men had nothing to give them, they complained.

"But, ladies," John said, "the drinks are on the house. David and I will be your servants for tonight."

This was received by wild giggles from the girls.

"That's so unfair, Emilia will have David all to herself while the five of us will have to share you!" Julie shouted.

"This baby can handle all of you," John said, earning another set of wild giggles.

Beer started pouring, and John's living room immediately became alive with the dancing.

David, while drinking his beer, watched them from the sidelines. Emilia was dancing with John, moving gracefully, and since she's a fan of modern jazz, her motions came out naturally, making each step easy on the eyes. Her laughter kept David company and he relished in each swag of her shoulder and in the easy sway of her hips.

Kelly and Julie joined them, laughing hysterically at John's stiff yet exaggerated movements.

Although John liked playing the field, David knew him to be a loyal chap. He was there when John dated a childhood sweetheart, Marie, exclusively for five years. They had a long-distance relationship, which John thought was going well. One summer, Marie spent every day with John, but when she left, she forgot to call him as though the summer was all they could ever share together. No more letters, phone calls, and text messages came. Later on, John learned that she married some random guy she met in college. John blamed it on the pregnancy. Marie blamed it on destiny.

Studying John now, David knew that John had healed; and his friend told him that he's interested in Kelly.

Emilia turned and glanced around, searching for David. She spotted him standing beside the bar and gestured for him to come over. David shook his head and took a sip of his beer.

"Come on!" Emilia shouted. All the girls stopped dancing.

Even John looked at David. "Come on, man. Join us. Everybody's already too drunk to notice that you dance with two left feet."

Everyone laughed including David.

"Wuss!" Julie piped in.

Emilia laughed and then sauntered toward him. The others started dancing again.

"Will you dance with me, kind sir?" Emilia asked.



“Nah,” David said as he kept on finishing his beer, ignoring Emilia’s teasing.

“Come on, I’ll show you how,” Emilia insisted.

“Not me. I can’t. My feet will just trip over yours.”

“Not if someone as good as I guide you,” Emilia said. Clearly drunk, she still managed to dance around him and make him look silly as he stood there watching her.

Emilia teased him, swaying her hips, digging into his shoulders, and pushing him lightly as she turned to dance around him. The heel of her right shoe slipped, and she pulled David down with her to the floor. They were laughing and no one from the group seemed to have noticed.

Instead of standing up and guiding Emilia to her feet, David pulled Emilia against him and spooned her. Emilia laughed louder, but she let him draw her closer.

“Look at the blinking lights above. They seem like disco lights. I like how they glimmer.”

David was laughing behind her ear. He adored Emilia even when she’s tipsy.

Emilia giggled and kept on mumbling, “They’re like stars. I love stars.”

David put his hand inside his right pocket and took out an inexpensive silver ring that he bought in one of the stalls he passed by the other day.

Lying down on John’s carpet and looking up at the disco lights, Emilia kept talking incoherently. David whispered from behind, “Shh, darling.”

Emilia giggled.

“There’ll never be just one perfect moment to do this as long as it involves you. I love you. I love you when you’re your usual self—intelligent, confident, and witty. I love you when I feel the kindness of

your heart. When you're like a child and you tease me, frown at me, and make me chase after you, I love you. And seeing you now, lying here with me, half-crazy with alcohol, I still love you. I know this may not count, but under these blinking disco lights, I want to ask you," he paused, and Emilia finally stopped giggling. "Will you marry me?"

Emilia didn't move and David became worried.

"Darling? Are you awake?" he asked.

Emilia struggled to her feet, shaky on her knees that David had to get up fast to support her.

"Hey," he said concernedly.

Emilia looked at him. "How dare you not propose to me on one knee? And you weren't even looking me in the eye!" she said. Then quickly, she hugged him.

Surprised by her outburst, David embraced her hard, dreading what he knew she would insist on.

"Baby, you have to dance with me," she said.

David froze and felt cold, wondering if she would ever answer his proposal.

"I asked you a question," he said.

"Shut up. Just dance with me," she said.

If David could roll his eyes the way Emilia so expertly does, he would have. But he just heaved a sigh. Right now, he knew he had to dance. He grabbed another bottle of beer and downed it almost immediately. Emilia showed him how to make a few steps with his feet. When David still couldn't figure it out, he grabbed another bottle of beer and within seconds finished it, leaving both of them drunk.

David lifted his feet alternately, swaying his hips a little to the right, and then to the left.

"Babe, it's all right to move your hands, too," she teased.

He grinned at her and put his hands up in the air. "Like this," he asked.

She nodded, her eyes barely showing because of the wide grin on her face.

“You’re hopeless,” she said.

At that moment, he forgot that he couldn’t dance and instead, teased Emilia with his robot dancing. He grabbed her waist and pulled at her.

“I’m a lot better in bed,” he whispered.

She laughed. “Uh-huh,” she said, patronizing him.

“What?” his eyebrows shot up. “You don’t believe me?” he asked, feigning hurt.

“It’s just that dancing is a good reflection of how one performs in bed—”

“Come on, I’ve already proven how great I am in bed—”

At that moment, the music switched into a soft tune, and everybody turned to look at him.

“Wow, you really had to announce it to the world,” John shouted.

“I think we should take a vote,” Kelly teased.

Everybody laughed, and David grinned at them like an idiot. He kept on defending himself.

Emilia pinched him and when he wouldn’t shut up, she kissed him. “I know, baby, I’m just kidding,” she whispered.

David danced that night until all their friends had retired to either the sofa or the carpet.

They ended with promises. He was looking at her, as though trying to measure if she was still drunk.

“You’re the only one I’ll ever dance with,” he said.

“Under the disco lights.” Emilia tossed her head back and laughed. “And yes baby, I will marry you,” she said.

### **Back to the present**

Emilia was looking at the disco lights remembering how David first proposed to her. It still left a smile on her face even though she knew

the proposal had been in jest. He proposed to her another time after that, when, as he called it, they were both lucid.

Looking at him now, she felt that same emotion surging like waves drowning her.

“Baby,” she started, her heart drumming. She had to tell him now, but before she could finish her sentence, David took her mouth in a kiss. It left her breathless and she pushed whatever she had to tell him away into the deepest recesses of her mind.

Emilia knew the timing was off. Her thoughts were running wildly through her head, and she wanted to stop kissing David, grab his hand, and tell him her secret and her fears after learning about the cancer. More than anything else, she wanted to be held in his strong arms, to feel the security and love that he had for her as she tells him everything. But she wondered if she had the heart to speak about cancer tonight.

She pushed him lightly and pulled back away from him, but her husband only thought that she was teasing him. He held her more firmly than before, engaging her in deeper kisses.

She didn’t have much time to be bothered by her thoughts any longer because as soon as she felt David’s lips against the back of her ear, she forgot all about cancer and told herself that for this moment, she would only think about her husband and how intoxicating he was making her feel.

She touched his firm chest and kissed it. David’s gaze was penetrating and when she finished undressing him, he took over. He unzipped her dress and pulled it down, sending it pooling around her feet. When she was naked, he gently cupped her breasts and playfully bit them. Then he pulled her closer and kissed her once more, this time just a little below her chin.

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The surrounding was bleak as though it was covered with fog, and Emilia sensed that she must be dreaming. David was standing on a hill

with two bikes beside him. He was smiling at her, calling her name, asking her to go biking with him. She smiled back and ran toward him, excited to get to where he was.

As she ran, her right ankle twisted under the uneven road and she fell. David shouted her name and ran toward her, but she couldn't look up at him because her right ankle was throbbing and she couldn't take her mind off it. She tried standing up but failed. When finally she gazed up, David was gone, and instead, she found herself looking at Mike.

"I'm a doctor," he said. Then he carried her. She hugged Mike close and cried. From afar, she heard David's voice. She opened her eyes and saw him blurred in the distance, fogged by her tears, running after her. She reached out to him until finally, her hand was touching David's.

Mike disappeared and she and David were back together to that very first day that they went out on a date when she first told him she loved him. She was wearing a sundress and he was smiling at her. Then the smile turned into laughter as she told him about her silly theory. She felt offended, and she asked him to stop laughing, but he wouldn't. She asked him to stop a second time, but the sound of his laughter only grew louder until she saw that he was crying. She didn't know why, but when she reached out to wipe his tears away, her chest hurt. It burned like fire, and Emilia was no longer sure if it was because she rode the bike for twenty miles, or if it was because it's the very first time she saw David cry.

He was holding her; then it became tighter that she couldn't breathe. She twisted, trying to pry his arms around her loose. But she couldn't because they were as strong as metal.

Upon thinking of metal, she felt a bitter taste in her mouth and remembered the food that she ate. She gagged repeatedly remembering how badly the metal tasted. Then she gulped air, trying

to breathe in. She felt herself falling head first into oblivion as though she was in a vacuum. She screamed a voiceless cry where words didn't escape her mouth, but she knew she had been heard. She kept on falling until she could no longer breathe. And then—

Emilia woke up, finding it difficult to breathe. It was only a dream, but her chest hurt. She was experiencing shortness of breath, and she couldn't tell if it was just because of David's arms wrapped around her. She tried to sit up in bed, all the while carefully untangling David's arms from around her. She slipped away so silently like the fading of the night in a starless sky.

When she was already sitting, the blanket slipped off her body and she found herself naked under the sheets. She coughed and her lungs burned. She tried to keep the sound of her coughing low, but it persisted.

She put on her robes and stood up quickly, moving away from David. Coughing with each step she took, she drew in more air making her feel light-headed. She ignored the woozy feeling and kept walking away from her husband. Before she could get out of the bedroom door though, David was awake.

Emilia was coughing doubly hard now, uncontrollably. Her vision was spinning, her chest tightening and burning.

"Darling, what's wrong?" David asked, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Emilia turned the doorknob and didn't answer him; she was gasping for breath and could feel the weight on her chest. She managed to turn the doorknob weakly before the room became dark as she fell, blond curls scattered like golden yarn on the floor.

"Jesus Christ!" David yelled. He scrambled out of bed quickly, but still reached Emilia too late. She lay unconscious. He woke her but his attempts were in vain.

"Emilia! Darling?" When she didn't respond, he quickly checked on her pulse and breathing; then he put on his shirt and slacks, picked her

from the floor, and dashed to the car.

He shouted Susie's name on the way down, thankful that he had asked her to stay over last night. He called out, asking Susie to pack some clothes for Emilia.

After a few minutes, David and Emilia were on the road, leaving a baffled Susie staring worriedly after them.

## Chapter 14

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AFRAID OF THE incident, David found himself driving without his seatbelt on and careening left and right to overtake cars to get to the hospital as fast as he could. The loud screeching of the wheels against the road broke the silence of the dawn. They left black streaks on the pavement. From inside the car, he muttered curses and kept on looking at the passenger seat where Emilia was safely buckled.

He sped through a red light and was thankful that there were no officers around. He knew he'd still get a ticket though. It didn't matter. He almost bumped his head when he took the curb onto the driveway of the emergency room and hit the brakes hard.

Nurses came rushing toward him; and he watched helplessly as Emilia was wheeled away, leaving him alone in the emergency room.

When his senses returned, David ran after the nurses and was brushed off and told to wait outside.

In just a few minutes, his ordeal was over. The doctor came and told him that Emilia's awake and that there was no reason to panic.

David breathed out in relief, still shocked about what happened in the last thirty minutes, but thankful just the same.

Emilia was lying in bed with her eyes closed while David talked to the doctor with a goatee.

"Her vitals are OK. I don't see any reason for you to lose sleep over this. She'll be OK. She just needs to rest," Dr. Walker said.

David waited for the doctor to finish telling him his observations.

"Will she be monitored?"

"Of course, the nurse will be doing rounds, and I'll check on her again tomorrow."

David nodded.

"We're going to run some tests and we'll let you know the result



immediately.”

“Thank you.”

David shook the doctor’s hand and watched as he left the room. As soon as the door closed, David went beside Emilia’s bed, pulled a chair close to her, sat down, and dropped a soft kiss on his wife’s forehead. He was brushing blond locks away from her face when a tear slid down her left eye.

“Nothing to worry about, darling. You’ll be out and about tomorrow morning,” David said.

Emilia bolted up from her bed, almost bumping her forehead against David. “Who’s with Jeremy? Susie’s with us. Who’s with our baby?” She sounded frantic.

“Why don’t you lie back down?” David asked softly. “I called your mom. She’s at the apartment since yesterday.”

Emilia breathed a sigh of relief and lay herself back down. She shut her eyes only to open them again. Her forehead creased in worry. She looked at him with tear-streaked eyes.

David frowned but tried to soothe her.

“Hey, don’t worry. The doctor said your vital signs are OK. It’s just procedure to run some other tests. You’re going to get wrinkles early if you don’t stop crying,” David teased but despite that, his wife still cried.

Emilia blinked back her tears.

“David, I’m scared.”

“Don’t be silly. There’s nothing to it. Although I have to admit that you gave me quite a scare back there.” He kept on running his fingers over her blond locks.

Emilia’s tears wouldn’t stop falling. David felt her body quiver as though afraid, and he instinctively moved out of the chair and squeezed himself in the bed next to her. He nudged closer and pressed his body against hers. He scooped up her head and placed it on his shoulder,

then pulled her head against his cheek. Every movement of his was a response to protect her; it had become second nature to him.

She cried louder, breaking into sobs.

He stopped brushing her hair and looked at her.

“Hey, it’s going to be all right,” David said. His wife was acting weirdly; and there was something she said earlier that didn’t feel right. He thought about it and finally realized that she had called him “David.” She never did. It was always just “baby” or “moron.” Or “baby moron,” depending on her mood.

Emilia choked on her tears. “No, I have cancer.”

“Come on, you’ve got to stop this nonsense,” he said patiently.

“No—it’s true,” she said.

David froze. He chuckled to try to make the situation lighter, though given the circumstance, a harrowing emotion grew inside his chest: an emptiness that grew bigger as his wife continued to cry. Uneasiness crept inside his heart.

“If you want, I’ll call Dr. Walker and let him speak to you directly. That way you’ll know that there’s no reason for all this fuss.”

Emilia’s tears kept rolling down. “Dr. Jones,” she said.

“What?”

“Look for Dr. Alex Jones,” Emilia repeated. “He’s my oncologist.” She swallowed hard. It was painful for her to have to watch his face—watch him digest everything.

“What are you saying?”

“Baby, I’m so sorry. I should have told you sooner. I should have told you about—”

“What are you saying?” David’s voice grew louder and it echoed in Emilia’s ears.

She reached out to touch David’s face and cupped it in both her hands. “David, I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

“What’s his name?” he asked. “What is the goddamn doctor’s name?”

“Dr. Alex Jones.”

With that, David inched his body away, removing his arm from under her head. He sat on the edge of the bed for a brief moment, his hands pressed against the gap between his brows. Then he stood up and stormed out.

David’s silhouette faded through the glass door panels of the hospital room, leaving Emilia to the coldness of the reality that she would be about to face. All she wanted was for him to stay beside her and hold her. And now he’s gone to chase the monsters she brought upon the table.

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David wandered the hospital halls, uncertain of what he should do. He kept on walking because he needed to get away from her.

Dr. Alex Jones. *Who the hell was he? Where could he be? Why in the world would Emilia give him this shocking news today? How long had she known?* The questions were driving him crazy. He needed to find the damn doctor. Fast.

His strides were long and swift as though he was running after someone. When he reached the nurses’ station, he inquired if Dr. Alex Jones was on duty that day. To his dismay, he was not.

“Where can I contact him?”

“I’m sorry but we don’t give personal information about our attending physicians. If you have a message, we can page him.” The nurse dismissed him, but David wouldn’t leave.

“Either you will give me his address or I will climb over your station and take the information from you.”

David didn’t notice that Dr. Walker had seen the commotion he started. The doctor approached him.

“What’s the trouble here, Mr. Smith?”

David turned and saw Dr. Walker. “I—I need to contact Dr. Alex Jones—”

Dr. Walker studied him, frowning. After a while he said, "Walk with me."

"I thought Emilia looked familiar. Perhaps when she came in for one of her appointments with Alex, I saw her. I'm not going to ask you what your business is with him." Dr. Walker stopped and using his phone, dialed. "I really shouldn't be doing this."

Dr. Walker waited a few seconds before speaking at the phone. He had his back to David.

The doctor nodded slightly. Then he ended the call and turned to David. He took out a card, wrote something on the back, and gave it to David. "This is Alex's address."

David read the legible handwriting on the back of the business card. A one-hour drive tops if there was traffic, but he was not expecting any at this hour so he could be talking to the oncologist in as little as thirty minutes. There was a part of him that secretly wished the doctor's place was farther.

"I don't know what to say..."

"Thank you is traditional."

"Thanks—"

Dr. Walker looked at him concernedly. "Go. And get some rest after. We'll take care of your wife," he said before walking away.

David looked at the back of the card again and his shaking fingers ran over the script as though searching for truth in those written words.

*What if it's true? Can I handle it?*

There was only one way to find out. He had to talk to this Dr. Alex Jones. It's almost five in the morning. Will the doctor even see him at this time of day?

He didn't want to lose control over his emotions again. His thoughts were scattered, and he couldn't compose what he would say for an introduction.

Suddenly, he felt the weariness that lack of sleep over the

preparations in the past weeks catch up with him. He stopped in the lobby, trying to drive the panic and fear that's starting to consume him.

The green leather couch in the hospital lobby looked comfortable, inviting him to seek solace in it. He collapsed on it and he worked on his fingers, which have begun to feel numb with tension. After that, he lightly massaged his shoulders as they have gone tense, too. He leaned back against the couch and stretched his legs, closing his eyes and rubbing his knuckles against his temples in an effort to clear his head. When the fear wouldn't go away, he balled his fists and started thumping them against his eyes hoping that the pain would clear his head.

There was no peace during that moment. David wanted to run straight to Dr. Jones, but he dreaded what he might hear. He also wanted to go back to Emilia, take her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right.

He opened his eyes worrying that how he was reacting could be affecting his wife. Shaking his head, he found it ironic that even though he was angry and frustrated, he was still concerned about how she would feel knowing that she was scared and hurting.

Tears started to form in the corners of his eyes, but he blinked them back. There was no sense crying over something that he wasn't sure of. He prayed that this was all a big joke. That Emilia, with her claims of not being able to crack a joke, finally decided to play a practical joke on him at such an inopportune time. But Emilia's tears had been so real. The oncologist was real. The address was real.

He had no details except that his wife had cancer. The way Emilia brought it up left him with no room for more questions. What stage? What type of cancer? He should have asked her instead of storming out, but he knew why he hadn't—had he done so, it would be more difficult to pretend that none of this was true.

*But what if it wasn't really true?*

*Call Dr. Jones.*

David realized he didn't have the doctor's mobile number. It was just the address.

*Go visit him now. Now.*

*It's too early. He could still be asleep.*

*He would understand.*

*I have to know.*

*This is my wife. Emilia is my life. I can't... I have to know all about it. I have to see Dr. Jones now. I need to talk to him.*

David gave a loud sound that was very akin to choking, then he broke into sobs. The hospital lobby was quiet at the time, and the faint scent of alcohol and sterilized air lingered in the lobby. There were a few nurses wandering about, and sometimes they passed in front of him, holding their charts, doing the usual rounds. Nobody bothered him as though a grown man hunched and crying in the hospital lobby was a regular thing. Something that was not unusual in a place where people lay suffering.

And then it was just David alone in the hospital lobby, slouched against the couch. He continued to sob, fearing for the words that he would hear as the day promised to unfold into a thousand omitted truths.

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A headache that was starting to build up woke Emilia. She didn't sleep well last night and her head was making her pay.

She stood up to walk to the bathroom. She waited a moment to be certain that her feet weren't numb and made sure she wouldn't have difficulty walking. When everything seemed fine, she proceeded to the bathroom unaided.

After that, she climbed back into bed. She glanced around for any sign that David returned to visit her after he left earlier, wondering where he could be at this moment.

Emilia buzzed the nurse and requested that her breakfast be served to her room already. She wanted to eat and be as healthy as she could possibly be. Ironical as it might seem, but Emilia knew that the first weeks after everything sinks in, David will need her more than she will have a need for him.

After the test results came back, she would prepare to go home, wait for David, and together, they would figure out how to make things right between them.

Emilia dialed her mother's mobile number. The phone rang, but no one picked up. Just when Emilia was about to hang up, her mother answered.

"Hello, dear," Alice said from the other line.

"Mom," Emilia said. She wanted to tell her mother about the cancer. "We have to talk."

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

"Mom, are you there?"

"Yes."

"I said we have to talk."

There was another pause.

"Oh, no. Don't tell me you didn't like the house?"

Emilia smiled in spite of everything that happened and shook her head although she knew her mother couldn't see it. "It's not that. Let's just talk when I get home."

\*\*\*

Dr. Alex Jones woke up early. He toasted bread and fried two eggs. At the same time, he switched on the coffeemaker and brewed his coffee. When he was finished, he set the food on a tray and took it outside to have breakfast by the pool.

He wanted to relax. He was still upset about losing a patient last week even though he knew it wasn't his fault. As a matter of fact, he was able to help extend his patient's life by another three months. Still,

he could not cure him. He hated cancer after losing both parents to it, and his hatred was the driving reason he became an oncologist. He wanted to be the thorn in cancer's neck, if ever that was possible.

It was odd that Dr. Walker called him earlier. When there's an emergency, it's usually a nurse or one of the administrative staff who calls. It was even weirder that all Dr. Walker wanted to know was if Alex had a patient named Emilia Smith. In fact, Alex did, and Emilia's been on his mind for the past week. Alex wasn't able to prod Dr. Walker's reason as Alex was still groggy from sleep and Dr. Walker ended the call too swiftly.

The day seemed quiet and he was enjoying his freshly-brewed coffee when the doorbell rang. Curious, Alex checked his pockets and realized he forgot his mobile phone inside his room. As a doctor, it was almost a sin not to carry his cellphone anywhere he went.

Instead of answering the door, he went to his room and checked his mobile to see if there had been an emergency call placed for him. There were no missed calls, no messages. He checked his pager. There were no messages there either.

The doorbell rang again, and he reached the gate on the fourth ring.

Standing in front of him was an unfamiliar tall man with dark hair and blue-gray eyes. His clothes looked slept in. Alex couldn't place the man facing him.

"Yes?"

The man moved closer to the gate. "Dr. Jones?"

"Yes?"

"I'm David. David Smith. Emilia's husband." David was watching the doctor's expression. It's as though he was praying that the doctor wouldn't recognize the name.

It took a moment for the name to sink in Alex's head, and he was finally able to put two and two together.

"Oh. Do come in."



David felt light-headed. He could hardly believe he was being invited inside. Either this man was very accommodating—or—he didn't like to think about the alternative.

His hopes of Dr. Jones not being real and of the cancer being a bad joke vanished. The soles of his leather shoes dragged as he followed the doctor inside.

"Come join me in the kitchen. Let me get you some coffee and then we'll talk."

He tailed the doctor to his kitchen, where Dr. Jones handed him a coffee mug and then invited David outside.

"Call me Alex. There's no reason to be so formal in my house," Alex said when they reached the poolside.

David took a seat. His eyes kept on leaping from the doctor, to the pool, to the still dark sky, and then back again to the doctor.

Alex watched as David's throat moved, the bump moving as though there was a lump. His eyes were liquid.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?" Alex broke the silence.

David looked at Alex, his blue-gray eyes penetrating and alert as though measuring what he would say.

"The fact that you invited me in without question has confirmed what I was going to ask," David said.

"It's difficult."

David met his gaze. "Is it true, then?"

Alex nodded curtly. The scenario was familiar and yet bizarre.

David held his head in his hands as though in a prayer. His shoulders tensed. Only the sound of the water falling from a wall decorating the end of the pool could be heard.

"Is there anything I can do?" Alex offered.

David looked up at him, his eyes in two angry slits. "You're a doctor, right? You're her oncologist. Why don't you tell me what you can do for her?" he snapped.

“This may be a bit of a surprise to you—”

“Surprise? Bullshit! You’re calling it a surprise as if it’s a good thing,” he yelled and stood up.

Alex drew in his breath and stood up, too, watching David carefully.

“I’m really sorry,” Alex started. “I don’t know what your wife has told you already—”

David shook his head in grief. “My wife never told me anything.” Then he gazed at the doctor. “Why didn’t you?”

“You know it’s not for me to discuss—”

“To hell with that,” David said moving toward the doctor. “It’s very convenient for you to say, right. ‘It’s not for you to discuss.’ What are you, some professor in college who can’t discuss the exam results? Or are you just looking for an excuse because I can sue you, you know.”

Alex moved, backing away from David who looked to be beyond consoling.

“My wife is there in the hospital—alone—at this very moment, and she could be dying... and here I am. Shit.”

“Just calm down, OK?” Alex said.

“Easy for you so say, huh?” David spat, stepping a few paces toward Alex.

Before Alex could control himself, he did what he knew he had to do to calm his visitor.

In one quick movement, he shoved David. Alex watched as his visitor lost his balance, flailed his arms up in the air, and ended in the pool with a splash.

Alex crouched at the edge of the pool and watched as the water’s ripple grew softer. After a few seconds, David’s head bobbed up. Ringlets of curly black hair covered his forehead as he gulped air.

Alex looked into his eyes and asked, “Better?”

David shot one annoyed look at him and then waded through the water, hoisted himself up from the pool and collapsed on one of the

chairs. The steam from his coffee mug seemed to be inviting him for some warmth.

“You may drink the coffee, you know,” Alex said after a few seconds.

David jerked as though he wasn’t expecting anyone to speak. He looked up at the doctor before taking the mug, wrapping his hands on the warm mug.

Alex put a towel at his back.

“Wouldn’t want to catch pneumonia now, would you?” he said.

David stared at his trembling hands. Then finally, he drank. As if the hot coffee had brought him back to his senses, he quickly darted a look at the man who was sitting in front of him.

“Oh, shit,” David said. “Dr. Alex... I’m really sorry about all this. It’s just so,” he paused not really knowing what to say next, “surreal.”

“I pushed you down the pool, we’re even.”

David’s cheeks grew redder. “I’m such an asshole. This is so humiliating—” David stood up in such a rush that the table shook.

“Please sit back down,” Alex said. “Now that you’ve calmed down, we can talk.”

David looked at the doctor, trying to read through the kindly eyes. After a few seconds, he flopped on the chair.

“I want to know the details,” David murmured before adding, “Please?”

Alex sipped his coffee. This was another one of those moments that he dreaded. As a doctor he knew that breaking bad news was part of his profession, but he had not gotten used to it. He didn’t think he ever would. He took a deep breath before he started speaking.

“About a month ago, I met your wife. She came to me because she was referred by her primary physician to have some specialized tests taken—tests to detect cancer. I read the results of her prior tests and consultations. From there I learned that she had complaints about shortness of breath and a cough that had lasted more than five months.

Later on, she told me that she shrugged it off because she's a smoker and thought it was because of that."

*A month?* One whole month and he only knew now, David thought. What kind of husband was he to not realize that his wife was sick? Of course he noticed that she had been coughing, but just as Emilia dismissed the thought, so did he. They were smokers, but he quit several years ago. His wife, on the other hand, wasn't successful in quitting particularly since she used smoking to relieve stress.

"There was a series of tests and when I read the results, it confirmed that she has cancer. I told her she should consult with other physicians, other specialists. She should get a second opinion," Alex continued. "In my mind I knew I was right with my findings, but I prayed that I was wrong."

"She came in again after a few days and showed me the results of her consultations with other oncologists. We had the same findings. I didn't see her again until four days ago. At that time, I told her that we should start with treatments but I haven't heard from her since. For the past two days I've been trying to reach her, but I haven't talked to her yet."

"How bad is it?"

Alex blinked at David, astonished. His wife still hadn't told him everything. "Stage IV."

"Oh God," he said. "And?"

"Chance of survival is low, but Emilia could be the one out of ten. As far as life expectancy, the average is eight months. But that information is based on a study conducted a few years ago and it could be better now. It all depends on how her body reacts to treatment. I can't really say at this point. All I have for reference are the results of her exams. I need to compare that with how her body will respond to the treatment, but she hasn't started it yet."

David put down his coffee mug shakily. "Oh, God. Is there anything

I can do?" His shoulders slumped; and his hands trembled against the table.

Alex's words came out as though they were being delivered from a previously prepared speech, and he's said them so much that it wasn't any surprise that everything sounded mechanical to his ears.

"Be there for her. Help her during the treatment because it's going to be painful. Don't let her pity herself. If you can avoid stressing her out, that will be good. Cancer often seems to progress faster when the patients start feeling as though they've lost the battle; and they stop fighting. Don't ever let that happen."

David stared at Alex with wide eyes; his lips had gone pale. Stubbles covered David's chin and he looked as if he aged in the minutes they were together.

"I don't know what to do. She's my wife."

"You have to accept this; the sooner you do, the sooner you can decide about the treatment plan. We have to start with her medication as soon as possible. Time is our enemy."

David nodded nervously. "Please help me."

Alex patted David on the shoulder and forced a weak smile. "That's what years in medical school readied me for."

David listened to Alex, but he wasn't sure if he understood the words at all; they didn't make sense and his brain didn't register anything.

One thing's for sure though, he would help Emilia fight cancer. They would be in this together.

He shivered and almost vomited from fear, already afraid of losing her.

## Chapter 15

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STAYING IN THE hospital and waiting for David to come back was an option Emilia considered, but in the end, she decided to go home. So after she confirmed her insurance information and settled the bill, she checked out of the hospital and hailed a cab to go home. She tried calling David to let him know that she had left and was on her way back to their apartment. He didn't answer though so she left him a voicemail.

She wasn't surprised when she got home and found her mother Alice babysitting Jeremy. At the sight of both of them, her heart ached.

Despite her age, Alice carried herself with grace and class, making younger women around her feel self-conscious. She boasted a tall, slender frame. Her eyes were a deep-set caramel brown like Emilia's.

As Emilia studied her mother's face, she felt a lift in her heart, a gentle tugging, and a surge of something warm. She would be very lucky to age as gracefully as her mother—if that was still possible.

Alice was wearing a plain, light green, tailored blouse over black slacks. Some signs of aging were the few fine lines around her jawline. Emilia wondered how many more lines would be added when she told her mother the news.

"Mom," she said.

"Oh, hi dear. Jeremy's already a handful. I'll remember that next time David calls me and asks me to babysit my grandson," Alice said as she made herself comfortable on the couch.

Emilia sat beside her.

"Mom—"

"Oh, yes, I remember. What was it you wanted to talk to me about? You didn't like the house? I saw it in a picture David sent me and I thought it's quite lovely."

Emilia swallowed, uncertain about how much to tell her mother.

“No, it’s not the house. I love the house,” Emilia said.

“But?” Alice looked at her. “What? There are always buts.”

Emilia paused, considering. She blinked and looked away. “Nothing. I like the house.”

Alice didn’t notice her hesitation; and instead nodded and continued talking in her usual buoyant attitude.

“It’ll be such a nice place for Jeremy to grow up in. Definitely far better than being cooped up here in this apartment. I never liked places without lawns—sorry dear—it’s just that not having a lawn takes away the warm appeal of a home.” Her voice droned on.

Emilia’s eyes were fixed on Jeremy, who was busily playing with a toy truck.

“Mom—”

Alice gaped at Emilia. “What?”

“I’m sick, Mom. I’ve been diagnosed with stage IV cancer, and I don’t know how long I still have.” Emilia listened to the sound of her voice. It didn’t falter. It was also devoid of emotion. Thinking about it so much had perhaps prepared her for this.

“What?” Alice’s mouth opened. “I’m sorry, dear but your mother’s already old. My ears may be failing me—”

“I’ve known for almost a month now but I didn’t want to tell anyone yet... I didn’t think I was ready...”

“Oh my God,” she said and covered her mouth. “Please say you’re kidding—”

Emilia’s eyes moistened. “Please, I don’t want to talk about it in more detail.”

“But dear—”

“Please, mom—,” Emilia cut in, her hand squeezing the couch tightly. She shook her head in despair. “I can’t talk about it yet.”

“Are you sure? Did you get a second opinion?”

“Mom, please—”

“But we have to talk about it now. I’ll call your father; he’ll know what to do. He has a friend that was a cancer survivor and I’m sure he can—”

“Survivors get through cancer because what they had was probably just Stage II. I’m at Stage IV—”

“No—his friend was Stage IV and yet—”

“Oh, just shut up, mom!” Emilia snapped and stood up. She started pacing around the living room and covered her ears even though Alice had already stopped talking.

Then Jeremy cried as though sensing the tension in the room.

“Susie—Please take Jeremy,” Alice shouted.

The old woman hustled in and looked at them, then scooped Jeremy up and withdrew from the room quickly. Her cooing voice softened as she left, and Jeremy’s crying stopped.

“Dear, we have to talk about this. Please sit down beside me,” Alice said, regretting the panicky tone that she used earlier. When Emilia still didn’t move, Alice walked over to her and took her hand. She pushed her daughter to sit down.

“I don’t know what to do,” Emilia said, still not meeting her mother’s eyes.

“We’ll take you to a specialist, we’ll have you tested some more—”

“But more than one doctor has looked into my case, and they told me the same thing—”

“Well, they could all be wrong! It’s not unheard of that a doctor committed a mistake in the diagnosis—,” she paused, not knowing what to say. “It’s not, it’s never—it’s not true.” The last word hung.

Emilia saw her mother’s tears.

“Oh, mom,” the words escaped her mouth in a rush and she threw herself at the woman that had always nursed her through each sickness that she had. She wanted to seek comfort from her mother, only this



time, she knew that the only comfort she could get was the assurance that her mother would care for her husband and son when she's gone.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm really sorry I have to hurt you this way. Tell Daddy I'm sorry, too."

Alice gave no response to that because she knew that it would break her husband's heart. Emilia was their only child.

The tight embrace and the slight shaking of both their shoulders said it all.

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David wasn't looking forward to the drive home because he dreaded the discussion he's about to have with his wife.

When he reached the hospital at around ten in the morning, he learned that Emilia had checked out. He wanted to yell at the attending nurses and administrative staff for letting her go alone, but he knew it wasn't their faults. When Emilia wanted to wiggle her way out of a situation, she could do so easily. It's her eyes that make her difficult to say no to.

David tightened his hold on the steering wheel, tensing each time he turned, releasing the gas pedal more than once unknowingly until a car from his rear would honk and overtake him. Another horn sounded, and David jerked as he quickly glanced at the rearview mirror. He stepped harder on the gas pedal and released it again, afraid to reach home so soon.

Dr. Alex Jones told him that he should act as normally as possible. Emilia shouldn't feel that she's being treated in a special manner; otherwise, she might be prone to depression and self-pity. Everything should be status quo. David didn't know if he could live up to that.

He parked the car in the garage and dallied as he turned the stereo and the air-conditioner off. He twisted the car key a bit further until the revving of the engine died down. To buy more time, he adjusted the driver's seat and reclined it. Then, he leaned back and counted to

twenty before he took the car keys, opened the door, and stepped out. Perhaps it's better if he didn't overthink things. Everything became more difficult and complex when he thought too much.

David closed the car door and breathed deeply before walking toward the apartment. His heart started drumming, and his right arm twitched in nervousness. He put his hand on the doorknob and its coldness seeped through his palms, travelling through his body. It stopped when it reached his heart. It lingered there. He waited for the coldness to pass, but when it didn't, he twisted the knob, pushed the door, and walked inside.

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*Six hours. Has it really been that long since David walked out of the hospital?* Emilia was beginning to worry. *Where could he be?* The most logical thing for him to do was to talk to her doctor. She gave him the name, but was he able to find Dr. Jones?

She wanted to call him, but decided that it would be better for both their sakes to discuss everything in person. She should see his reaction, each agonizing twitch in his eyelids, the disappointed eyes, the low voice, the evidence of turmoil that she caused—that's her punishment for keeping the secret. And this time, she had to man-up to face her husband.

Alice went upstairs to put Jeremy to bed, and after that told her that she would help start packing to prepare for the move from the apartment to their new house. She was supposed to stay with them for a week, but after their talk, Alice said that she would remain indefinitely until the details of Emilia's treatment had been laid down, and she saw that everything was going as scheduled.

Emilia listened to her mother without argument. She knew better than to dispute her on this. Had she done so, they'd be arguing until now.

She had broken the news to her mom and was thankful that it's over.

As much as possible, she didn't want any day to pass by wasted on being sad and with everyone around her getting depressed. Instead, she wanted to ensure that each day would go by as though there was no news of this sickness, and the visits to the doctor were part of her daily routine, and there was nothing extraordinary about it at all. She had not dwelled on anything so negative in the past and she vowed to herself that she definitely would not start now.

Coming out about her cancer was, if anything, uplifting. She remembered the cabdriver. He was right. It was time to face it. Now that her mother and David knew, her heart felt much lighter, and she was somehow comforted.

Emilia wrapped her arms around herself as she looked out the window of their apartment, finding it odd that out there, nobody else was affected by her getting sick. Being so insignificant, her loss would probably not matter to anyone at all and if that's the case, why should she be so sad with the idea of dying? She bit her lower lip as she tried to control having to cry again. A long vexing sound followed as she breathed heavily.

*There is still some time. And perhaps God will be so good as to give me a miracle. One day, I might wake up healthy again, and the people around me will smile and tell me I've been sleeping and was just having a nightmare.*

Emilia didn't want to admit it to herself, but she knew that delaying the medication left her feeling that *this* wasn't real. Not facing the truth about her condition allowed her to enjoy her days and almost forget about the future. If she didn't go for treatment, she really couldn't be sick, could she?

David's car pulled in the driveway. Emilia didn't realize that she'd been biting her lower lip much too hard until she tasted the tanginess of blood. The car's engine stopped and her heart drummed faster.

In the seconds that followed, nothing registered to her except for the sound of the car door opening and shutting, the slow footsteps against

the pathway, and the silence that followed that was disturbed only by her heartbeat.

It would only be a few seconds now before she knew how all this will turn out.

*Act naturally, act normally, no more hiding.* The chanting continued in her head in a desperate plea for retribution over her omission.

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Emilia locked eyes with her husband, searching for the emotions that she knew were hiding behind his tired eyes.

David was still holding the doorknob in his right hand as though pushing the door shut would require from him significant effort. His shoulders were stiff and his eyes were haunted that he felt like a soldier who came home straight from a battlefield, saw death unveil in front of him, but still tried hard to ostentatiously cast courage about to hide whatever hurt was inside.

“Hi, darling, miss me?” he asked when he was just a few feet away from her.

Emilia noted that while the words were the same, the manner in which they were delivered was different. She clutched herself tighter, her lower lip and chin quivering. She opened her mouth slightly to say she did, but clamped them closed again for fear that her voice would betray her.

In terrifyingly slow movements, she walked over to him, met his gaze, and when he still didn’t do anything, she tiptoed to kiss him lightly on the lips.

From upstairs, the sound of wood against wood was heard; movements to gather things into boxes, a preparation before moving out to bottle up everything in the household into memories.

It was David who broke the silence.

“Are you OK?”

The words seemed to be forced out of his mouth. They were said so

softly and so devoid of emotion that she couldn't be certain of what he was feeling.

"Yes." She immediately regretted having spoken because her voice gave away her emotions. She didn't know she was so shaken inside.

"You should be resting," he said. "You shouldn't be moving around like this. Get in bed—"

"No, I'm feeling better."

"I don't know what to say," David said.

Emilia gazed at her husband's face and wondered how he aged so much, so soon.

"I'm going to call Dr. Jones and set up an appointment with him." It was an effort to continue speaking, but this was the moment for her to lay down everything that she had been keeping from him.

"I? When will you include me in this?" It was said softly, but there was a stress to his every word.

She jerked her head up when she heard the snap in the tone of his voice. She realized her mistake; and she whispered, "I'm sorry."

David collapsed on the couch. "I'm sorry too. What else do we need to do?" he asked.

"I don't know what the next steps are. I'll see if I can get an appointment tomorrow. Then, I'll know from there."

"Goddamnit, Emilia. Will you include me in this?"

Emilia flinched. She remembered when she was still a child and she lost her father's phone. She didn't intend to, but it was the first time she ever held a mobile phone and she was amazed by it so much that she carried it with her during weekends, begging her father to allow her to. Then while counting her money to buy the latest copy of *Seventeen*, she put the phone down in the shop's counter. When she reached home, she realized that she had left the phone.

That was the only time her father had hurt her, using his leather belt to whip her butt. Not even the soothing words of her mother relieved

her of the tenderness she felt on her behind. Later on, her father held her and told her it wouldn't happen again, and that the only reason he lifted a hand was because the news came at such a bad timing.

It was the only physical pain she ever felt. And right now, hearing David's words, the memories came back because she had no recollection of anything so painful to compare his words against with.

"I'm sorry. Yes, we'll go together to Dr. Jones." She didn't understand why she was having so much difficulty talking about this with David. "Are you hungry? Would you like to eat? Mom prepared breakfast earlier, and there's still some left."

When David didn't answer, Emilia turned to get food from the kitchen for her husband.

David quickly stood up and grabbed her arm.

"You had no right," he scolded her.

His grip tightened on her arm, and she felt scared. She couldn't speak. All she could do was look into his burning eyes. She had been in the wrong, keeping this from him.

"You had no right to do this to me. How dare you take away one month's worth of working through this? I'm your husband, for God's sakes!" David's face turned red. "And now I feel guilty shouting at you."

"I'm sorry, babe," she said through ragged breath. She wasn't accustomed to seeing her husband so angry.

"You're sorry? You're sorry over what? You kept this from me and now you're sorry?"

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way. I'm sorry I didn't tell you immediately. I thought that if I didn't believe in it, that if I didn't tell anyone else, one day I'd wake up and learn that none of this is real," Emilia blurted out.

She shook herself against David's grip and succeeded.

"I thought that by keeping all this to myself, I was sparing you pain.

That the less I believed it, the less it became true. I know it was stupid, but I didn't want to face it because I didn't want to stop living for you. For Jeremy. I don't want to have this conversation with you even now, because I know how this will end. We'll only feel how helpless we are... and from there, how will we move on?"

Emilia thought that talking to her mother had prepared her for what was coming when her husband came home, but she was wrong.

"I know it's wrong to say I feel cheated, but that's just how I feel right now. You took from me time that I could have spent supporting you and telling you that it will all be OK. And if it doesn't get better, that I'll be here for you. If that's not my role in your life, then what good is it that I'm your husband?"

"It's not taking away time from you. Don't you see? I gave you more time to be happy. Without worries—"

"That's bullshit and you know it!"

"You wouldn't understand any of it—"

"What? How could you say that?" David was looking at her intensely, and Emilia could see that he was past being calm. He pointed a finger to her, thrusting, admonishing her. Each thrust felt like a hammer against her chest. "You think it's easier having to hear it from your oncologist? He was looking at me with pity in his eyes because I didn't know. I wanted to claw his eyes out—"

"I don't want you to hurt—"

"You're out of your mind!"

"No, please, just hear me out..."

David looked coldly at her. "And that, my dear, was what you should have said a month ago."

In one quick motion, he flung the coffee table and sent it tumbling. The vase on top of the table crashed and fell, scattering pieces of broken glass across the floor.

"I thought it would be better for both of us, you know... I'm sorry, I

don't know how to explain it to you. You couldn't know how I was feeling, what I was thinking. But the moment I learned about everything, all I wanted to do was forget. Can you blame me for that?

"I don't want to miss out on the important things that are yet to happen in your life. In Jeremy's. For God's sake, even the simplest things make me miserable now—and nostalgic. What about the things I'll miss out on? The beef stew that you'll learn to make someday. The coffee that you'll brew. And Jeremy—him sharing the things that I like doing. Trips to beaches. Watching him go to school. Talking to him as an adult. Coaching him about how to be responsible. About how to pick the right girl. It tortures me that I wouldn't be here to tell him that I like the girl he's dating. Or maybe pick on the girl he's dating! That I won't be here to see him graduate from college. That I will never know if the years will be kind to him. That even a simple thing—an activity—I'll never get to share with him anymore.

"I know it's silly but I'd like to go biking with him one day. And how will that happen now? He's two. The only things he knows are cry when he's hungry, laugh when he's happy, sleep when he's tired. I don't have much time left so I don't want to lose another few seconds of happiness with you and Jeremy. Not even if it means that I will have to carry the burden alone for a little while...

"And you..." she continued, "and you, I don't know what I will do, what I can do for you, to make it easier. I just don't know!"

David couldn't look at her so he turned away. His fists were clenched tightly. Emilia knew that he must be fuming at her. She entwined her arms around him, pulling him from behind, sobbing against his back.

"Baby, please..."

"You are so unfair. I don't know how many times I have to keep on telling you that I'm your husband. I deserve the right to be with you through all of these. You can't decide when it was that I have to be a



part of your life because that should be every—fucking—day.”

David removed her arms from around him but she wouldn't let go. “Oh, please baby, don't make this harder...” she whispered, begging him to listen. “It wasn't easy for me, either.”

David managed to pry her arms from his body and faced her. Looking in her eyes, seeing them wet with tears, he couldn't push her away anymore.

Before he knew it, he was pulling her closer, and her sobbing increased. He took a deep breath of the smell of her hair. The clean shampoo. The fresh scent of her body. He kept breathing her in as though he's afraid that not doing so could make her disappear sooner.

Emilia clutched him and squeezed herself tightly against his chest. When there was no response from him, she looked up, and saw again the tears in his eyes. There's no more hint of anger in them, only the hurt that she inflicted on her husband. And right then, she wanted to just make him angry again.

She touched her husband's face, softly pressing each finger against the tears, but they won't stop rolling down so she did the only thing she knew to make amends. She kissed him hard, feeling his tongue, teasing him so he would give in. She pulled on his head to bring his lips closer. When his mouth softened, she lightly bit his lower lip.

David couldn't resist any longer, he grabbed her waist and kissed her hungrily on the lips, keeping to memory the contour of her lips and savoring how she tasted.

In the back of his mind, David knew that he has to be the stronger one. It didn't matter that he felt the way he had.

*Nothing matters but how she feels,* he kept on telling himself. *Fuck what I feel.*

But he was lost already in his own battle. The talk earlier with the doctor. Him saying that it could be eight months. Or it could be longer. Or that Emilia could be one of the cancer survivors. But

another image would fleet inside his head where he was living alone in the new house he bought and everything would come sinking back in.

He grabbed Emilia's shoulders and no matter how tightly he squeezed his eyes, the tears kept falling. And then he wasn't able to control it anymore. He shook as he sobbed.

Emilia moved and pulled him closer, trying to soothe him. But it was his moment. It had to be. And so she let him lose it.

After a while, David stopped shaking. He bent toward her, drawing her in as though there were still spaces between them.

"I'm sorry, darling. I'm sorry," he repeated as he bent and kissed her forehead. "It's just so hard. But we'll fight this together. We'll get through this together."

"It wasn't easy for me. All the more because I knew how I'd hurt you. I'm so very sorry," Emilia said.

David squeezed her tightly and cradled her like a baby. This time, it was she who cried against his chest. Letting it all out wasn't easy, but his being here, and her knowing that he will never leave her side made everything bearable.

"I'll fight it, babe. Don't worry, I'll fight it," she kept on saying gutturally. "And if God will just listen to what I'm praying for, then I'll get to stay with you for a long time."

David nodded slowly, repeatedly, not knowing that he's doing it involuntarily.

He shut his eyes tightly and fought back another batch of tears. He had to be the stronger one, he told himself one last time.

## Chapter 16

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### **A memory from 14 years ago**

AGAIN, JUST LIKE the other days in 1997, David had waited for Emilia outside her classroom. He couldn't wait because after four years, both of them would now be graduating from college. Emilia would soon look for a job just like she promised as she was thrilled at the idea of making her own money.

Similarly, David talked to his professors and local art gallery owners and started showing off his portfolio. It was more difficult for him since he was a new artist and there were already tons in the field. Sometimes, the gallery owners wouldn't even agree to meet with him.

Emilia knew David has talent. Regardless, the field he chose was bound to make success extremely challenging. After two months of rejection letters, countless bottles of beer, and finished paintings that were littered to just rot in the garage, David decided to take a job in advertising. His passion for the arts could wait. He said that advertising would only be his day job while he was struggling to make a name for himself in artistic circles.

"One day, when I feel like I'm more than good enough, I'll paint you. And that'll be the first painting I'm going to exhibit in a gallery," David told Emilia. She would then punch him lightly on his arm to let him know that she didn't approve.

When they started working, time became a problem. Emilia wasn't aware that sales could be so demanding. It was just her rotten luck that when she got hired, her company was entering their peak sales months, and she had to extend her working hours to meet with clients and sell condiments to supermarkets.

Most of the time, when she was not in the field doing rounds, she would be in a coffee shop crunching numbers and figuring out how to

meet the demand forecast for her group. It was an additional challenge that her boss Liza was sternly firm about her numbers. She kept on telling Emilia that she had to focus on delivering above the target—that she had to raise the bar.

Emilia's first month bombed, which she found unsettling. She's a born achiever and because of that, the feeling of inadequacy was something she abhorred. She was off target by a few thousand cases and when this was compared to the prior year of the same month, the numbers looked doubly bad. She kept running through her spreadsheets again and again, but couldn't figure out what went wrong. Liza was fuming when Emilia turned in her report.

"This number is what we'd hit if we didn't have an agent in the field, which just speaks about how horrible these figures actually are."

Emilia had to examine and probe deeper into her numbers for two straight days before she was able to come up with a more in-depth report on how her horrendous sales came about. She called Liza and asked if she could take an hour of her time to show the analysis she'd prepared. Liza agreed, intrigued with what Emilia had to say.

"One, we have no running promotions this time, which prevented the customers from ordering more cases. Two, we can't do a side-by-side comparison of this month's sales against last year's. They're incomparable because we had an impending increase in the prices of oils and tomato sauce in the past, and customers ordered more to take advantage of the lower prices. This year, there were no projected price changes leaving customers to order only what was needed in the market.

"Three, we implemented a new warehouse management system. We delivered products that didn't pass the shelf-life requirements as set forth in our contracts, and when these reached the customers, they rejected the products outright. This could also have contributed, making our customers a little gun-shy when it came to ordering in bulk

from us again.”

When Emilia started her presentation, Liza was going through some documents in front of her, but she found herself listening intently to Emilia’s explanations. Liza was leaning forward on her desk, the leather chair creaking under her weight, when Emilia ended her presentation.

“It is an explanation why our sales this month are low,” Liza began. Thoughtfully, she added, “It wasn’t just your accounts, Emilia. I admit that I was being hard on you, but to tell you the truth, there were others that did poorly this quarter.”

Emilia was saddened upon hearing that across the company, sales was bad; yet she was relieved that she had been able to show a good analysis of why the sudden drop occurred. Although it was at a micro level, she still knew that she was able to put together a solid explanation regarding the general trend of their sales.

“I’ll make a few quick calls. Please expect our agents to get in touch with you. I need you to share with them what you just presented and together, look at the issue holistically.”

Emilia rubbed her cold hands against the sides of her skirt. She didn’t realize that she was holding her breath waiting for Liza’s comments. There were no praises, but her boss’s reaction somewhat conveyed that she’d been happy with her analysis.

She nodded and left the room.

The days that followed were met with another series of sleepless nights working with the other agents to review their numbers. Since Emilia was new in the company, they didn’t give her much chance to speak during meetings, but she was adept at charming her way with people. In the end, she got the chance to finally show her analysis.

When the group separated, they were all ready to present to their managers, and by then, Emilia had been warmly accepted in the group.

Through it all, David was there for her. Since he knew her work

demands, when they were not together, he spent late hours working on his projects so that he could deliver them on time. The hours that he was able to cut during normal office hours, he spent them with Emilia. If these hours weren't enough, he would skip work and offer to drive for her during client calls. Those were just a few of the ways he found to make certain that he could still be a part of Emilia's daily routine.

Back in college, although they had different majors, they would compare the available slots of their subjects and align their schedules as closely as possible before picking out which classes to take. That way, they'd get to spend as much free time as they wanted with each other.

"How was it? Have you slept yet?" David asked when he met Emilia for dinner.

They entered the steak house. They agreed that on Fridays, they would go for a steak dinner. It was something that Emilia wasn't too happy even though she also loved steaks as it would require her to put more time on the treadmill. But David begged her to say yes. *'He loved steaks. She loved steaks,'* he reasoned. And she couldn't say no to him. So she figured she'd run the extra miles on the treadmill.

They passed through a wooden sliding door and chose a table in the corner of the dimly-lit restaurant. The tables were wooden with matching chairs. Cowboy hats and pictures of cowboys riding horses were hung on the walls. Part of the reason Emilia and David frequented the restaurant was its ambiance.

"The numbers still suck, but I was able to wow my boss with my brilliant presentation."

David chuckled. "That's the spirit, darling."

"No, no—it's true," Emilia argued, frowning over her boyfriend's less enthused reaction. Then, she rolled her eyes at him when she realized that he's teasing as usual.

The waitress came over and smiled at them. She handed out menus, but David already had his order in mind.

“I’m having the usual,” David told the waitress. “And then, Caesar salad for her and a glass of merlot for me.”

“Will that be all? How about some appetizers?”

“Could you please put that in first? We’ll call you over later for the rest of the order.”

The waitress nodded and repeated the list before she turned and walked away.

David looked at Emilia. “Your job sounds really boring,” he said.

“It’s not! I actually find it very challenging. Plus, I’ll get a good bonus if I sell beyond the target.”

“So how much bonus did you get this quarter?” David was teasing.

“I hate you.”

They laughed. “No worries, darling. I’m sure you’ll figure it out, and once you’ve done so, they’ll have a hard time begging you to stop selling. They’ll tell you to stop otherwise there’ll be no more production lines with a big enough capacity to support your sales.”

David took Emilia’s hand and gave it a light squeeze. He looked at her dainty fingers and he grew fonder of the woman in front of him. She was wearing the cheap ring he gave her after graduation even though she had kept on teasing him that he was only able to get her to say yes to his proposal because she was drunk.

The waitress came back and set the glass of wine on David’s side while she poured water into Emilia’s empty glass.

“You’re being too kind,” Emilia said.

“That, my dear, is what you call a pep talk,” David said, winking.

“Oh, you’re so bad!” Emilia said before laughing. “Enough about me. How’s work?” she asked.

The salad was served and Emilia started eating. David watched her.

“Here, have some,” she offered.

“No. As I always say, it will take up valuable space that I’m reserving for my steak.”

He sipped his wine.

"Today, I had to work on a print ad for a T-shirt company. I'm not sure if it'll be a hit, but the tagline's 'Feel the comfort. Shirts on.'"

"Oh my God, that's terrible," Emilia said.

"I know, right? I'm working on something, but I'll have to mention to my boss that the tagline sucks."

"Or... or it could appeal to the public, after all, it sounds familiar."

"Familiar, common. Yes." He frowned.

"It might work..."

"I don't know about that. I hope—so that at least one of us will get a bonus." He winked at her again.

She kicked him under the table, and laughing, David yelped.

"What about your paintings? Anything new?" she asked.

David shrugged. He was working on several paintings, a series composed of five frames. He was almost done with it and he was rushing since he was able to contact a gallery owner that has an event before the end of the month; the owner allowed David to join the exhibition.

"I'm still working on something, but nothing out of the ordinary."

When the steak was served, David immediately started. "I'm starved."

"You look like you haven't slept in ages," Emilia suddenly commented. She was looking closely at him now. David raised his eyebrows to keep from looking as though he was hiding something.

"What? I slept like a lion after eating an elephant."

"No, you're hiding something. This happens only when you're working on a major project. Out with it," she paused, "Can a lion ever eat an elephant?"

"If a boa constrictor can swallow an elephant, my guess is that a lion can shred an elephant to pieces," David said, laughing. "Remember, The Little Prince?"



“Of course. That’s a classic piece—,” Emilia said. Her eyes widened all of a sudden. “Don’t change the topic! Oh, you’re so good at this, making me feel stupid and like a child the way you avoid my questions!”

David laughed wholeheartedly. “OK. You got me. Remember the gallery *Classics*? I was able to talk to Julio, the owner, and he’ll give me a spot in his month-end exhibition. I am allowed to hang five of my paintings there.”

“Julio?”

“Yes, Julio. He’s a talented artist and has very deep pockets—family money he told me. Lucky him. It’s a good thing that he’s just a few years older than I am, and we got along well during our first meeting. It happened so fast. I can’t wait for the end of this month.”

“Wow, that’s great. Five? Have you picked out which ones you’re going to put on display?”

“Nope. I’m not showing any of the ones that I previously painted. I’m working on a concept. I’m done with four paintings and I’m finalizing on the last one.”

“Wow. That many?” she said. “Show me.”

David knew she would beg him to show her the paintings, which was exactly the reason he didn’t tell her sooner.

“No, this time you have to wait.”

They continued eating, and every now and then, Emilia would ask again about the paintings. What concept he was working on, what medium he used. But David was able to segue into other topics.

The night ended with David dropping Emilia off at her condo and bidding her goodbye with a kiss.

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The day that David had been waiting for came, and whistling, he put on a dark blue dress shirt that he picked only the other day. He put on a striped, blue, silk necktie. He grinned at his reflection because he acquired the look he was working to have, rugged and formal at the

same time. He ran his fingers over his dark hair and messed it up, annoyed that he had put on mousse when he never did before. And now, it seemed like his hair's all flat and lifeless because he combed his hair the wrong way. He checked his reflection again and this time, he smiled as his hair was back to its usual fashionable mess.

Months of preparation and still he had some reservation about his works. It felt like the strokes were done in such a rush, and although the overall effect was good, he knew that the audience might not like them. Honestly, though, he didn't care. He had no intention of selling the series.

David called Emilia to make sure that she would come to the gallery. She said that she'd drop by in between her rounds to the clients. She'd be quick, she had said, because her schedule for the day included meetings with four different clients. David said he understood but not even the promise of a brief visit dampened his attitude.

He entered the gallery and shook hands with Julio. Similar to him, he was wearing a blue dress shirt. He had a coat on.

Julio displayed ten of his favorite works. He was still trying to make a name in the field, but he kept on saying that he wasn't that much interested in the money that his paintings might someday bring in. He just wanted to express himself through his works of art, to which, David, in one of their meetings once replied, "Lucky bastard." This led them both to laughing.

"You seem happy," Julio said upon seeing him.

"Delighted is more like it," David replied.

"Well, if I were in your shoes, I'll be too." Julio grinned and patted him on the shoulder. "See you around, pal."

David went to where his paintings were displayed and wondered as he studied each piece in the series, *Will she notice?*

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Emilia parked the blue company car outside *Classics*. There were

other sedans in the parking lot, but she was disheartened that there were only a few patrons that dropped by for the opening. She threw the keys in her purse and got out of the car in a rush as she had to leave again soon. Right now though, she pushed any thought about the meetings away. She's here to look at the paintings and support her boyfriend.

As soon as she entered the gallery, the first thing she did was look for David's listing. True enough, there were five paintings under his name. "Life at its finest."

She read it again and almost choked. *Life at its finest?* To Emilia, the series' title sounded lame; her lips twitched while she thought of a diplomatic way of telling David that his exhibit title was as bad as her first quarter sales.

As she walked around the gallery, she decided not to ruin this day for him so she'd just keep her opinion to herself and tell him some other time. Maybe some connoisseurs would think differently and take interest in his paintings.

She walked around and saw the typical stills. She checked the artists, and several were under Julio's name. *So that's the Julio he was telling me about*, she thought. *He's talented. But he should paint more than just still life.*

As she continued checking out the paintings, she found out she was wrong, there were a few more of Julio's, and he had some portraits and a few abstract pieces. There were even a few that she liked and wouldn't mind buying, if only she had the money to spare.

Then she came across David's paintings, but before she studied each one, she looked around to see if he was nearby, but she failed in locating him.

She read the exhibition title again out loud, testing it on her mouth, *Life at its finest*, and she got goose bumps at the icky way it sounded to her ears. She still couldn't believe that he'd select a title like that, and

without any catchphrase, his series would surely hit the red mark.

There was a total of five paintings. Looking at them holistically, the only link that she found was their finely-sculpted wooden frames. Not one of the frames was the exact copy of the other, but the way that each was carefully carved definitely put a continuity in the series. At least that part was brilliant.

Her eyes skimmed the paintings, studying the first one, but before she could criticize it in her mind, her eye caught sight of the next painting and her jaw almost dropped.

It was a portrait of her. She clenched her fists tightly in utter frustration, a curse escaping her lips, wishing that she could punch him. She looked around but David was still nowhere to be found. How could he display a portrait of her like that? She didn't want to be part of an exhibit, to be the subject of criticisms. Her thoughts were flying when she noticed that the fourth painting was David's portrait.

She grew even more frustrated. *He thinks that if there's a portrait of him in the series, too, I won't be mad at him for displaying my picture in a gallery?* She was fuming. The moment she found him, she would hit him really hard with her purse.

She closed her eyes and wiggled her fingers in front of her, then breathed in and out steadily, which was what she learned from her yoga class. *Meditate, meditate*, she kept on telling herself. Chasing away her panic, she drew a few more breaths before opening her eyes again, yearning for the painting of her face to vanish, but it still hung in front of her as though taunting her.

With a grunt, she moved back to the previous painting.

The first one was quite ordinary—really. It was of a car, but the painting was focused on the front wheel, which was zoomed in against a rustic background.

She skipped her portrait and moved to the third painting and found herself staring at a lamb. She beamed with pride as she studied the

strokes David used in realistically capturing the lamb's fleece. It looked unimaginably soft, and she got the urge to caress it. Behind the lamb was a young lady watching over it, a smile painted on her sunburnt face.

She moved to look at David's portrait and some of the irritation that she felt earlier came rushing back. His blue-gray eyes were looking directly at her and his face was painted with his usual impish smile—as if he knew that she would be mad over this exhibit and was already begging for her forgiveness.

Emilia moved to the last painting and she let out a sigh of disappointment. Afraid that David had suddenly appeared behind her and heard her, she turned around and was thankful to find that she's still alone.

The frame held an abstract painting, a mixture of earth colors that looked to be splattered against the canvas. In the middle, there was some sort of twinkling thing. She suppressed another sigh.

She looked at all five paintings again and felt, much to her chagrin, disappointed. If a review were to be made of this exhibition, she feared what would be written about David's corner.

If this was what he chose as his first series to present to critics, she seriously doubted if he would ever get anywhere.

Frustrated, Emilia searched for the mobile phone inside her purse, and when she found it, quickly dialed David's number. His phone rang but it went unanswered. She tried contacting it again, but she still got no answer.

She tapped her left foot and checked her wristwatch. David still wasn't around and she would have to leave soon. She tried finding him but her eyes fell on a young couple who were staring and grinning at her.

She cocked her eyebrows and then realized that the couple was probably trying to figure out if she was the person in the second painting. Flustered, she gave them a meek smile and without another

glance left quickly.

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David squirmed when he felt his phone vibrating inside his pocket. He took it out and watched as the light blinked, Emilia's name flashing on the screen. He grinned and ignored it, putting it back in his pocket. He was having too much fun watching Emilia from behind a post, seeing how she reacted as she went over the paintings.

Emilia looked around, undoubtedly searching for him, and he knew her well enough to surmise that had she seen him, he would have received a terrible nagging. He put his hands over the pocket of his pants, waiting for the vibration to stop.

The phone went still, but the vibration started again, and he had to immediately put his hand inside his pocket because it started tickling his leg. One thing's for sure though, he wasn't going to answer her calls.

Emilia looked around one more time at the gallery and left. Her heels barely made a sound against the carpeted halls.

David laughed as he watched her prance away and his sides hurt from trying to keep any sound from escaping his mouth. Then he checked his watch. It was almost four in the afternoon. He squinted as though mentally calculating something, and then he started walking toward the gallery entrance.

He checked the left pocket of his pants for something else and exhaled when his fingers closed in on the cold metal. It's still there. He was afraid he'd lose it after taking it out of the box.

*Thirty minutes. I'm giving her thirty minutes,* he thought.

When he reached the gallery entrance, he looked for a good spot to wait.

He checked his watch once more, each movement of the watch's thin, stainless second hand teasing him.

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Emilia rode the blue company car immediately, pressing her foot on

the gas pedal heavily, sending her rear wheel over the sidewalk as she turned. She cursed, and her wide mouth was pressed in a thin line as she drove away.

There were a lot of reasons for her to be pissed off. First, she couldn't find David. Second, she felt immensely humiliated that her portrait had to be paraded in that manner. Third, when she called David, he didn't answer. And he still hadn't called her back!

She dialed his number again and went through to his voicemail. This time, she left him a message.

"You owe me big time. And over dinner, don't ever tell me that I didn't pass by. I went and gone, and I never once glimpsed your sorry ass!" she paused. "Oh, and wipe that smug smile off of your face!"

She let out a sound that was partly a curse and a sigh of resignation after she put the phone down. She took to her breathing exercises again to compose herself. *Meditate, meditate*, she kept on muttering. How she missed the sound of the waves to soothe her nerves.

She glanced at the car's digital watch; the red blinking numbers told her that in a few more minutes she'll be late for her next appointment. She had the sinking feeling that she wouldn't be able to make it to the meeting, and that would be fourth on her list, in any case.

Then once Liza learns about it, Emilia will get a good dress down, and that will be fifth.

She sighed and breathed in again. She took her phone while driving and dialed her client's number. It rang three times before it was answered.

"Good afternoon, Amanda speaking," she heard from the other line.

"Hi, Amanda, this is Emilia. I'm on my way over. I'll be there in around thirty minutes."

"Hi, Emilia. It's OK, my boss isn't here yet. But he phoned in ahead of you and said that he'll be arriving shortly."

"Damn!" Emilia said. Then realizing that Amanda had heard her, she

rapidly added, "Oops, sorry about that. OK, I'll be quick." She asked, "Can you run over the things that he wanted to ask in regards our new promotion? That way I'll be prepared and won't need to waste any of his time."

Her thoughts drifted back to the gallery. Not seeing David there infuriated her. After all of her efforts to squeeze him in her tight schedule, and seeing her portrait hanging there, the thing that she wanted most was to at least find him so she could nag him about it.

"Well, for one, he said that the promo's schedule is going to conflict with the one that we're running now..."

"What? Can you say that again? Sorry, I lost you for a moment there. Tunnel," Emilia quickly said. She couldn't concentrate. She kept thinking about David's career plummeting. And it hadn't even reached its peak yet. Or at the very least, started soaring. *What's wrong with him? Why would he ruin that chance?* She kept on searching for the right word to describe the painting series, and the only one she came up with was "tasteless."

"Emilia? Are you listening? Perhaps we should just discuss this when you get here," Amanda said.

"No! I'm sorry. Static." She winced at her pathetic excuse. "I got you all clear now." But she was still thinking about David.

*The series. The paintings. The wheel. Her picture. His portrait.*

She was sure she missed something. David wouldn't risk his career like that if there wasn't a reason.

"I'm hanging up," Amanda said impatiently.

"Oh, please, don't!" Emilia interjected as she quickly tried to remember what Amanda was droning on. "You mentioned something about the conflict in promos, right?" Emilia hoped that it would appease Amanda enough to not hang up on her.

"Yeah. Then, he asked if there are other discounts that we could take? He said that..." Emilia's thoughts were again back to the gallery.



*The wheel. David's portrait. Her portrait. The lamb. The abstract painting.*

What was that about?

Something was definitely up. She was positive about it now. What was the riddle? Was this some sort of puzzle that David was trying to make her solve?

*Was this a surprise of some sort? Why would he? He knows how I hate surprises. But he also knows I like the puzzles.*

She went through the paintings again in her head.

*The wheel with the rustic background. Her portrait. The lamb. David's portrait... And the twinkling thing?*

What could she be missing?

The first painting was very straightforward. It was a wheel.

The second and fourth ones held no other meaning.

What about the third painting? Why was there a lamb? She couldn't figure it out. She could still hear Amanda talking from the other line, but Emilia couldn't focus on what Amanda was saying.

The third painting held the biggest clue, and that was what she needed to crack. Maybe she was focusing on the wrong object. Maybe it wasn't the lamb.

Could it be the young lady? The lamb and the young lady?

All of a sudden Emilia hit the brakes and she burst out laughing.

"Oh my god," Emilia said.

"Emilia? Why? What happened?" Amanda sounded shocked.

"Amanda, something's come up. I won't be able to make it. Please, please, please—make an excuse for me," Emilia begged.

"What?" Amanda sounded irritated. "I can't just..."

"You can. Got to go. I'm really sorry. Bye." Then Emilia hung up, unmindful of whether she'd get a negative in Liza's scorecard of her performance for canceling a meeting in such short notice.

Emilia took a U-turn. "Oh my god, I think he just proposed."

Then she drove all the way back to *Classics* still laughing loudly after realizing that the third painting was depicting the famous nursery rhyme “*Mary had a Little Lamb.*”

The keyword was “Mary;” only it was spelled differently.

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David didn’t have to look up to know that Emilia had come back. A loud screeching of the tires announced her arrival and when he gazed at the parking lot, Emilia’s blue car was already parked.

He looked at his watch. Twenty-two minutes. His estimate was accurate. He smiled to himself when he got the confirmation of how well he knew her.

Then as quickly as she parked, Emilia looked around, obviously searching for him. Their eyes met, and she came running toward him, leaving the car’s engine on and the door to the driver’s side open.

He stood motionless as he watched her run toward him.

He knew she liked puzzles, and every day, he worked hard to please her.

He was grinning widely at her, excited to wrap her in his arms. Emilia was still running, grinning at him when one of her shoes’ heels snapped, and she went tumbling down the pathway.

His smile was wiped off his face in an instant and he ran toward her. She was already sitting when he reached her.

There were a few strays of curly, blond hair that had gone loose as she fell. He crouched down beside her and seeing that she wasn’t hurt, let out a laugh.

Emilia picked her shoe and threw it at him, which he caught. She was laughing, too.

“Come on, you’ve got to admit it was funny,” he said, his happiness brimming from the way his smile had been plastered on his face. “Cinderella,” he added, putting her foot back into her shoe with the broken heel.

Emilia looked at him and laughed again. “You’re the cheesiest man I’ve ever met,” she said, her dimple showing.

David laughed louder. “That wasn’t quite the reaction I was hoping for,” he said. He checked his left pocket, and his fingers immediately found the ring. He took it out and he knelt on one knee. “I know cheesy is not something you like. I can come up with what I think in my head are the best lines to convince you to stay with me forever, but then you’ll probably just laugh about them and ridicule me. So I decided to just limit it to simple words I surmise won’t make your eyes roll,” he paused and looked into her eyes. This time, he was no longer smiling. His eyes grew soft as he said, “Happiness will always be a choice. I can choose to be happy. You can choose to be happy. But can we just choose to be happy together?” His lips closed before he opened them again. “Marry me,” he said.

Emilia stopped laughing. “Oh, so this time’s the real thing?” She looked serious.

“You always tease me that you only got engaged to me because I took advantage and proposed when you were drunk,” he replied.

Emilia looked away, her lips partly open.

David swallowed as he waited for Emilia’s answer. He knew in his heart that she would accept. *Of course, she will. Why won’t she?*

But when it took longer for Emilia to say yes, he panicked. His hands became clammy.

*Oh my god, is she going to say no?* His mind was exploding.

After what seemed like forever to David, Emilia met his gaze with the glowing warmth of her brown eyes.

“What can a girl who’s so in love possibly say to that except yes?”

David swallowed.

“Baby, yes—I will marry you,” she said.

David put the ring on Emilia’s finger and held her close. She was gazing up at him with those warm caramel eyes of hers.

He kissed her passionately, and when it was broken, there were tears in her eyes.

“I thought you didn’t hurt yourself when you fell,” he joked.

Emilia pinched him playfully on the side.

Then one by one, the few spectators that had gathered around them yelled out congratulations, cheering them.

David scooped Emilia in his arms and brought her to the passenger side of her car. He slid in the driver seat and with one last wave at their audience, drove away.

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### EXCERPT FROM BREAKING THE SCROLL

#### Chapter 1 – Lamare Amark

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*“The world is ruled by McWindStorm Arren, the emperor, who once was my lover. His power cuts across the entire dominion and the people, the citizens, all bow to honor him.*

*And my son, Kino, is as he always is, never a citizen of Akea, land of extraordinary powers.”*

I wrote the last paragraph in my scroll, listening to the feather pen brushing against the brown, brittle paper, and I felt a growing uneasiness in the pit of my stomach. I dipped the feather pen in black ink once more and signed my name at the bottom.

The door to the small bedroom I occupy opened and Kino’s face peered through the gap.

“Mom?” he said.

I smiled and was pulled out of my reverie. “Yes, my little man?”

“Is it a good time?” he asked.

My smile grew wider. “Always a good time for you.”

Kino entered the room and pulled another wooden chair close to where I was sitting. He collapsed on it as though he had something huge to tell me. But he just sat there and peered at my scroll.

“This isn’t for your eyes, Kino,” I said.

He smiled mischievously and the wide gap between his upper front teeth showed.

“I’m sorry, mom. I just want to know what it is you’re always writing about.”

“Not this one. This is only for the emperor to see.” And it was true.

The scroll in front of me closed another series of events in the coming fortnight for Akea where I, the Royal Scribe, with the ability to weave the future of the dominion, an ever faithful servant of Emperor McWindstorm Arren, prepare to submit my latest manuscript.

“Why do you always write for him?”

“Because it’s my job. Otherwise, we won’t have anything to eat.”

Kino frowned. “But I want you to write other stories. The ones about invisible people that you told me about.”

“Maybe some other time —”

“But you promised,” he insisted.

I pulled my son closer toward me and hugged him. My chin rested on the top of his head.

Kino grew taller over the past moon-turn. He’s now twelve. Being a short woman, I only have a few inches on him now, but another moon-turn or two will make him taller than I am.

“Come, let’s go outside,” I said and held his hand. “I’ll tell you another story instead.”

Kino grinned and he walked beside me.

Outside, the two moons Luna and Risa greeted us. Akeans believed that the moons bring balance to the land and harness our powers. Sisis, the sun, was beginning to show itself behind a thick cottony lump of clouds.

I sat on a patch of green grass in the front yard and Kino settled beside me. As a habit, I let him lay his head on my lap.

“Once upon a time, there was a place in Akea called Nivatton. The people in the land all had the power of invisibility and they roam the

forests without being seen,” I started. Nivaton is a real place in Akea, but the stories I tell my son about the people were all make-believe.

I stopped because Kino was grinning at me.

“Why?”

“You always start your stories with once upon a time,” he said.

“Because that’s how far ago the stories were,” I argued.

“But it gets old, mom,” he said.

I played with his brown hair, crumpling ringlets of them in the palm of my hands.

“You’re a bloody ass. Do you know that?”

Kino’s eyes widened. “Your words! They’re not decent —”

It was my turn to laugh. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing longer.

Shaking my head, I continued with my story. With Nivaton, its people, and the adventures that they had.

Little does my son know that the adventures he believed were too far from reality were actually a little less strange than what I had experienced in my more than three decades of living in Akea.

My mouth opened mechanically and tales of Nivans came out. But inside my head, I was remembering my own story. The story that ended with binding Kino’s power.

I paused and tried to blink back the tears that were foreboding. It happens every time I remember that I was the cause of my son’s unhappiness.

\*\*\*

The Akea that we know now was once a peaceful land. But things changed and the land’s history took a turn.

It started with a grape-picker’s son and his name was McWindStorm Arren. A man and a dreamer.

Northsam Mendel Amark, my father, used to be the emperor. His power was charisma and because of this, he won the hearts of the

people. According to my father's loyal supporters, the empire flourished when he was still the ruler. It led him to believe that he had everything in control. But my father was not without his faults.

"Bring him in," Northsam said.

The man who was standing beside him nodded slightly and in a booming voice announced, "The emperor wishes to speak to McWindStorm Arren, a grape-picker's son and a storm-crafter."

About a dozen soldiers moved forward and when they were about three yards away from Northsam, they parted in the middle, leaving a tall man standing before the emperor.

I was sitting beside my father as my gaze fell upon a man whose hair was the color of the storm clouds. His eyes were slanted, frightening me, but nonetheless, he's good-looking in a rugged kind of way. I could tell that some moon-turns separated us by looking at the hardness that was sculpted in his face. As though he had seen battles and worn them out.

The man prostrated in front of us.

"Highest, I am humbled to be afforded this audience," he said in a cold voice.

Northsam moved forward in his seat. "Rise, child," he said.

Wind rose, but his head remained bowed and he did not raise his eyes toward us.

Northsam was pleased because Wind knew the protocol. It used to be that no one who was not invited to meet an emperor's eyes expressly could do so. Times had changed, but Wind waited for the permission and for that Northsam was delighted.

"Open your mouth only when you know the traditions," Northsam's advisor said.

Wind still had his head bowed. He put his hands on his chest, right hand over the left and began to speak.

"Highest, I am here to submit myself to your eternal rule. To serve



the land. To use my power only for Akea's greatness. And in this premise, to nominate myself as a worthy candidate to the Princess's hand in marriage."

My heart thumped inside my chest. I knew that this was the reason he had come to the palace. At sixteen moon-turns, I was already of marrying age. And my father had made an announcement all over the land that he was seeking a son-consort. Over the past months, men came and presented themselves to my father and me.

"What makes McWindStorm Arren believe himself worthy?"

"A man is not fully a man without being of service to a woman. My heart, although still innocent from the love of a woman, offers itself to the Princess."

"And what of your power?" Northsam asked.

"With deep regret, my power shall be offered only to the emperor and to the land. My power is not mine and it will not be surrendered even to a Princess most worthy."

Northsam's eyes lit up. Wind knew his words, and by far, he seemed to know how to win my father's approving nod.

Northsam stood up and held out his hand to me. I was confused but I did as I was instructed to do.

"Come, my child," he told me. I stood up and walked beside my father.

"McWindStorm Arren, raise your eyes and meet mine. For now, I shall present you to my daughter."

The palace's receiving area went still and nobody dared to react. Everybody was watching curiously. This was the only time that an heir to the throne was a woman and because of that, the ceremony was new to them. Always, for hundreds of moon-turns, the heir was a man and he'd always claimed a lady in marriage.

But this time around, a man was sought for me.

Wind slowly raised his eyes. They were solemn and gray. When his

eyes met my father's, there was a trace of deference. But when he looked my way, there was a slight change in his eyes that even when I was still young and knew nothing about empires and rulers, and how to rule a land, I believed I saw in Wind's a claiming over me. A vow that he would make me his.

A chill ran down my spine and I clutched my father's hand tighter.

"Father," I gasped.

Northsam looked at me and smiled. He touched my face, "Fear not, my joy. He is only a man."

My lips were still trembling when I looked back at Wind. This time, he had his eyes back to the floor, waiting for the next part of the ceremony that would make him my betrothed.

When the ceremony was over, I tailed after my father to his room. I caught him as he was drinking wine.

"Ah, my dear Princess wants a word with me," he chuckled. I could sense that he was beaming.

"Father, why did you immediately give him your blessing?" I asked.

Northsam sat on his chair that was gilded with diamonds and rubies.

"He is a good man."

My eyes widened. "But you don't even know him!" I protested.

He laughed.

"What makes you think that I, the emperor, don't know him?" He sipped on his goblet. His eyes were peering curiously at me over the rim.

"He only came to you now —"

He nodded. "I see. There are things that maybe, you should know by now," he paused, considering. "You are of age. One day, you'll be sitting in this place that I occupy. It's time I tell you about the world."

I listened, confused with my father's words.

"An emperor doesn't make a decision on impulse. Except maybe in war. But all else, everything, is thought of. Even before I make the

announcement over the land, I had all the profiles of citizens checked out. Wind was a good contender although I didn't know he would actually want to claim a place in the palace. I have seen him rise. He has worked in service to the land for a long time, and his power — ah! It will bring Akea to even greater heights.”

I watched my father silently.

“Will you pour me wine, child?”

I stood up and took the cask of wine. Then I carefully refilled his goblet.

“My power is passive. Charm. Who would ever think that it's good enough for an emperor? Perhaps it would be better on a War General to rouse the soldiers to fight. But to rule an empire? It is lacking. Sometimes, I feel that my power falls short. You won't understand it because your power is so — magnificent.

“Wind's was like your great grandfather's. And if the history tells us the truth, when my time passes and rule transfers to you and your betrothed, Akea will attain its zenith once more.”

“I don't understand —”

Northsam shook his head. “I know what's best for you, my Princess.” He looked at me with kindly eyes and I knew he wouldn't tell me anything more.

After a while he said, “If you were the dutiful Princess I believed you to be, what would you do if your emperor asks of you something?”

I choked. Because not answering the question in the way proprieties dictated would render me rude. Even the Princess was not excused from showing meekness in front of the emperor regardless if he was her father.

“Heed, father,” I whispered.

Northsam nodded, satisfied with my answer. He didn't say a word anymore. I kissed him on his hand and left.

\*\*\*

“Mom?” Kino asked.

I realized that he was already sitting beside me and was looking at me concernedly.

“What are you thinking about? You didn’t even finish the story,” he complained.

I smiled at him to make him think that I was okay.

“I have a lot of things inside my head,” I said.

“I know that.”

A carriage pulled in front of our cabin. Two horses were drawing it.

“I should be leaving now,” I said. “The emperor is waiting for me.”

“Can I come?” Kino asked.

“Not today,” I said. I don’t want my son to set foot in the palace. It would be too painful for me to see him treated by the soldiers and servants in the palace as though he was nobody important. He should have been the heir to the empire; and it twists my heart to know that he will not be able to lay claim over the land.

“But maybe someday?” he pushed.

I smiled weakly. “Of course. Someday’s a good day.” I kissed him on the top of his head before I stood up. It took me only a few minutes to grab the scroll and freshen up before riding the carriage. Once more, I would meet with my former husband and I found no excitement in that.

## Chapter 2 –Lamare Amark

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While the carriage slowly took off, I watched through its window my son's figure that became smaller as the carriage's wheels turned. Each creak of the wheel was like the thud in my chest that made me queasy. I don't want to meet with Wind. Not ever again.

But it was something I have to endure for as long as I live.

I yawned because I slept only a few hours as I had to get up early to finish the scrolls. I tried to control myself from falling asleep because lately, nightmares come to me.

I tried to shun the memories, but they always came. And when they do, I crumble even though I had been trained to become a strong ruler. My vision fogged as I remembered baring my power to Wind. If I could only turn back time I would have been more careful about revealing it.

\*\*\*

The betrothal was announced over the land and for several months, orange and blue ribbons were tied to trees that lined the palace's sidewalks. Each day, a ribbon would be removed from a tree. It was a sign that the day of the wedding was getting closer and closer.

When the last of the ribbons was removed, I wore my best dress and rode a high chair carried by a dozen naked men. Curtains were draped all over the sedan chair's posts to cover me, and once I was in front of Wind, he stood up, knelt in front of me and kissed my hands.

"I pledge myself to the Most High Princess of Akea, to be her loving consort. That I would protect thee. That her life would come before

mine.”

Trumpets blared and we were wed as simply as that.

For Wind though, it didn't stop there. He had to prove himself worthier than ever.

Wind, as the future empress's consort, was expected to travel all over Akea; and he had to do it in a fortnight. If he could return in this short time, not even the emperor himself could question his place as my consort.

Once he returned from his conquest, he would show the proof by revealing in his body the tattoos that were marked by the lords of each land, each one a graphic symbol of the province's emblem.

The citizens gathered in the Royal Hall and awaited his return after fourteen days. As the golden bell beside our land's flag tolled, we saw Wind riding a sea of clouds, like a god with his ashen hair, and his lean, bronze body naked and covered only with dark tattoos of the fourteen provinces' emblems that made up Akea.

On his right shoulder were the rising stars of Lacay islands and opposite were the horsemen in flight of Ameres. Trailing down his right arm was the double-edged sword of Bulacnin. His body was a map of all the insignias in our land; the tattoos were the seals that bound the provinces to the empress's consort.

Wind stepped down from the clouds and the citizens who witnessed the event pulled their shawls tighter because it had gotten unmistakably misty and cold. The court servant approached him, bowed down before him, and dressed him in red robes.

My father stood proudly, his face beaming. I could tell what he was thinking — that Wind would make the people bow to him, and there would be assurance that the Amark bloodline would never perish.

Wind never even looked at me. He went straight to my father, knelt in front of him, and kissed his hands. In return, my father took the jar of grape seed oil beside him and poured some over Wind's head.

“By this you are family, you are who you will become, you are Akea,” he had said, anointing him.

Wind stood and Northsam embraced him. Even with the welcoming gesture, Wind’s arms remained hanging limply to his sides, not returning the embrace. My gut tightened, the old fear strengthened, and I almost summoned the gods to make me disappear. At that moment of confusion and fear, Wind looked at me and smiled. And just like that, my worries vanished. I was completely taken by him.

Until then, I had forgotten that taking in the family a consort would render him a gift from the emperor. That the emperor would pass on part of his power to him, to assure the people that his blessing was unconditional. And Wind’s smile that instantly drew me to him proved that he had gained part of Northsam’s power. I was charmed.

Wind fixed his gaze on me as he moved to where I was standing. Right in front of me, I looked up at the man I would only call my husband starting that day. My lips parted as I waited for him to claim me. He kissed me and the crowd erupted in cheers.

Akea celebrated for a month, a period which everybody knew would be dedicated to conceiving. An heir was expected.

Wind and I spent our first days travelling across the land. Instead of staying in one of the empire’s estates, we settled in common rooms because Wind wanted me to experience the life that he lived before we came to be. He took me riding clouds and showed me how to make water out of them. Of course, I could only try because my power was not like his. With each new trick that he showed me, I giggled like a schoolgirl, amused by the man who would soon hold Akea in his hands with me.

I knew that I was envied by all the women in our land and sometimes, when women approached him and knelt before him, or called him “My Lord,” a burning sensation would start inside my heart. I would lock myself inside a room and cry, jealous of the attention the

women were giving him. He's mine and no other's; my initial thoughts about him being evil was entirely wiped out of my head. He knew the world from beyond the outskirts of the palace, and he made me appreciate the beauty of living even more.

Our month together was about to end. The empire expected us to be back in the palace in a few days, but I wasn't sure if he had made me pregnant and if an heir would soon be presented all over the land. I had not been nauseated nor did I have mood swings, which I heard were common with pregnant women. I was nervous, but he told me that there was no reason to feel that way because I was still young and had all the time in the world to bear an heir.

It was the day before we headed back to the palace in Kanela, Akea's capital. We were out in the middle of a brook, hidden by mountains. We had been kissing when suddenly, he broke it.

He looked at me intently and asked, "What's your power?"

"It's something strange. I don't really like to talk about it," I said. My father forbade me not to share my power with anyone because it was — different — in a good and scary way because if I would will it, I could make Akea mine. Not that I had to; as the Princess, I was Second to the Throne.

"I'm sure I won't find it appalling." His lips curved in a smile. I should have sensed that him being charming was his way to draw the secret out of me.

Everyone in Akea has powers, but before anyone can fully harness his or her gift, a presentation to the emperor had to be made, acceptance by the emperor consummated, and listing of the name made in the Akean books. These acts were the very essence of gaining citizenship in the land. Otherwise, an Akean would just be an *unborn*, a *lost one*, or a *free farer* as some rebels liked to brand themselves.

For Royalty like me, the declaration and presentation of power need not be done. Being Royalty meant service to the people and in



exchange for this lifetime commitment, the non-declaration of one's power was among our privileges. Regardless, it was still a choice if we'd like to share what our power was with anyone.

I shook my head, smiling. I was giddy over my husband's charms and yet unsure if I could trust him with my power.

"It wouldn't interest you, dear husband."

"Try me." His silvery eyes were piercing and eager. I didn't know how I could resist him. When I still didn't answer, he turned his back to me and walked away, the water rippled as he glided.

I was an idiot to act out on impulse. I couldn't have my husband leaving me like that. I would do anything to keep him beside me because he had taken me captive with his strength, power, and beautiful face.

"Writing," I shouted.

He stopped and looked at me.

"Whatever I write could happen should I so desire it," I said.

His eyebrows shot up. He didn't believe me. I thrust a finger up in the air and wrote "*Come back to me.*"

As I did, the words glowed like wildfires against the air. For a few seconds, they remained in air, then the words faded, leaving wisps of smoke as they vanished. Even I get amazed at how spectacular my power was when in display. I could write on anything — paper, rock, metal. Even on water.

I didn't have to look his way to know he was walking slowly toward me because the soft ripples of the water told me that he had. When he was right in front of me, he touched my chin, and I looked up at his face. He had a smile on but it didn't quite reach his eyes. He kissed me as though it was to seal his success in drawing from me a secret, but my body didn't respond to his touch in the way a wife's would to her husband. I shivered and I was scared, but I hid my emotions from him.

My last thought on that day was that my father had been right.

That was almost fourteen turnings of the moons ago, but I still look back to that time and consider myself accountable for what happened to Akea.

Guilt is all that's enveloping me now. My life as a Royal Scribe is remarkably different from my life as a Princess a long time ago.

The carriage will take me to the palace, which used to be my home, but now, it felt like a forsaken dungeon — one so vast that it holds my boy, Kino, the rest of Akeans, and I under the rule of an evil emperor. With my father gone, I have no ally to bring Akea back to its former glory — back to what it meant long ago to all of us Akeans — freedom.

I looked down and found the scroll lying on my lap. I held it tightly because it was the only ticket to life that Kino and I have.

## Chapter 3 – Kino Amark

---

I walked all the way to the Akean trading market carrying with me a basket full of wild berries. Instead of running swiftly like the other boys in Akea do, I'm left with walking or sometimes running a few hundred yards before exhaustion bogs me down.

The feeling that I don't belong shouts at me. Unlike everybody else in Akea, I have no power. This makes me the subject of my classmates' taunts — unborn — the tag stings!

When I was younger, I didn't care because my mother, Lamare, would spend her entire day with me while she wrote on scrolls that she brought to the palace for the emperor. Every time she finished, she would teach me how to read and write, and take me to the fields where she would tell amusing stories about invisible people. She would also teach me how to climb trees. On other occasions, we would spend the entire afternoon swimming in brooks.

But that time has long passed. I'm now envious of the other boys my age that would not have any difficulty carrying a basket full of their farms' produce to wherever they want. When a cloud of dust would suddenly appear by my side because a boy younger than I was running past, my heart would twist leaving a gash of hurt that not even my mother's warm embrace could cure.

My mother told me that my ability would manifest when I get older, but it wasn't true. Kids younger than I am have displayed powers all around me. At twelve moon-turns, I should have been blessed already with a power. We even have a class in school to prepare us for

presentation to the palace. It sucks because I can't relate to the professor's lecture. My classmates, on the other hand, hang onto the professor's every word. They were wrapped in excitement over the turning of the moons because the event would culminate in the declaration of their citizenship. The right to be called an Akean.

I decided that I wouldn't go to the palace again to join the Akean Wine Festival, the celebration of the full turning of the moons, the same event where citizens gather in Kanelan Palace for a week-long merriment. The highlight will be the presentation of the children's powers to the emperor so that they can be ordained citizens of Akea.

Randall, my classmate can read a book with its cover closed. It's like his eyes can drill through the pages of the book. Nicola, my neighbor, can plant a seed, tend it, and make a shoot sprout in seconds. Dorothy can find water during drought.

But me, nothing. Without any power, it looks as if the only time I'll ever set foot in the palace again will be to deliver crops to the kitchens.

It isn't easy, especially since my mother told me that I'm Northsam's, the former emperor's, grandson. I didn't believe her. If I were who she told me I was, then why weren't we living in the palace like Royalty were supposed to? And why didn't any other citizen regard us as such? My mother tried too hard to make me feel better to the point that she had to lie. But I listened to her stories because they took me to a different place in Akea. One where my mother and I lived a whole lot better than how we actually fare; and sometimes when you've got nothing of much value, dreams were all that's left.

I counted the wild berries in my basket before I handed them to a dark-skinned man, who looked old enough to be my grandfather. Beads of sweat covered his forehead. The old man put twenty-five coins on my palm.

"Here you go, boy," he said.

I looked at the coins, surprised but grateful. They were enough to

buy us bread for two days. “Thanks,” I said.

I walked away before one of my classmates spots me lingering in the market. I didn’t like it that they show off what they can do to me just because they can — it makes the tag *unborn* stick — like a fruit fly dancing around a rotten berry.

To make matters worse, Lamare has no power to blow wind to punch the bullies chasing me, or to make the ground rumble underneath them, or to make her words loud enough so that she could shout at all of them.

I walked faster, hiding behind the large boxes of garments and crates of fruits and vegetables in the market. It’s only a few more yards before I’m out of the market and back in the entry point of the forest to go home.

Finally, I located the two gigantic trees which were about two hundred meters high with leaves that never fall off even during fall. They mark the entry to the forest that led to Wawang, my village. Since these trees were so huge, not even a dozen grown men holding each other’s hands could fully wrap their arms around these trees, and because they were easy to spot, they served as the villagers’ landmark to the trading market.

I ran toward them, avoiding the paved roads, so that my shoes wouldn’t make much noise. I breathed in relief as soon as I found myself standing underneath the shade.

“There he is,” someone shouted behind me.

“I told you today’s his market day, or else they’ll starve,” another one said.

Those voices belonged to Conrad Eros and Lima Gotti, the ones who have been bullying me since forever.

I ran even though the effort was futile. In a few seconds, they would be able to catch up on me. I was straining my ears, listening to their footsteps, but surprisingly my lone strides were all I heard.

Suddenly, the land trembled and erupted exactly where I was about to step and I fell. My face hit the ground first. That was new. I didn't know one of them could do that.

I stood up with bent knees and feet spread several paces apart, ready to fight Conrad and Lima. There was something wet in the corner of my mouth and I tasted blood. Dust covered the front of my shirt and the coins were scattered all around me.

Conrad and Lima were beside me in a few seconds. "That's nice, Lima," Conrad said.

"I told you I'd show you something new," Lima said and grinned wickedly.

I was waiting for the punch to hit my stomach, but none came.

"No need to grimace, Kino. Call it a day," Lima said. Then he turned to Conrad and laughed, leaving me standing, staring after their figures.

One day, I'll show them. I'll stop being bullied.

I wiped the blood from my mouth and took extra care not to spill some on my shirt. I don't want Lamare to worry. I looked at my shirt and shook off the dust that had gathered.

The coins glittered under the sun, which made it easy for me to spot them, but when I counted, to my dismay, I only found eighteen. I moved over to the bushes, maybe some rolled over there, and I was able to pick up two more. With only five coins missing, I decided to head on home.

I looked down in front of me and saw a familiar set of footprints on the ground, smaller than mine, with no specific markings to the soles. These footsteps, I think, belong to the ghosts of Nivaton. I shivered.

There are stories about Nivaton — apart from those Lamare told me about — that the place is filled with ghosts, and I'm terrified even just hearing about them. Weirdly though, I see the same set of footsteps wherever I go and it freaks me out. I didn't tell Lamare because I

didn't want her to worry. Do these footsteps belong to Pyper, the ghost I had the misfortune of meeting once?

I have no power, and if ever she or another ghost appears in front of me, the best I can do is run. That — or cry shamelessly and beg the ghost not to hurt me.

## Chapter 4 – Pyper San Diego

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**I**t's different here in the mainland of Akea as opposed to Nivaton.

For one, the people are busy especially in the trading market. Also, all types of produce may be found here, which was pretty neat because from where I came from, Nivaton, food source was minimal and variety was not a privilege.

A stall of green apples was right in front of me and I grinned. My favorite. I took one and bit on it, tasting the sour and sweet combination of the juice and revelling in the crunchy fruit.

“Hey!” the peddler shouted. Then his voice thinned in fear. “A ghost!”

Other peddlers glanced his way and some of the passers-by gasped, pointing to the apple that I was holding.

Everybody was looking at the apple with wide eyes. Oh no, my father will scold me if he learns about this incident. I made the apple invisible too, and the spectators' mouths opened at the same time. It's so funny that I was tempted to make the apple reappear and turn it invisible again, but I didn't do it anymore.

Grinning wider, I moved away from them, careful not to bump against anyone otherwise my identity would be revealed.

I saw the boy Kino — that's his name — if I remembered correctly. This time, he's running away from two other boys who looked to be the same age as he. I followed him. I took one last bite of the apple before letting its core roll down the ground.

The two boys chased him down, and I covered my mouth to silence a



moan as I watched them trip Kino with the earth's sudden eruption. When Kino fell down, my heart went out to him and from where I was hiding, I almost ran toward him to help.

But my actions were limited. All I could do was feel part of his sadness, anger, and frustration. As he picked up the coins, he didn't retrieve them all, and I was the culprit. Did this make me a terrible person? I hoped not. The coins were so pretty lying on the ground, shining and reflecting the sunlight that I was tempted to pick out a few and keep them for myself.

When Kino was facing the other boys, I thought that they would clobber him just like the other days so I silently crept beside Kino. But to my surprise, the bullies left without even touching Kino. True, the ground that threw him off was harsh, but at least the bullies did not punch him anymore.

Nivaton is a valley surrounded by four mountains. Mt. Senan is to its east, Mt. Anale is to its south, Mt. Golli to its north, and Mt. Ricuss to its west.

The trees in our province are old and our people care for them because each tree can hold a tree house. The width of a tree is usually about three-to-five grown men wrapping their arms around the trunk allowing us to build our houses on top.

According to our Elders, when Northsam still ruled Akea, Nivaton was one of its fourteen provinces. There's Ameres, Derella, Minnowin, Lacay Islands — and some others that I could no longer recall. What struck me as weird was that no Akean ever discovered what our powers were. I kept on asking my father why and he refused to answer until one time, perhaps he got tired of my incessant questioning that he finally relented.

He told me, "Pyper, it's an agreement between the oldest bloods — between the emperor and the Elders of Nivaton, now, go and play with your cousins." While I didn't understand his explanation, at least he

answered my question.

Nivans have the same power, invisibility. On the other hand, Akeans have different abilities. Each one is unique. Well, sometimes a few of them share the same power too, but that seldom happens.

The Elders said that when Emperor McWindStorm ravaged Akea, he went to our town and was greeted by its silence because everybody hid in their houses out of fear. He took the Nivans' silence for hostility so he summoned storms to ravish Nivaton. There was severe flooding and he thought Nivans died. He left with his throng, declaring Nivaton dead. But he couldn't be more wrong.

The tree houses that Nivans built sheltered them from the flood. The population decreased, true. Some unlucky ones, who were out gathering food died, but most Nivans survived. To prevent any further attack from the emperor, they concealed themselves, embracing their heritage; and they were cloaked with invisibility since then.

After the flood, Nivans gathered the dead and placed the bodies at the center of the village. Then they uttered prayers and burned the bodies.

The smoke couldn't be concealed, and Nivans overlooked that part. All they wanted was to give back the dead Nivans to mother Akea, honoring them as they died. They forgot that the smoke would rise higher than the mountains. The palace soldiers saw the smoke and took it as a beacon that the town survived and in a span of minutes, the province was once again filled with Palace Soldiers.

McWindStorm brought soldiers by letting them ride the clouds with him. The others, who came an hour after, were riding horses. Others still came on foot, but they still managed to get to Nivaton in a short time.

The Akeans didn't see Nivans because they turned invisible and hid in their tree houses, waiting for the Palace Soldiers to leave.

When McWindStorm saw what was causing the smoke, maybe he

felt compassion inside his evil chest because he struck lightning toward the piles of bodies until nothing was left but skulls and bones. The flesh was all burnt, leaving just ash.

Since then Akeans called Nivaton the Ghost Town, and nobody from the province argued. They saw the power of the emperor and didn't want to rouse his suspicion about Nivans' presence. Because of that unfortunate event, Nivans rarely became visible anymore, even if there were no outlanders in the province. As moon-turns came and went, they noticed that their skins had gone gray. The change in skin color could only be attributed to hiding from the sun.

Many moon-turns later, I was born and this was the Nivaton that welcomed me — the infamous Ghost Town.

I may be young and to my ears, the stories sounded like mere myths, but I believed all of them. That's why carrying Kino's coins, five of them to be exact, felt like I committed a heinous crime. One so shameful that wouldn't be pardoned by our Elders. Going outside Nivaton was frowned upon. It could make Akeans suspicious of our existence, and we no longer wanted that.

But Kino — he's just a boy and I feel sorry for him. I'm also young, I bet he is about my age, give or take one or two moon-turns, and I can't do anything to help him no matter how much I may want to.

I didn't feel warmly toward Kino at first because I was brought up by my parents to hate all Akeans, and after the story that I just shared, who wouldn't, right? To me, Akeans are heartless, ruthless, and in all ways, evil. I even remembered this one time when I drew pictures of them and put horns and tails on their human forms. That's how much I despised them. Until that first time I got the courage to climb down Mt. Riccus, explored the other side of the world, and met Kino.

It was morning and fog still covered the mountains. I made myself visible for a while, and my gray skin showed. It's ugly, but it was something I had to live with. Mother said that the longer we make

ourselves invisible, the paler our skin will become. So as moon-turns went by, I got grayer. Whenever I caught sight of myself in mirrors, it's hard to disagree with them who branded us ghosts because indeed, we looked the part. Running in the mountains, blending with the forests, turning invisible and then showing ourselves, I think we can even fool ourselves into believing we are actually ghosts.

When I was almost at the bottom of the mountain, I cloaked myself in invisibility. The rocks were slippery against my sandals, and I fell, lost control of invisibility, and passed out.

The cold water woke me up and I stared into worried eyes the color of a newly-sprouting leaf. They belonged to Kino.

"You've been out for an hour," he said. He rummaged in his rucksack and after finding a tube of ointment, he moved toward me. He squeezed it and cream oozed out. He dabbed generously on my left arm.

When his fingers touched me, he tensed. Perhaps he was thinking that my gray skin would be cold, but then as he continued rubbing cream against my arm, he relaxed.

I was scared that he's so close to me. He was an Akean and I didn't know what could be going on inside his crazy, evil head.

*Rule number one – Make people believe you are a ghost.*

*Rule number two – Never ever speak.* For how can ghosts speak?

These are a few of the Nivan Tenets. Anybody caught breaking them would face flogging in our town hall, or being locked up in our town dungeons.

"What's your name?" Kino asked.

I just stared at him and let him tend to my wound.

"Why are you so gray?"

I didn't speak, but since I was hurt, I let him tend to me.

He brushed curly, blond hair away from my face and I flinched. He laughed softly. "It's okay," he said.

When I still didn't speak he said, "I'm Kino. I usually pass by here when I go to the public market to trade." He was, perhaps, trying to urge me to talk to him.

Not that I didn't want to — it just didn't feel right. So I sat long enough to wait for him to finish. I tried to feel my feet and they were okay. When there was no more blood and instead, a good coating of the cream covered my arm, I stood up and ran away from him.

"Hey," he shouted after me. "What's your name? Where are you from?"

I looked back, wondering if I should give him my name. It seemed wrong. But his eyes were so innocent — I didn't think he would do me any harm.

"Pyper," I said. Then I made myself invisible.

I watched as his face paled, horror painting his pretty face as realization dawned on him that he tended to a ghost.

I walked slowly so as not to make any noise. I needed to make my escape as quietly as possible. Any twigs breaking or leaves crushing under my feet could make him doubt that I was a ghost.

I thought that was the only time I would break a Nivan rule, but I was wrong.

When I was higher in the mountains, I sat on a patch of green grass, careful not show myself unconsciously, and watched Kino as he picked his rucksack. He looked once more to the spot where I vanished and then he walked away. Slowly at first. Then he sprinted as though a sense of fear overcame him.

## Chapter 5 - Lamare Amark

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Inside the carriage, my head almost bumped alternately against the ceiling and walls. The journey was made rough by unpaved streets and rocks littering the roads, making traveling a pain. I looked out the window and saw the damaged roads. It used to be better than this, but when Wind became suspicious of plots that could take the empire from him, he started scheming. He made me write on the scroll countless disasters to strike Akea, and these — the destroyed roads — held witness to each catastrophe.

When Wind took the empire, he had wanted nothing but power. Akea is slowly dying, its citizens barely keeping up with the disaster he brings. And today, storm clouds have gathered in the east. It seems like Wind is not in one of his better moods again.

Until now, I still want to claim Akea. Although no one remembered who I used to be, I felt that being of Royal blood — of Northsam's blood — it is my responsibility to do something about the land. But my friends were long gone. The supporters of our family were defeated openly in battle if not killed in a plot.

When terror rose in the chests of the people Wind dealt with, he charmed them, making them lose their ground, and when they were caught off guard, Wind would swoop in, pass current through the wine a lord was drinking, or push one down the palace by a fistful of wind that for no reason blew at such an inopportune time. When all our family's allies had started to be wiped out of the map, my suspicion grew. My father might have hinted it. Only, Wind was cunning.

Out of the fourteen lords that rule Akea, all were dead in a span of months. Seven were travelling to the palace to join the Akean Wine festival. It was an annual event, and everybody was invited to celebrate in the palace. Farmers, traders, wagon-drivers, fishermen, child-caretaker. Mothers, fathers, children. Sometimes, the festival started with contests of who had grown the biggest grapes. This was followed by a showcase of how wine was made.

Baskets of grapes would be placed inside a large wooden basin that everyone referred to as the “pool.” From here, women would enter the pool and dance all throughout the celebration. They served as entertainment for all of Akea to see. But that wasn’t all.

The Wine festival is also where each kid of a certain age will be presented to the emperor for the display of his or her power. In the center of the palace grounds, a kid would tame a bull with a snap of his fingers. A flower would bloom by an innocent child’s touch. The other powers were simple, like jumping really, really high. There was a young boy I witnessed who can talk very loudly that when he’s done presenting his power, my father laughed and teased him.

“This boy has a future here in the palace as the town crier.” And the audience laughed.

After the presentation of the kids, they would register their names in the palace registry, which contained all the names of everyone who ever lived in Akea that were ordained citizenship. The display of power was what made them truly Akeans, while the chronicling of their names only came as ministerial.

By the time the festivity was over, the ladies dancing in the pool would come out, looking like goddesses in their wet white clothes, which had turned purple during all the dancing. And there, we would see the grape extract, a liquid of purple haze.

Everybody gathered around the pool, and from where we stood, the ceremony would begin.

Northsam would instruct the servants to remove whatever residue that still remained in the pool, and once only the liquid was left, he would start with:

“The moons have completed their turns; Akeans have once again been claimed. With a new set of extraordinary blood, Akea can’t bleed. Time turns, challenges will be brought upon the land...”

As he uttered those words, Northsam would begin working on the pool, his arms outstretched, turning in circular motions, directed at the pool.

“We are Akea. Flesh and blood. We are different, and we are guided.”

At this point, the parents of the children who had presented themselves would bring their children around the pool.

“By registering your names in the Book, you vow to serve, to use power to no ill will, and to transform —”

As Northsam repeated the litany of the emperors who ruled Akea before him, he would lift his hands in the air, and thrust them toward the pool, and watch as the purple liquid turned red and into maroon as though the liquid had aged so soon.

Even after watching the aging of wine for so many moon-turns, the act still brought goose bumps to my skin. It is the vow that makes up the citizens, and the citizens that make up the land extraordinary, and the extraordinary that makes up Akea.

“And use power to harness only what’s best for the land. Like the grapes that are now wine, so have you aged.” He would look at all the kids gathered around. “You are Akeans.”

From that point, servants would move forward carrying goblets. They would dip them in the pool to get wine and pass it onto the children who presented.

After all had drunk, Northsam would continue with, “And now, for the rest of Akeans, the wine is ours to share.”



Cheers would erupt, music would blare, and the celebration would last for as long as there was still wine to consume — usually for an entire week.

It was in this event that seven of the lords did not make it to.

The lords were traveling to the palace, each coming from their provinces with guards escorting them. But two days into the festival, there was still no word of their whereabouts. The palace alerted the War Generals, and a search party was formed and deployed all over Akea.

The lords were found, but not in the state we wanted.

I rode with Wind to get to the spot immediately while my father travelled riding his horse. Throngs of soldiers followed us. When we reached the spot, I was horrified. From up above, I was greeted with the tangles of roots that shot up in the air. The trees' leaves were to the ground, branches and trunks smashed against the men's bodies. A mess of dried blood covered the ground while putrid scent hovered in the air.

I saw Northsam climbed down his horse and ran to where the bodies lay. "Tree runners," he said in agony.

Tree runners were those who have the power to talk to trees. They had kinship with them, and because of that, they were the only ones allowed to fell a tree.

In my head, I couldn't believe that Tree Runners would do all these. Why? What good would it serve them? The trees were their lives, the sources of their everything. They wouldn't waste a considerable number of trees to kill citizens... They were not murderers.

All around, the grounds were littered by holes evidencing the brutality that was committed as trees were forcibly removed. As I surveyed from above, I realized that something was odd, but I couldn't quite put a finger to it. Then it came to me.

The leaves that used to display various hues of meadow looked dried.

Only when I squinted did I realize that they weren't, but dusts made the leaves appear brittle and dying.

I knew it wasn't the Tree runners. I removed my hands holding my husband's waist and glanced at his face. He was calm, his face devoid of emotions.

Was this beautiful man accountable for our allies' deaths?

Wind wisely plotted it out. He had stirred suspicions when two of our lords died. One was through the use of lightning, the other pushed by air. So this time, he used trees. To those who took one look at the scene, it would seem as if it were the Tree Runners. But with the way the trees had been callously pulled out, with dusts covering the scene, it could only be air that had done that. But I kept my mouth shut because there was no proof to my suspicion.

The Tree Runners were banished from Akea mainland, and they were sent to Sonista where they hid, unable to roam Akea. Father and Wind agreed that it was a fitting punishment — not to take the Tree Runners' lives, but to make them suffer for as long as they live by secluding them, untouched by the outside world.

Nine allies dead and five remaining. How long before all of them are gone? And how long before Northsam follows? And me, how would I fare in Wind's game?

The deaths ended for a few months.

I couldn't face my husband, and I had been terrified of him and of what he could do since then. I couldn't tell my father what I believed happened even when the time came that my conscience wouldn't let me sleep in guilt anymore because Wind was always beside him, learning the craft of leadership or — guarding my father from me. I didn't know which.

I learned to love solitude, and I would ride my horse, Heeler, alone in the woods to escape from my guilt and hide from my fears. In one of those journeys, I met a Nivan.

His name was Timbukte Lassis.

I had been travelling hard since I left the palace early in the morning, and my skin scorched under the heat of the sun. I didn't realize that I wandered away from my usual route. Instead, I found myself following a pathway under a canopy of trees. When I reached its end, there was nothing left to be explored; huge trees blocked the view. I turned away and was about to start galloping back again to the palace when from behind the trees, a flock of birds flew. I stared at the trees blocking the path. They were hundreds of meters high making it difficult for me to see what could be hidden behind them. They stood intimidating me, and I would have turned if I had not heard the soft flow of water from behind them. I pulled at Heeler and urged my horse to move forward until the trees that blocked the view took us in and I found myself facing a pathway — to where — I didn't know. I juggled my memory, remembering images of Akea's map, but I didn't recall any mention of this path. Out of curiosity, I pushed forward until at dusk, I was greeted by Nivaton. I stared, amazed at the place.

How the professors described Nivaton was an understatement. Trees as high as fifty meters littered the place and they held in their wide trunks the tree houses. The tree houses were big and I marvelled at how they were built. There were pathways and bridges connecting one tree to another. Below, there was a span of hundreds of miles of clearing, which I could only surmise was where events were held. Sort of like a town plaza. Mountains surrounded Nivaton.

Where could the people be? The Nivans — it would be such a pleasure to meet them finally. As a Princess, I wasn't allowed to stray far from the palace without any soldiers trotting at my heels, and the success of discovering this place on my own was overwhelming.

I didn't know how light could touch this place with everything in it so humongous, but surprisingly, the place was well lit, foliage was excellent, and the breeze that cut through the trees was calming.

I took Heeler near a stump and knotted the ropes to keep her there. I looked up and was surprised to see that nothing stirred in the houses. There seemed to be no form of human life. I continued walking, searching for something. It felt eerily cold. And suddenly, I got scared. I looked back and saw a pair of footsteps trailing after mine. They were big, and I could only conclude that whoever — or whatever was trailing me could knock me down so very easily. I ran away, pulling my skirt up until in my rush, I fell, my knees scraping on the ground. I watched in horror as the pair of footsteps moved closer and stopped right in front of me.

A body started to form out of thin air and I found myself staring into green eyes. His hair was black and long and his jaw was wide. He seemed to be reading my thoughts.

“Boo,” he said and smiled.

I screamed and managed to throw pebbles his way, which were the only ones I could grasp from the ground.

He laughed loudly and moved toward me, holding out his hand.

“I’m Timbukte. Timbukte Lassis.” He winked as he held out his hand to me. I hesitated before taking it. In an easy movement, he hoisted me up my feet.

“Those knee abrasions —”

“Don’t touch me!”

He laughed. I ran all the way back to Heeler and quickly untied the knots. I braced myself and rode her. I was about to trot away when I found Timbukte staring at me.

“It will be dark soon. Let me take you back to the mainland.” He said it kindly, yet insistently.

I looked around, and he was telling the truth. The moons still reflected some light from the sun. The trail back to the secret passage that I found earlier could be difficult for me to retrace without illumination, which meant that I would have to go back by climbing Mt.

Ricuss and using the entry point in Akea Trading market.

Neither option seemed appealing.

“How will I know I can trust you?” I asked.

From the tree houses, light started to spread. I looked up and saw images of their residents starting to form. Like the lights that shone, the Nivans started appearing like magic. It struck me — invisibility. What a rare power. And something they all shared. That was unheard of in mainland Akea where everybody possessed a power that was almost-always different from the rest of the population. But here, it’s like they were fruits coming from the same tree.

Inside my head, I laughed at my own choice of metaphor because indeed, Nivans were hanging from the trees.

I was taken by the place, by its people. My mouth still hung open in awe.

“You can trust our Head Hunter,” a motherly figure from one of the tree houses said.

I looked at Timbukte who raised his eyebrows at the woman who spoke.

“Head Hunter, she found the secret passage — it is by tradition that whoever finds it on her own has the right to Nivan knowledge. You may ask her to stay.”

I didn’t understand what she meant. Confused, I looked back at Timbukte.

“Please stay as it will be dark soon.”

Before I could speak, Timbukte walked toward me and in one fluid motion, he had taken my waist and pulled me down from Heeler.

“Come. That’s my house over there,” he said as he pointed to a house four trees away.

“Can you climb?”

I’d never done it before; all I was ever good at was riding horses. I shook my head.

“Not to worry.” Then he pulled a knot of ropes from overhead and when he was done loosening some of the knots, I saw a ladder hanging in front of us.

“After you,” he said.

I was wearing a skirt and I didn’t want to climb and expose myself to him — I blushed.

As if reading my mind, he quickly added, “I’ll climb ahead and watch out for you.” Then he did, blending in the tree as if they were one.

I followed. In every step I took, he would stop by opposite me, watching out should I fall. My knees were shaky as I made the final steps that led to the entrance of his house. I was standing on the veranda when he joined me.

“Come on in,” he said and made his way inside. I followed.

“Don’t you think it’s scary if all of you could turn invisible and go inside each other’s houses?” I had wanted to say that theft could be strong in their town, but my father had trained me not to be so rude. *Words are the sharpest weapons, and can kill a spirit* — that’s what he always said.

“No. We are only invisible to those who don’t have the same power. But for us who do, we can catch each other. It’s difficult to explain, but it’s sort of like looking through a glass of water — you can see the other side, but you know that something transparent is blocking your view.”

I imagined what he told me and maybe to untrained eyes like mine, if a Nivan so much as appeared before me — whether or not I saw the sign that someone was there the way Timbukte described — I was pretty sure I would still be caught off guard.

There was nothing different about the way we live except that in this place, the rustles of the wind could be heard clearly, bird melodies hung in the air the entire day, and children playing laughed loudly and gaily. I told myself that these were the reasons I kept coming back.

Every time I got scared of Wind, I would pack some clothes and ride all the way to Nivaton. Here, I was met by kind faces, by gentle characters, by a group of people worrying about nothing but what to sing next.

Nivans were song lovers, and when they're all invisible and they sing together, the place felt ethereal. Songs would come from everywhere that it became difficult to anyone listening to tell exactly where the melodies were coming from.

I was still young and had never known love so real. The more I spent time with Timbukte though, the quicker I got acquainted with an unfamiliar emotion, one I never felt with Wind.

With my husband, I would gaze at his face and feel as if I lost all senses — that he could make me do anything he wanted. That I would heed his words. That the desire to be close to him was something difficult for me to fight even with my guilt and worries. But when he's angry, when his charisma wasn't working, I would find myself shaken, manipulated at the thought that I was in love.

Slowly, I began withdrawing from Wind, but he was like a magnet that drew me closer and closer to him. Every time. If I should find him with another woman, I'd holler like a madwoman. Inside my heart, I searched for the source of my feelings for him and found nothing but awe. The man that I wed was most desired, feared, and respected, and I was the one he chose. Pride made me care for him and the fact that I was envied sealed my marriage. Elation was indeed sometimes more powerful than yearning.

It was different with Timbukte. Each time I ran away from home, it felt odd that galloping in my horse made me feel like surrendering to my heart. With each flight, I distanced myself from Wind and brought myself closer to the Nivan.

Having grown in the palace and attended to by servants — from the food that I would eat for the day, to the oil that would be used after my

bath, to the tiniest details like who would stay up to powder my ankle — I never had to worry about these things.

In Nivaton, I realized that the only one I want to do all of these for me was Timbukte. Let me correct that — these things need not be done. With him, a smile was all I needed.

The carriage that I'm riding came to a stop, and I found myself hugging the scroll to my chest. Back to my reality now, all memories of the past were dampened once more by my fear at seeing Wind. I looked outside and stared at the imposing palace. Nothing much has changed except for the usual wearing of the walls. To the right side, the golden bell and its post stood. Decorative trees still lined up the sidewalks, and the grass covering the entire yard was carefully trimmed.

Soldiers patrolled the palace grounds and a stretch of citizens were lined up to seek an audience with Wind. They were being hustled inside so as to avoid crowding the streets. I looked at the faces of the citizens and felt sorry for them. Although there were some who looked to be minor lords in the provinces where they came from, most looked like they had not eaten in the past days. They were dingy and their faces were forlorn. It broke my heart that there was nothing I could do for them anymore.

The soldier opened the carriage's door, and I stepped out. Another fortnight of events written, of things that are to come in Akea. All memories of the past were gone in an instant as a familiar thudding inside my chest began. I knew I look scared. I needed to grow courage. Or let my courage walk me back to the right path so that I could stand for what I believed was right.

And Kino —

He was of the right age to be presented as a citizen, and if he didn't discover his power soon, the humiliation would eat at him. He never spoke about it — how he felt about being so different. There had to be



a way to release him. It would come to me, how to break my son free.

But how and when?

A solid idea was what I needed. But with no ally in the land, with every lord fearing Wind and his storms, my son may end up so lifeless in his lifetime. I knew how he was feeling — or maybe just understood it. How could I not? We're in the same place.

Plan. Fast forward. Approach the problem with a different strategy. One that's so simple and ridiculously spelt out that it would be hidden in its course. But how?

The palace guards escorted me as I walked the long path to the palace. Hours will tick slowly while Wind reads my scroll and seals each script, each word, with lightning. He will burn every line to make it true. The smoke will eat at my heart, scorching it until it so badly burned that I would no longer feel sorrow over who would be affected by another set of edits in my scroll.

This is usually the moment that I'll lose control over my emotions and cry, but the moon-turns have taught me now. Wind liked seeing me weakened. So this time, I'll muster with all my courage not to let my eyes dampen. The hours will be long and how my eyes will sting, but today, as a sign of quiet rebellion, I will not cry.

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