

*ETERNALLY
HAUNTED*

LUIGI SANTO

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CHAPTER 1

Even as a child, I was obsessed with the darkness in life as equally as I was consumed by the light. I yearned for an impassioned life. I wanted to experience emotion of every kind—to stave off the numb feeling inside me and to remind myself I was still alive. I wanted to experience love and hate in all their extremes, just as I desired all forms of pleasure and pain. I even believed I could never be truly happy unless I had also experienced deep sadness.

My dark view of the world was largely shaped by my lonely and haunted childhood. I was an only child because my mother had died giving birth to me, which left me with eternal guilt and shame over causing her death. Her loss also meant I lacked the unconditional love many mothers have for their children. As for my father, he had died emotionally following her death and was unable to offer me the love I desired. At least, he was unable to show his love for me. I also sensed he resented my birth, which was

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an added burden I had to carry. That's why I subsequently spent my whole life searching for a deep and meaningful connection with someone, hoping it would somehow give meaning to my own life.

The earliest impassioned experience I could clearly remember was the day I turned five. My father decided I was old enough to visit my mother's mausoleum for the first time, and it proved to be both the happiest and saddest day of my childhood. It was also the day I first saw the man who would come to haunt me for the next twenty years of my life.

The day started unusually early. Yet, I was so excited that neither the chilly air nor the early morning hour could dampen my enthusiasm. As my father led me through the imposing iron gates of the Melbourne General Cemetery entrance, I could smell the wet dew on the grass and hear the birds tweeting their morning songs. A cold, gentle breeze caressed my face, and I squinted in the morning sun.

The cemetery was eerily quiet and desolate at the break of day. I peered through my mourning veil and saw an unusual sight. A mist had covered the cold, wet ground, leaving the tip of the headstones exposed and making them appear as if they were floating in mid-air. The mist extended all the way toward the outer edges of the cemetery, where tall, dark trees with twisted trunks encircled the perimeter, keeping the outside world at bay. I wasn't sure whether the trees were protecting us or ensnaring us.

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My skin felt itchy under my new, stiff clothes. My father admired long-standing traditions and had insisted that his only child be dressed in outdated formal attire. He had bought me a black, frilly birthday dress to go along with my black pillbox hat, which was matched with a black-netted veil and black feather. My short black overcoat exposed my matching black stockings and shoes. I also wore black velvet gloves, and in my right hand I clutched the only thing of color—a single long-stemmed red rose. My father wore a black suit and tie with a crisp, white shirt under a long cashmere overcoat. A black fedora partially covered the premature gray streaks through his sandy brown hair, which made him appear older than his thirty-five years.

The sweet, fruity scent of my father's cologne permeated the cold air as we approached a clearing in the cemetery grounds and came to a sudden stop. I looked up at my father's impassive face, which betrayed no emotion. Yet, his glassy eyes revealed hidden wounds I could never penetrate. He took off his black leather gloves, reached into his coat, and pulled out something that sparkled in the sunlight. My eyes widened with delight at an elegant gold necklace in his hands. Hanging at the end of the chain was a golden ring that had seven heart-shaped black diamonds in square settings along the top half of the band. I immediately recognized this ring because my father wore one exactly like it on his left ring finger. He knelt next to me and placed the necklace over my head.

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“Now that you’re five, you can inherit your mother’s eternity ring,” he said. “Do you remember what eternity means?”

“Forever?” I asked.

“That’s right. These rings symbolize that your mother and I will always be together.”

“How?”

“Remember when I said your mother and I were soul mates?”

“Yes.”

“That means we were meant to find each other and be together. Your mother and I designed these rings to represent our eternal love for each other. They are the only two of their type in the world. They once linked us together, and now it will link you to Mama. Always wear it close to your heart.”

“I will,” I said solemnly. “I’ll never take it off.”

“Good girl. Happy birthday, Stasya.”

“Thank you, Papa.”

The moment my father placed the eternity ring around my neck, I experienced my first mystical connection to my mother. I could actually sense her presence growing within me, as though her spirit had been awakened inside my body. As time passed, I became so superstitious about the power of her eternity ring that I never took off my necklace. I feared if I parted with it I would instantly lose my connection to her. To my surprise, I also felt a strong connection to my father for the first time, as though the

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union of the two eternity rings had drawn us closer, and I instinctively felt they would bind us together from now on.

CHAPTER 2

My father took my hand and we continued on our way toward my mother's mausoleum. Just as that moment, a white butterfly fluttered alongside us, as though it were escorting us toward my mother's mausoleum. We had taken only a few steps, however, when I heard a faint female voice calling my . I looked up at my father, hoping he had heard the voice too. But he remained impassive and kept on walking.

I heard the voice again and looked in the distance to my right, where I glimpsed something white and flowing darting between the trees. I suddenly became dizzy and weary, as though my body were fighting some willful infection that had invaded it. I lost sight of the image, and my eyes darted left and right at the distant trees in desperate search of it. I spotted it again. This time, the object was more recognizable. It was a woman dressed in white. I was mesmerized by her and fell into a trance,

blocking out the world around me. I didn't even hear my father calling my .

“Stasya, what’s wrong?” he said, raising his voice. He came to a sudden stop and tugged my hand, snapping me back to reality. “Why didn’t you answer me?”

I knew he wouldn't like my answer.

“I saw Mama again.”

He looked disappointed and knelt next to me. “Mama’s not alive, Stasya. We’ve talked about this before. Remember?”

I nodded half-heartedly.

“Mama is never coming back. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

But I didn't truly believe him. At least, I didn't want to believe him.

“Mama is inside the mausoleum,” he said.

“Sleeping forever?”

“That’s right. And where you and I will join her one day.”

“When?”

“Not for a long time. Come, we’re almost there.”

We continued walking, but my tired little legs struggled to keep up with his long strides. I searched for my mother among the dark trees but couldn't find her. I then felt something brushing against me from behind. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it resting on my right shoulder. It looked like a hand—a woman's hand. I quickly turned around but saw no one. The hand had vanished.

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My father came to a sudden stop, and my body crashed against his legs. I turned my head forward and saw the family mausoleum, which appeared huge and majestic to me. It reminded me of pictures I had seen of the Parthenon. It was over eight feet tall. Four tall columns adorned the façade, and two heavy doors, made of wrought iron and glass, were the centerpiece. Flanked on either side of the doors were two life-size statues of grieving female angels standing on pedestals. Etched into the stonework above the door was my father's family : Andersson.

I heard a jingling sound as my father pulled out a set of keys from his coat pocket. He let go of my hand and approached the iron doors, which he had trouble opening, as though some force were preventing us from going inside.

As my father struggled with the doors, the angels suddenly twitched and came to life. They turned their mournful heads toward me and showered me with welcoming smiles. I was so used to seeing things that most people couldn't—such as my mother's apparition—that I thought nothing of it. As a child, I believed everyone could see the same strange things I could. To me, it was like experiencing a waking dream and they were no different to the dreams I experienced when I was asleep.

The angels stepped down from their pedestals and spread their majestic wings. They sauntered toward me and surrounded me with their outstretched wings in a protective stance. One of the angels then dropped to her

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knee and presented me with a small bouquet of red roses. I clutched the bouquet and felt a thorn piercing through my skin. I winced and dropped the bouquet, along with the long-stemmed rose I had been clutching. I took off my glove. Several drops of crimson blood were slowly dripping down my finger. Entranced by the trail of blood, I suddenly heard my father calling my , releasing me from my trance. I glanced toward him and saw that the angels had returned to their pedestals. I looked down at my hand. The blood was now gone and so was the bouquet of red roses.

“Come,” said my father. “Let’s go meet Mama.”

I put on my black glove, picked up my single long-stemmed rose and joined him. As I reached the entrance, I glanced anxiously at the two grieving angels to either side of me and hesitated.

“It’s okay, Stasya,” he said, reassuring me. “Come inside.”

CHAPTER 3

I entered the mausoleum with great reverence, as though I were stepping inside a place of great holiness. Yet I was puzzled at not seeing my mother. I had expected to find her lying asleep in the middle of the mausoleum floor and was disappointed when she wasn't there.

My father ushered me inside and my senses were regaled by an array of sights and smells I had never experienced before. The interior was beautifully crafted with lavish marble, vibrant stained glass, and rich mahogany. Fresh bouquets of multicolored flowers adorned the interior, filling it with a sweet fragrance.

I looked up and saw several rows of plaques nestled on either side of the walls. They contained the names and photographs of people I had never seen before. They were my father's relatives.

"Where's Mama?" I asked.

“She’s sleeping behind this wall,” my father said. “Behind each plaque lies a member of my family, and Mama.”

“Can we open them?”

“No, we can’t disturb them.”

“Which one’s Mama?”

“Look for her photo on the wall.”

I quickly scanned all the names and photos in search of my mother until I found her. “There she is,” I said, beaming.

My father lifted me up at face level to my mother’s photograph. She looked so vibrant and animated that it was hard to accept she was no longer alive. I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I loved her long brown hair, her sparkling, dark brown eyes, and her full, red lips, which stood out against her light-olive skin.

I was used to hearing people say that I resembled my mother and was happy to see that I did look like her, though my hair and complexion were much darker. I had black hair, warm olive skin, and hazel eyes. She was a Russian beauty with a bold and fearless gaze. I wished I were more like her. I was a timid, pensive, and aloof child. In that sense, I took after my father, who was reserved and aloof, the hallmarks, people said, of his Swedish lineage. Along with his sandy-brown hair, he had a pale and freckled complexion and light-blue eyes. Much like their two distinct national identities, my parents were polar opposites, seemingly attracted to those qualities that the other lacked. Yet their marriage had worked beautifully—

everyone said they had been so much in love with each other.

I glanced at my father, who was equally absorbed by my mother's photograph. His eyes showed uncertainty, which intrigued me. I wanted to know what he was thinking. I hoped he was feeling the same emotions I felt—a deep sadness but also elation at being near her. He turned to me, and I thought he was going to say something, but he remained silent and his face was emotionless. He motioned for me to place my red rose inside the flower holder, which I did.

“Can Mama see us?” I whispered.

“No, but she knows we're here.”

“Is it dark and lonely inside there?”

“Mama is happy being here because it's peaceful and quiet.”

I was compelled to touch my mother's , which was etched in gold-leaf lettering. Her plaque read “Anastasya Andersson (née Antonov).”

My father guided my right index finger along the last six letters of her .

“STAH-Syah,” he said. “You're a part of her, and so is your .”

“What does this say?” I asked, pointing to two dates.

“Born May 24, 1964. Died May 24, 1989.”

“My birthday!” I beamed. I was proud my mother and I shared the same birthday and was oblivious to the fact that she had died on her twenty-fifth birthday while giving

birth to me. Much later I learned that she experienced sudden cardiac arrest during my delivery.

“What does this say?” I asked, pointing to more words further down.

“Loving wife of Ethan Andersson and mother to Stasya.”

He positioned my face closer to my mother’s photograph, and I kissed it. Her face was icy cold against my lips, but they tingled with excitement. He placed me back down and held my hand.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Bow your head and pray.”

We both said the Hail Mary, requesting the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the repose of my mother’s soul. As we prayed together, my mother’s presence grew stronger within me, cossetting and enveloping me in a warm embrace. I clutched her eternity ring as though it were a rosary. An intense sensation soon emanated from deep within me. I felt such a strong connection to my mother that I was certain she was there with us inside the mausoleum. When we ended the prayer with the sign of the cross, I fully expected to see my mother standing there.

CHAPTER 4

As I turned toward the mausoleum entrance, I saw a solemn figure standing outside. However, it wasn't my mother. It was a man. He was about the same age as my father and was wearing a dark-blue suit and tie, a light blue shirt and gray overcoat. I would later learn his name was Gabriel. I had never seen him before, but he did not seem like a stranger. I sensed a strong connection to him, which I couldn't explain—a connection as strong as my connection to my mother. His face looked familiar, yet I couldn't place where I had seen him. Perhaps it may have been a family photograph. His features were striking. He had thick, luxurious, jet-black hair, and his skin had the same warm olive tone as my mother. His penetrating, ebony eyes stared right through me. I was entranced and unable to look away from him.

My father suddenly squeezed my hand too tightly. I winced and tried not to yelp. I looked up at him; his

normally impassive face was now filled with rage. I could feel his body tense up as he glared at the man, who wasn't at all intimidated by my father's scowl. The man returned my father's gaze with equal ferocity, forcing him to finally look away.

"Let's go, Stasya," my father said.

He yanked my hand and rushed me out of the mausoleum. He closed the heavy glass-and-iron doors, this time with surprising ease, and reached into his coat pocket for the keys. He quickly locked the doors behind him, determined to shut the man out. I glanced at the man and thought I had heard him whisper my in a deep, melodious voice. Even though he never moved his lips, I heard him say my as clearly as I had heard my mother's voice calling my only moments before. I was mystified by my ability to hear his thoughts.

As we rushed past the man, I remember smelling his citrusy and spicy cologne, which was as overpowering as his stare. I caught a brief glimpse of his left hand and noticed something glistening on his ring finger. He was wearing the same eternity ring as my parents. My father had claimed only two were in existence, but now there was a third. I yearned to know who this man was and why he was standing outside my mother's mausoleum. I turned back to get a better look at him, but my father tugged my hand and forced me to look ahead.

"Who's that man?" I asked my father.

"Nobody," he said curtly.

"Why is he wearing Mama's eternity ring?"

“Forget you ever saw him.”

Yet, I couldn't forget him. Nor could I forget him for years afterward. As we left the cemetery, I could sense his eyes burrowing into the back of my head, prompting me to turn around for one last look. I caught a brief glimpse of him before my father tugged my hand and forced me to look away. I desperately wanted to know why I had experienced such a powerful connection to a man I had never seen before and began to suspect the eternity rings had somehow drawn us together.

My mother's eternity ring also heralded my journey into a new, impassioned life. I had never experienced such intense happiness and sadness at the same time. Although I was elated at experiencing my mother's presence for the first time, I was equally disheartened by the realization I could never actually be with her or hold her. Until that moment, my mother had always been a distant and absent figure in my life, as I had yet to fully grasp the real meaning of death. Visiting her mausoleum for the first time had immediately made her death more palpable. Even so, amid the death and desolation of the cemetery, I felt more truly alive than I had ever felt before.

CHAPTER 5

As my father drove us home from the cemetery, I was mentally and emotionally drained. Yet I could not—or would not—fall asleep in my child seat. My head was filled with haunting images of my mother’s apparition, the weeping statues that had come to life, and the striking man with the identical eternity ring.

My eyelids grew heavy as I listened to the whirring of the car engine. Suddenly, I heard the flapping of wings. I turned to my right and saw one of the angels flying alongside our car. I looked to my left and saw the other angel. They appeared to be escorting us home. I looked toward my father, who showed no sign of seeing anything unusual. I eyed the angels with wonder and wished I could experience their weightlessness, soaring high into the air. All I could feel, however, was a huge weight in my heart, as though I were sinking deeper into myself. The sensation took hold of me on that day and never relinquished me.

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The angels then waved good-bye as they flew away. I eventually lost the battle against tiredness and fell asleep.

* * *

I was half-awake by the time we reached home. My father's house was in Sherbrooke Forest within the Dandenong Ranges, about forty miles southeast of Melbourne. Sherbrooke Forest is a cool, temperate rainforest, not like the humid rainforests of northern Australia. Our dwelling was one of the few nestled within this broadleaf-evergreen forest, which was home to lush ferns, sassafras, and mountain ash trees. The forest was also home to unique Australian wildlife. My happiest memories during my childhood were of encountering swamp wallabies, wombats, platypus, echidnas, and lyrebirds.

My father's estate contained extensive established gardens, artificial waterfalls, and a small lake. Our house was a lavish, three-story mansion in the Art Deco Streamline Moderne style, which emphasized long, horizontal lines and nautical elements and which always reminded me of a ship cutting through the forest. My father's father, who was a builder of luxury boats before branching into property development, built our house in the 1930s. My father inherited the business from his father and became a successful developer of luxury apartments.

We reached the end of the driveway, where I could see the house staff. They were standing in line in front of the main door with birthday presents in hand. There was Dennis, the wiry and elegant butler in his late fifties; Susan,

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the diminutive and delicate maid in her twenties; Gus, the energetic and brawny middle-aged chef; and of course my beloved governess, Yvonne Dean, who had also been my mother's governess, and so had been with both our families for many years. Her presence always had a calming effect on me and while she tried her best to be a mother to me, she could never replace my own mother. She also looked very youthful for her age, even though she was ten years older than my father. Perhaps that was because she had never married nor had any children of her own.

Weariness had finally taken hold of me and I closed my eyes. I had almost fallen back asleep when I suddenly felt weightless. My father carried me out of the car and offered his apologies to our house staff, but they didn't begrudge me my tiredness. I sensed my body floating through the house and up the stairs to the second story. I flew along the corridor toward my bedroom, which was the last door on the right, and landed safely on my bed.

CHAPTER 6

I slept for several hours and awoke just before midday, when we celebrated my birthday. I spent the afternoon playing with my new toys but was still tired from my early morning visit to the cemetery and was asleep by six. That night, however, something unusual happened to me that greatly alarmed my father and Yvonne.

I would later learn that while everyone was asleep, an indistinct human voice reverberated throughout the dark and quiet household. The voice quickly escalated into the loud moaning of a young woman until it eventually woke my father. He got out of bed and put on his robe to investigate. When he opened his bedroom door and stepped into the darkened corridor, he could hear the woman's moaning more distinctly. He made his way toward Yvonne's room, thinking she was in pain. He stood in front of her closed door and was about to knock, when the door suddenly opened, startling them both.

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The moaning became louder and more urgent. At first, they thought it was Susan. But Susan always slept downstairs, and this sound was coming from the upper floor. Horrified, they realized it was coming from my bedroom. Yet it was not the voice of a young child.

As my father and Yvonne made their way toward my closed bedroom door, the moaning grew louder and more distressed. Yvonne told me that when they opened my door, they confronted a terrifying sight. I had kicked off my blankets, and my body was writhing in pain. I was clutching my stomach and uttering the same words over and over in a voice that was not my own.

“Save my baby ... Please save my baby.”

My father rushed to me, calling my . But I could not be roused from my trancelike sleep. I kept pleading for my baby to be saved as I clutched my chest and stomach. My father gripped my arms and shook my body, yelling my . This time, I responded. I opened my eyes and looked blankly at him. Yvonne edged uneasily toward me with her hand over her mouth. However, I was completely calm, which disturbed them even more. I had

father and Yvonne had heard moments before. My father was grateful I did not remember anything, but he remained unnerved by my nightmare. I smiled at him and he offered me a strained smile in return.

CHAPTER 7

The following morning, Ethan looked pensively into his bathroom mirror as he shaved and got ready for work. He performed his normal morning routine as though in a daze, taking far longer than usual to put on his business suit. He then wandered into the kitchen, where Stasya was cheerfully eating breakfast in front of the TV as Susan helped her get ready for school.

“Did you sleep well, Stasya?” Ethan asked her.

But she was too engrossed with the morning cartoons and failed to hear him.

“Stasya!” Susan called out. “Your father asked you a question.”

“Sorry, Papa,” Stasya said, looking away from the TV.

He repeated his question. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, Papa. Can I sleep with Yvonne again tonight?”

“We’ll see.”

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“You’re going to be late again.” Susan chided Stasya as she switched off the TV. “Go get your school bag.”

Stasya frowned and reluctantly left the kitchen.

* * *

Ethan drove Stasya to school on his way to work, casting furtive glances in the rearview mirror as his daughter sat in the child seat. Stasya appeared completely unaffected by the previous night’s episode. While this should have comforted him, he was deeply troubled that it happened at all. As he dropped her off at school, he decided to stay behind and wait until she had disappeared into her classroom. Only then did he feel comfortable leaving her.

He got back into his car and drove to his office, where he was CEO and majority shareholder of the successful Property Development Company, Andersson and Son. Ethan was actually the “son” in the company but had resisted changing the . He was a conservative man who disliked change and also wanted to honor his father’s role in developing the company from its humble origins. Once at work, though, Ethan had trouble concentrating on anything other than his daughter.

* * *

It was dark by the time Ethan arrived home from work, having stayed back late to make up for an unproductive day. The kitchen light was still on at the rear of the house, and he made his way to the back door. But no one was inside the kitchen. Suddenly, he heard a young woman shrieking from the lounge room. It was the same voice he had heard the previous night from Stasya’s bedroom. He

rushed into the lounge room, which was dark and empty except for a bright light emanating from one corner.

The woman's voice was coming from the TV, which had been left on in the seemingly empty room. It was his wedding video. He gazed at the TV as his wife, Anastasya, shoved a large piece of wedding cake into his mouth. She squealed with delight as she looked directly into the camera, seducing it with her mischievous eyes and alluring smile.

Ethan was so entranced with the video he failed to hear Stasya's voice from behind one of the lounge chairs. She staggered half-asleep toward him and he picked her up. He noticed Yvonne rousing from sleep as she lay on the sofa. The sight of Ethan made Yvonne quickly stand up and anxiously press down her dress, clearly embarrassed at being caught sleeping.

"What are you doing up so late?" Ethan asked Stasya.

"We were waiting for you," Yvonne interjected.

"Why were you late?" Stasya asked him.

"I'm sorry. I had a lot of work to do in the office."

"Go change into your pajamas," Yvonne told her. "I'll be there in a few minutes to brush your teeth."

"Can't I watch just one more video?" Stasya asked her father.

"She wanted to watch all her mother's videos," Yvonne told him.

"It's getting late, Stasya," he said, putting her down. "Go get changed into your pajamas. I'll be up soon."

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“Okay,” Stasya said despondently, hunching her shoulders melodramatically as she left the room. Neither Yvonne nor Ethan could understand Stasya’s sudden obsession with Anastasya. However, the other children at school would often talk about their mothers, so it was only natural that she was curious about her own mother.

CHAPTER 8

Yvonne invited Stasya to sleep in her room again that night, an offer Ethan appreciated. A light sleeper, Yvonne awoke during the night to discover Stasya was not in bed with her. She sat up, switched on the lamp, and scanned the room. She jumped out of bed and checked her en suite, but Stasya wasn't there either. She put on her dressing gown and rushed out of her bedroom.

She saw a light under Stasya's closed bedroom door and quietly tiptoed down the corridor toward her room. She quietly knocked on the door and called out her . But there was no answer. She opened the door to see the lights were all switched on but the bedroom was empty. She frantically searched the en suite, but Stasya wasn't there. Yvonne promptly ran down the corridor and knocked on Ethan's bedroom door.

The house staff switched on the house lights, room by room, calling out Stasya's as they searched everywhere for

her. However, Stasya wasn't anywhere inside the house. She was actually outside, at the edge of the rainforest.

* * *

Stasya had put on her normal day clothes—a pair of jeans, a thick woolen top, and red sneakers—oblivious to the anxious voices calling out behind her. The household eventually spilled out into the rear garden as Stasya was about to be consumed by the rainforest, but she was deaf to everyone behind her. She was about to disappear from view when a voice cut through the cold night air.

“She’s over here,” Yvonne called out.

Everyone ran toward Stasya, but her father was the first to reach her. He shouted her name, but she continued walking and came to a stop only when he clutched her body. She seemed bewildered by everyone’s presence.

“What are you doing, Stasya?” Ethan asked her. When she didn’t respond, he shook her harder.

“Stasya,” he shouted. “Where are you going?”

She slowly turned toward the rainforest, which seemed to beguile her.

“I’m going home,” she said dreamily.

“This is your home,” her father said, indicating the house behind him. “This is where you live.”

“No, my other home,” she said.

“What other home?”

“The house I grew up in.”

Yvonne muffled a shriek as the other house staff exchanged nervous glances.

“You grew up in *this* house,” her father told her. “*This* is our house.”

“Not when I was Anastasya,” Stasya replied, causing Yvonne to reel back in horror.

Her father looked sternly into her eyes and squeezed her arms tightly.

“You’re not Anastasya!” he shouted, frightening Stasya into silence. “You’re Stasya. Do you understand?”

Stasya remained silent, too stunned to speak.

“You must never enter the rainforest again,” he ordered her. “Is that clear?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“But not on the other side.”

“Especially the other side,” he said. “Please don’t disobey me.”

“Come back to bed, Stasya,” Yvonne said to her, attempting to calm the situation.

Yvonne picked up Stasya and carried her back to the house as the others slowly trailed behind them. Stasya looked back at her father, who remained behind. He looked in the direction of the rainforest as though frightened. Perhaps something within that rainforest caused him pain, which is why he dreaded what lay in store for her if Stasya ever entered it?

* * *

The following morning, Yvonne entered Stasya’s bedroom and saw her searching frantically under her bed.

“What are you doing?” Yvonne asked her.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“Do you know where my red sneakers are?” Stasya replied.

“They were muddy, so we had to wash them. They’re still drying.”

“Why were they muddy?”

“You don’t remember anything about last night?”

“No. What happened?”

“Nothing,” Yvonne said with relief. “Never mind.”

“I think I had a strange dream,” Stasya hinted unsurely.

“What was it about?” Yvonne asked anxiously.

“I was lost inside the rainforest.”

“Were you frightened?”

“No. No, I was happy.”

“Why were you happy?”

“I don’t know. I just felt happy.”

CHAPTER 9

Several days later, after I returned home from school, my father led me into the lounge room, where he introduced me to an elderly man, Mr. Stroud, as an old family friend. I had never seen Mr. Stroud before. He made polite conversation about my favorite subjects in school before asking me about my sleeping habits and my dreams. I thought they were strange questions to be asking a child, especially one he had just met. However, my father urged me to answer the questions fully and truthfully.

After I answered Mr. Stroud's questions, my father asked Susan to take me into the kitchen for some milk and cookies. Even though this was my favorite treat, I wanted to stay behind with them, as my curiosity had been piqued.

I reluctantly followed Susan into the kitchen, where she poured me a glass of milk. My eyes soon fell on the red door next to the pantry. I rarely paid much attention to this door, but for some reason, I was now deeply intrigued

by it. I glanced intermittently at it as I munched on the cookies. My curiosity finally got the better of me, and I quizzed Susan about it.

“Susan. What’s behind that door?”

Susan was humming to herself as she washed the dishes and didn’t hear me, so I asked her again. “Susan, what’s behind the door?”

“What door?”

“The basement door.”

Susan froze for a brief moment before she continued washing the dishes.

“Nothing,” she said nonchalantly. “Just some things your father has stored down there.”

“Mama’s things?”

“I, ah, I really don’t know.”

“I’ll ask Papa later.”

“No!” she said, dropping a glass into the sink and smashing it. She turned off the water and gazed at me wide-eyed.

“You must never ask your father about this,” she said. “There’s nothing really important down there.”

“Then why does he lock it?”

“How do you know it’s locked?”

“Because I’ve tried to open it.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see what was behind the door.”

“Listen to me carefully, darling. You have to keep away from that door. Do ya hear? Please don’t ask your father about it, either. Understand?”

LUIGI SANTO

I was now more curious about what was behind the locked door. I stared at the door so intently it was now the only thing I could concentrate on, and I couldn't even hear anything Susan said.

"Stasya?" Susan said, raising her voice.

"Yes," I said blankly.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

"You must never discuss this door with anyone from now on."

"Why?"

"Please do as I say. All right?"

I nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, go to your room."

I left Susan to pick up the shards of glass and walked past the lounge room, which gave me an opportunity to eavesdrop on my father's conversation with Mr. Stroud. I tiptoed closer to the open door to listen to their conversation, but I couldn't understand most of what they were saying.

"Sleepwalking is quite common in children Stasya's age," Mr. Stroud told my father. "It will fade in time as she gets older. It's not necessarily a symptom of any psychological issues. And it doesn't cause any emotional harm."

"Then what should I do?"

"Don't attempt to wake her when she's sleepwalking, as this could frighten her. Just guide her gently back to bed."

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“She says she sees her mother’s ghost.”

“Does she find that frightening?”

“No.”

“She may well be experiencing a waking dream—a transitional state from wakefulness to sleep. It can sometimes occur when there’s a disconnect between her mind and body as she goes in or comes out of REM sleep.”

“She says she can visualize things that aren’t there for long periods of time, things that only exist in her mind. She sees hallucinations of people, places, and events she has never experienced.”

“She may be experiencing eidetic imagery.”

“What’s that?”

“An eidetic person can ‘see’ an object in front of them that is not actually present. They can visualize what’s in their mind.”

“Is there something wrong with her?”

“Not at all. While eidetic imagery does occur in some children, it is almost nonexistent in adults, so these images will gradually disappear as she grows older.”

“But why does she keep seeing images of her mother?”

“It could be her way of coping with her absence. Do you discuss her mother with her?”

“No. I don’t want her to know too much about her.”

There was a moment’s silence before Mr. Stroud interrogated further. “May I ask why?”

“I have mixed emotions about her mother, and I don’t want to influence Stasya’s opinion of her.”

“I see,” Mr. Stroud said pensively. “I know you only wish to protect your daughter from your own prejudices, but perhaps her actions are a way of compensating for your unwillingness to discuss her mother with her.”

“I’m not ready to discuss her. Not yet.”

“That’s your choice, of course. However, children of Stasya’s age are good at playing roles and creating imaginary people. Her mother’s absence in her life may be influencing her desire to bring her back to life—even within herself.”

I was intrigued by my father’s comments that he had mixed emotions about my mother. This was the first time I had ever heard him say anything negative or uncomplimentary about her, and I wanted to know why. I wanted to know what my mother had said or done to make my father speak this way about her. I then heard my father and Mr. Stroud walking to the front door, so I quickly made my way up the stairs to prevent them seeing me.

CHAPTER 10

In the ensuing months, I developed an obsessive desire to know everything about my mother, an obsession no one could understand—let alone me. I would repeatedly watch her videos and study her mannerisms, asking Yvonne questions about what type of person my mother had been. Yet something bothered me about the photographs and videos: there weren't many of them before my parents' marriage. There was nothing from her childhood or her family, so I decided to quiz Yvonne about this.

“Why aren't there any videos or photos of Mama when she was younger?”

“Why do you want to see them?”

“I want to know what Mama looked like.”

“Well, she looked very much like you,” Yvonne said evasively.

“What was she like as a child?”

“The same way she is in her photos and videos with your father.”

“Are they all down in the basement?”

My question caught her by surprise. “Who said they were down in the basement?”

“Nobody. I just want to know if they are there.”

“I don’t know, and please don’t speak to your father about this.”

“That’s what Susan said.”

“Susan was right. It will upset your father.”

“Why?”

“Listen, Stasya. I know you want to know more about your mother, but you’ll have to wait until you’re older.”

“How much older?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why can’t I see them now?”

“It’s just not possible, darling. Please obey me. Okay?”

I consented, but it wasn’t okay. I yearned to know what my mother had been like as a child and whether I would ever grow up to be like her. She looked so confident and outgoing, qualities I did not possess, and I wanted to know whether she’d ever been like me. I was more serious and introverted than most of my school friends, and I yearned to be more confident and outgoing like my mother. I didn’t like who I was and wanted to be different; I wanted to be someone else. But most of all, I wanted to be like my mother.

Her absence in my life had caused me more anguish than I let on to others. Yet I never shunned my dark

thoughts. In fact, I encouraged them. Life with my father was controlled and organized, and he forbade any lively outbursts or outpouring of emotions from me. Therefore, I was drawn to the darkness in life—it made me feel more alive and it made me believe my mother was somehow still alive. While I hid my misery from everyone else, my penchant for keeping things bottled up meant that I was an aloof and solitary child. I told myself I preferred to be alone.

Yvonne empathized with my desire to know more about my mother and offered to discuss the matter with my father. It took a lot of courage for Yvonne to voice her opinion, so I wasn't expecting much when I eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Mr. Andersson, may I borrow the key to the basement?" Yvonne asked my father.

"Sorry?" my father said, as though he had misheard her.

"The key," Yvonne said. "To the basement."

"Why?" my father asked in a hesitant tone.

"Because I'd like to give some of Anastasya's belongings to Stasya."

"Which belongings?"

"From her childhood—photos, dresses, brushes, hair ribbons, and the like."

"Why?"

"Stasya keeps asking so many questions about her mother, and I think it would be nice to let her know a bit more about her by giving her some of her mother's

possessions. She's turning six soon, and I think they would make a lovely birthday present for her."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"It's only natural for a child to want to know about a mother she has never known."

"You know my feelings on the matter."

"Yes, I do. However, I believe that if she held these belongings in her hands, it would put her mind at ease and possibly stop her afflictions—her sleepwalking and her trances."

My father remained silent. I braced myself for disappointment.

"Okay. But only her mother's childhood photos and videos," he said in a severe tone. "Nothing after she turned seven."

"Of course, Mr. Andersson. I understand."

"And don't let her go down in the basement."

"I'll make sure of that. Thank you again, Mr. Andersson."

I was ecstatic. I couldn't wait to see what treasures I would receive. Yet I was puzzled as to why I couldn't see anything from my mother after she had turned seven. I wondered what had happened after that age. Did she change into a bad person? Did she become so rebellious and mischievous that my father didn't want me to see her, lest my mother influence me? I had so many unanswered questions that it was exasperating not being able to ask anyone. However, at least I would now be closer to my

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

mother and hold the very things that were once close to her.

* * *

The following day, I came home from school to find an array of my mother's childhood possessions placed around my bedroom—on my bed, on top of my dresser, and draped on my chair. My eyes widened as Yvonne introduced me to my mother's childhood clothes, brushes, hair ribbons, and the like. I held them as though I were touching the royal crown jewels. I became so enamored with her belongings I insisted on wearing at least one item every day after school. Yet it also made me more curious about what else was down there in the basement. I imagined my mother's life catalogued and preserved down below like a shrine in her honor.

Although my father initially objected to my new obsession, he gradually came to accept it, especially since I had stopped walking in my sleep and falling into trances. I even noticed an immediate change in myself whenever I wore my mother's items. I became more outgoing, confident, and mischievous. Yvonne, however, tried to discourage my new obsession.

"You shouldn't wear your mother's clothes all the time," she said. "They're old and tattered."

"But I like them," I said. "I like wearing them."

"Your father has bought you such lovely and beautiful clothes," she said. "You should wear them for him more often."

"Okay," I said dejectedly.

LUIGI SANTO

“From now on, you can only select one item from your mother’s wardrobe.”

I was about to make a suggestion when she swiftly cut me off. “And no dresses.”

“Ugh,” I said with a pout.

“That means you can only limit it to scarves, gloves, and hats. And only one piece of jewelry at a time. I won’t have you looking like a female rapper. Understood?”

“Yes,” I said, sulking.

CHAPTER 11

My infatuation with my mother's personal belongings made me spend all my time indoors, frustrating Yvonne and my father, who struggled to get me out of the house for exercise. However, one sunny afternoon, Yvonne suggested something that instantly enticed me.

“Would you like to visit the place I used to take your mother as a child?”

Of course, I agreed. We drove for about five minutes to the Sherbrooke picnic grounds, where Yvonne and I then proceeded on foot toward the Sherbrooke Falls trail. The trail was over half a mile in length, and along the way, we listened to the melodic cacophony of birdcalls and saw many lush ferns and towering mountain ash trees, some of which were two hundred years old.

However, I wasn't used to such prolonged physical activity and soon became tired and breathless. The hot sun had also dehydrated me and left me lightheaded. I didn't

say anything to Yvonne and persevered without complaint because I was so eager to follow in my mother's footsteps. Yet shortly afterward, the world began spinning around, and I fell into a trance.

When everything finally stopped spinning, the ferns and trees surrounding me rapidly reduced in size and shape, much like a time-lapse video, as though I were gradually traveling back in time. I soon became lost in my own world. That's when I noticed a young boy standing several feet away from me. He was around ten years of age and resembled a young version of the man I had seen at the cemetery outside my mother's mausoleum. I suspected I was recalling my mother's memory. The boy smiled as he approached me. As he drew nearer, he quickly morphed into Yvonne, who grasped my shoulders, plunging me back into the present.

"Stasya, are you okay?" Yvonne asked.

I didn't respond and kept gazing around me.

"Stasya. What's wrong?"

"I've been here before," I told her.

She tried to act nonchalant, but her slightly tremulous voice betrayed her. "That's not possible," she said dismissively.

"Everything looks so familiar," I said.

"I've never taken you here before, and neither has your father."

"But I've walked this trail before."

"The sun is merely playing tricks on your mind. Here, drink some water."

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

Yvonne thrust the water bottle to my mouth—probably more to silence me than anything else—and quickly changed the subject. “Let’s keep going,” she said. “We’re almost there.”

Yvonne took my hand, and I began to doubt myself. Perhaps I was imagining things. Perhaps I was hallucinating because of the hot sun. When we finally reached the waterfall, it was much smaller than I had anticipated, no taller than an adult, but it was beautiful nonetheless. I let go of Yvonne’s hand and raced toward it, easily navigating my way around the rocks, trees, and foliage as though I had been there many times before.

I suddenly felt different on the inside—assured and serene. I didn’t know if I was recalling my mother’s emotions or whether the tranquility of the waterfall was taking me to an elevated place. Either way, I sensed a swirl of emotions surging higher within me, filling me with confidence and happiness.

As I approached the waterfall, I spotted a log with markings on it that had been etched by a small tool. Yvonne eventually caught up to me, and I turned to her with a mischievous smile, much like my mother would have.

“I remember making these markings on the log,” I told her excitedly. “They’re still here.”

“It must be from a dream you’ve had,” Yvonne said. “I’m sure you’ve dreamt of being your mother many times.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t feel like a dream. It feels real.”

“Well, they’re the best dreams of all. They seem so real that even when you wake up, you still feel as though you’re dreaming. Isn’t that right?”

I began to doubt myself again. Perhaps I was recalling a dream of this place that was so vivid I thought I had been here before. Perhaps that would explain my feelings of *déjà vu*.

“You want to be with your mother so much that you become her to make the dream more real,” Yvonne continued. “Right?”

“Maybe.”

“Come, let’s turn back.”

“I want to stay here longer. It’s so peaceful and quiet.”

“Come on, Stasya!”

“Please call me Anastasya.”

Yvonne looked troubled. “Why?”

“Because it’s my name.”

“No. Your name is Stasya.”

“But Stasya is short for Anastasya. So my name is Anastasya.”

“I don’t have time for games, Stasya. Please, we have to go back.”

“Okay.” I grumbled.

“And don’t tell anyone we came here.”

“Don’t worry, Vonnice. It’ll be our secret.”

Yvonne looked at me with disbelief. “What did you call me?”

“Vonnice.”

“Why?”

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“I think it suits you.”

“Did you hear anyone call me that?”

“No.”

“You’ve never heard anyone call me Vonnie before?”

“No. Why?”

“I haven’t been called that in a long time.”

“Can I call you Vonnie?”

“No, your father wouldn’t like it.”

At the mention of my father, I visibly tensed and lost my tranquility. It was as though I had suddenly changed back into my normally docile and reserved self.

“What about when we’re together?” I asked timidly.

Yvonne hesitated for a moment. “Okay. Just don’t call me that when your father is around.”

“I won’t,” I promised.

CHAPTER 12

By the time Yvonne and I had returned home from Sherbrooke Falls, my inner light of confidence had collapsed into a black hole, sucking the happiness and confidence out of me. Nothing could escape its gravitational pull, and I felt as though I had lost my magical connection to my mother.

“Take off your shoes before you enter the house,” Yvonne insisted, eager to remove any evidence of our excursion.

“Okay,” I replied dutifully.

“Then go inside and change your clothes.”

“Alright.”

I entered the kitchen and filled a glass with cold water to cool me down. As I gulped the water, I heard a creaking sound behind me. I turned around and saw the red basement door slowly opening by itself. I was startled to see the door unlocked for the first time and stood there,

transfixed. I placed my glass down on the kitchen bench and slowly crept toward the open door. I stood at the entrance to the basement and peered into the darkness below.

“Papa?” I called out.

There was no reply. I deliberated my next move when I suddenly heard a woman’s faint voice whispering my name from within the darkness. I took a cautious step down the staircase when I heard the voice again.

“Mama?” I called out.

Silence. I took another step down and then another, until I had descended halfway, enticed by the mysterious yet comforting darkness below. As I slowly continued down the staircase, fear and curiosity vied within me. The dark basement was so alive with expectation I was certain it was about to give birth to my mother. I could sense her presence coming to life from within the darkness. I suddenly had an out-of-body experience of looking down at myself from above, and came to an abrupt stop.

“Mama?” I called again.

Still silence.

“Papa?” I called out.

There was no answer, so I continued until I was almost at the bottom of the darkened staircase. I stopped and looked back to see how far I had come. I could see sunrays streaking through the kitchen and extending its reach into the top half of the staircase. I wasn’t sure whether to return to the safety of the light or to continue toward the beckoning darkness below. I glanced at the wall next to me

and saw the indistinct outline of a light switch. I made my decision and decided to continue. I pressed the light switch, and the dark basement came to life.

An astonishing assortment of bright colors, odd shapes, and aromas instantly overwhelmed me. I saw a tantalizing array of objects, mementos, apparel, and personal effects that clearly belonged to my mother. I didn't know where to look first; there were so many new pleasures to take in. I stepped into the basement to get a closer look at everything when my eyes rested on an old photograph of my mother, hanging on the wall. She was about ten years of age and posing with her family. Standing next to her was a young boy who looked to be her own age. He was the same young boy I had seen earlier that day at Sherbrooke Falls. My mind was full of so many questions I didn't know where to begin.

As I moved closer to get a better look at the boy, I saw another, more intriguing photograph of my mother. She was in her late teens and was wearing a formal dress at a function—perhaps a high school ball. She was sitting at a dinner table next to a young man of the same age. He was an older version of the same boy from the previous photograph. The same man I had seen outside my mother's mausoleum. I wanted to know why my mother and this man were sitting next to each other. How did they know each other? Were they related? Were they friends? Were they in love?

As I studied the photograph, their expressions startled me. They both looked into the camera like two caged

tigers that had been cornered and were getting ready to pounce on their attacker. I had never seen such an expression on my mother's face before, and it was both unsettling and intriguing. In all her photographs and videos, she was always smiling radiantly, so I was surprised to see her scowling at me.

As I moved closer, I knocked over a box of letters and envelopes, which cascaded to the floor. I quickly gathered the envelopes and noticed they were all addressed to my mother. I turned them over and saw that they were all sent from someone named "Sophia Antonov." She had the same surname as my mother. Were they relatives?

I gathered the envelopes into the box and placed it on top of the others before returning to the same photograph on the wall. The young man seemed to be looking right into me. I could sense his presence within me, exploring my soul. His eyes were captivating and plunged me into a trance.

"Stasya?" said an angry voice. "What are you doing down here?"

I braced myself as my father's heavy feet raced down the stairs. As he stood over me, I had never seen him wear such a disgusted expression before, and it frightened me.

"Answer me," he said.

"The d-door was, was open," I said. "I thought you were down here."

"Even if I was, you've been told never to come down here. Haven't you?"

"Yes," I said with quivering lips.

“Then why did you disobey the rule?”

I was so paralyzed by my father’s anger the words couldn’t leave my mouth.

“Go to your room,” he ordered. “And don’t come out until I say so.”

I scurried up the stairs, with tears in my eyes. As I entered the kitchen, I saw Yvonne’s compassionate face. She moved to comfort me, but I was embarrassed at being scolded I buried my face into her dress and began crying. We waited for my father to come up the staircase, and I could sense Yvonne’s body tensing with mounting condemnation. I clung onto Yvonne as my father appeared behind me.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Yvonne admonished him. “She’s only a child.”

Yvonne composed herself and said no more, mindful of her position as an employee in my father’s house. Yet my father didn’t argue and was chastened by Yvonne’s rebuke. He knew Yvonne was right, and he admired her courage and love for me. Having said her piece, Yvonne escorted me out of the kitchen, muttering to herself quietly, but loud enough for my father to hear, “You shouldn’t have left the door unlocked.”

CHAPTER 13

Several hours later, my father stood contritely outside my open bedroom door. I was sitting at my desk drawing pictures, which I often did whenever I was anxious or sad. Drawing was my way of expressing and channeling my emotions to help me better understand what I was going through. At that moment, I was filled with conflicting emotions for my father. I hated him for the way he had treated me, but I also wanted to know why he was so angry. He had acted the same way when he had seen that man outside my mother's mausoleum. I loved my father and wanted to get closer to him, but he would always shut me out, and I never knew why. Drawing was my saving grace. It calmed me down and transported me to an idyllic place.

“May I come in, Stasya?” he asked softly.

“Yes, Papa,” I said blankly as I continued drawing. I didn't want to look at him as he approached my desk. He

stood there, quietly looking over my shoulder, but I wanted to be left alone.

“Your mother liked to draw butterflies, too,” he said affectionately.

“A lot of girls do, Papa,” I said impassively.

“Stasya, I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

I put down my colored pencils and turned to him with a wounded look. “I’m not a bad girl.”

“I know. It was my fault. I shouldn’t have left the door open.”

“Why can’t I see what’s down there?”

“It’s not for you to see. Not yet, anyway.”

“But they’re just Mama’s things.”

“I can’t explain to you now, but someday I will. Okay?”

“Yes, Papa.”

But that day never came. He never explained it to me, even when I was older. Just then, his eyes rested on another drawing, and he furrowed his brow. It was a drawing of a white house ensconced within a steep, wooded cliff atop seven cylindrical columns for support. The house overlooked a turbulent sea with waves crashing against rocks on the beachfront.

“Have you seen this house before?” he asked with a troubled expression.

“No.”

“You’ve never seen a photo of this house before?”

“No. Maybe I’ve seen it in my dreams.”

“Good dreams or bad dreams?”

“Happy dreams. That’s why I love drawing this house.”

“You’ve drawn this house before?”

“Yes. Lots of times.”

“Can I see them?”

“I’ve thrown most of them away,” I said, rummaging through my desk drawer. “I only keep the ones I really like.”

I showed him a dozen drawings of the same house perched on a steep, wooded cliff by the sea.

“Why do you like drawing this house?” he asked, still uneasy.

“I just like it because it’s so close to the ocean. It makes me feel better when I’m sad.”

“How often do you feel sad?”

I shrugged.

“Is it because of Mama?” he asked.

“I think so.”

He studied my drawings and focused on one in particular. It was a close-up of the front door, which had a name plaque on it that said “Renascence.”

“What’s this word on the door?” he asked.

“It’s the name of the house.”

“Where have you see this word?”

“Nowhere.”

“You’ve never seen or heard this word before?”

“No, I made it up. Why?”

“It’s a real word.”

“Really? How do you pronounce it?”

“RE-na-sens.”

“I like the sound of it. What does it mean?”

“It means to be reborn,” he said distractedly. “To become something new.”

“Like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“I’d like to live in a house like this one day.”

“Why?”

“I want to live by the sea and watch the waves crashing onto the rocks.”

He was clearly unsettled but remained silent, which left me frustrated. I wanted to know what he was thinking or if I had done anything else wrong. “Is something wrong, Papa?”

He quickly put down the drawings as if they were inconsequential. But I didn’t believe him.

“No,” he said evasively. “Wash your hands and come down for dinner.”

“Okay, Papa.”

After my father left, I studied the drawings of the house, wondering what had caused him to react so strangely. As my eyes rested on the word *Renaissance*, images of my mother and the young man scowling at me suddenly flooded my mind. Their faces possessed the same wild expressions from the photograph in the basement, and I couldn’t get them out of my mind. Their haunting images receded only after I finally walked away from my desk.

Yet their faces would continue to haunt me from then on. I wanted to know more about the young man and the occasion it was taken. However, Yvonne refused to discuss it, and I didn’t wish to incur my father’s wrath again by

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asking him. Instead, I was left to fantasize about why my mother and the man I saw outside her mausoleum had come to be together in the same photographs when they were younger.

CHAPTER 14

Almost one year later, on the morning of my seventh birthday, I woke up unusually early. The dawn light had peeked through my bedroom window, but the rest of the house was still dark and quiet. I tried to go back to sleep but couldn't—not only because I was excited about my birthday, but also because I had a disturbing dream about the photographs from the basement. In the dream, my mother and the young man had magically come to life and leapt out of the photographs, growling like tigers as they pouncing on me.

I woke up frightened. When I opened my eyes, I saw what appeared to be a white veil directly over my face. It was so close to my eyes I could see the weave pattern. It was also thin and I could see right through it. I detected the vague outline of something on the other side. I focused my eyes on the object, and a smiling face came into view. It was my mother. When I blinked, the veil was

gone—and so was my mother. I raised my head and scanned my semi dark bedroom.

Whoosh. I caught sight of a white object exiting my open bedroom door. I jumped out of bed and ran into the corridor, where I caught a brief glimpse of a full-length white dress disappearing down the staircase. I raced down the corridor to the staircase and looked down to the ground floor. My mother was heading toward the kitchen. I quickly descended the staircase and jumped the last few steps to the ground-floor landing. I ran to the kitchen, sensing I had finally cornered her.

I leapt into the kitchen and scanned the darkened room, but saw no sign of her. Suddenly, I heard a faint female voice behind me. I turned around and realized the voice was coming from behind the closed basement door. I crept toward the door and heard the indistinct voice of a woman from down below. It sounded like my mother's voice. It was lively and happy, yet I couldn't make out what she was saying. I moved closer and placed my ear against the door, yet I still couldn't hear what she was saying. I twisted the doorknob, but it was locked. I peeked through the keyhole and saw light and shadow on the staircase. Someone was down there.

The basement light instantly switched off, and the voice fell silent. I heard footsteps climbing up the staircase. I stepped back and waited nervously for the door to open. The footsteps grew louder and closer and stopped at the top of the staircase. The doorknob slowly twisted, but the door was still locked. The doorknob twisted left and right

as though someone were desperately trying to get out. Yet it still wouldn't open. Suddenly, there was silence. I couldn't hear anything except for the sound of my heart beating loudly.

I heard a noise behind me and turned around. Through the kitchen window, I saw a flowing white dress heading away from the house. I ran to the back door, unlocked it, and flung it wide open. I leapt into the rear garden and saw my mother in the distance disappearing behind several narrow tree shrubs that soared high into the air.

I raced across the manicured lawn toward the tree shrubs, where I caught a glimpse of her in the distance entering the rainforest. I ignored my father's warning about staying away from the rainforest and ran to its edge, where I stopped and scanned the trees. But I couldn't see my mother. The sun had not yet risen over the horizon and the rainforest remained shrouded in darkness. I scanned the trees, hoping to see something, anything. However, my mother was gone, taken by the rainforest. I heard my father's voice behind me. I turned around and saw him running toward me in his night robe. When he reached me, he quickly scanned me up and down for any sign of injury.

"Are you okay?" he asked breathlessly.

I nodded.

"What were you doing out here?"

"I saw Mama again."

"Stasya, what did I tell you about this rainforest?"

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I lowered my head despondently, knowing I would be reprimanded.

“Please don’t disobey me again. Understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

He took my hand and led me away. I looked back at the rainforest one last time yet failed to see my mother. He tugged my hand, forcing me to look away. As we entered the house, a sharp pain passed through my heart. Would I ever get close enough to touch my mother? Life was teasing me with a glimpse of her presence, but she always eluded me. I spent my seventh birthday feeling lonely and sad. Not even the presents and cake could make me forget I could never touch her.

CHAPTER 15

My father sensed my misery because the next morning he made me a special offer. “How would you like to spend the whole day together today?”

“Don’t you usually work on Saturdays?”

“Not today. I want to spend it with you. What would you like to do?”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything.”

“I want to go swimming.”

My father furrowed his brow. “Isn’t it a little cold to go swimming?”

“But our pool’s heated.”

He hadn’t thought of that.

“Wouldn’t you prefer to see a movie or buy some toys?” he asked.

“No, I want to go swimming. I love being underwater.”

“I didn’t know that.”

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“Yeah, it’s so peaceful and quiet under the surface.”

“Is that what you really want to do?”

I nodded vigorously.

“Okay. We can go swimming, and then we can have lunch together.”

“Can we go to Mama’s favorite restaurant?”

He furrowed his brow again. “You don’t want to go anywhere else?”

“No, I want to go there.”

“Okay. Whatever you want.”

* * *

I caught my father peeking over his newspaper as I swam in our heated pool. The warm water felt soothing and relaxing. When my father wasn’t looking, I disappeared under the surface and swam the whole length of the pool underwater. When I resurfaced, my father was standing over the edge of the pool with an uneasy expression.

“Please don’t stay underwater too long, Stasya.”

“I’m okay, Papa. I’ve done this lots of times.”

“Stasya! Please.”

“Okay, Papa.”

I swam on the surface to appease him before I eventually dipped my head underwater again. I loved the sensation of my body floating freely underwater because it made me feel weightless. Perhaps this is what it felt like being inside my mother. Being underwater was comforting; I wanted to stay down there forever. As I returned to the surface, I caught sight of a dark, swirling mass on the bottom of the pool, near the deep end. I

raised my head above water but couldn't see the object beneath the waterline. I was about to dive underwater to investigate when my father called out again.

"Stasya. What did I say?"

"Okay," I said.

"And don't swim near the deep end of the pool, either."

"Alright."

I reluctantly obeyed my father's wishes but kept glancing at the deep end of the pool for the dark object. Suddenly, it reappeared. I glanced up at my father, who was engrossed in his newspaper, and decided to investigate the object. I took a deep breath and disappeared underwater again.

I swam closer to the deep end of the pool and was completely transfixed by the swirling motion of the dark mass. As I approached the object, I could see that it was long, flowing hair. The mass of hair abruptly swirled upward to reveal a face. It was my mother. She had her eyes closed and was seated in the lotus position at the bottom of the pool. She was wearing a flowing white dress that blended into the white walls of the pool and made her appear like a ghost.

I swam closer to get a better look when her eyes opened unexpectedly. She smiled and held out her arms, beckoning me to come closer. As I swam to her, she began to fade from view. I was within reach, when I stretched out my hand to touch her for the first time. I managed to reach her hand, but it quickly dissolved at my touch before

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vanishing altogether. In a matter of seconds, my mother had disappeared again.

I twirled around and scanned the entire pool in search of my mother. But I couldn't find her. I desperately kept searching for her but was quickly running out of breath. I soon became lightheaded. In my confusion, I no longer knew which way was up or down. I swallowed some water and then heard a muffled splash. I saw a white object rushing toward me with two hands reaching out to grab me. The last thing I saw before I blacked out was a blurred face pressed up against me.

I was unconscious by the time my father pulled me out of the water. I wasn't breathing, and he began performing CPR on me. He pushed down on my chest and expelled water from my mouth. I began coughing. He turned my body to one side to expel more water. I began coughing uncontrollably and started crying. My distraught father raised me up and rushed me away from the pool. In my half-conscious state, I thought I was an angel flying through the air. But I was soon weighed down by overwhelming guilt and sadness, and I began berating myself.

“I'm so sorry, Mama. It's my fault. I'm sorry.”

CHAPTER 16

I slowly opened my eyes and saw white bed sheets that smelled of detergent. I was exhausted, and my whole body ached. I saw my father standing with his back to me as he comforted Yvonne. I glanced around the hospital room and saw I was the only patient. I tried to speak to get their attention but felt too weak. I struggled to keep my eyes open and had to close them. The voices of my father and Yvonne faded in and out as I tried to follow their conversation.

“What if she’s inherited the same curse that afflicted Anastasya and her family before her?” my father asked in desperation.

“That’s why we need to keep her as far away as possible from him,” Yvonne asserted. “That’s the only way to end the family curse.”

“Perhaps,” my father said, unconvinced. “Even if it’s true, that doesn’t solve her problem.”

“That depends on what you see as the problem, Mr. Andersson. Stasya actually welcomes her mother’s presence.”

“But I want her to forget these memories, whatever they are.”

“There are times when she takes on her mother’s persona, and she’s not even aware she’s doing it,” Yvonne said. “Her smile, the look in her eyes, her mannerisms. It’s as though she becomes her mother for a moment. I can’t help thinking she’s in touch with something beyond herself.”

“Reincarnation?” my father asked.

“More than that. Do you believe in spirit possession?”

My father paused. “To believe in that, I would first need to believe in spirits.”

“Do you think Anastasya’s spirit is amongst us?” Yvonne asked him.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I sense her presence within the house, as though she has returned.”

“Or never left ...”

“I’m sure many people have experienced the same longing for someone who is no longer alive.”

“Not like this, Mr. Andersson. Sometimes it can be unsettling to be near Stasya.”

“I wouldn’t blame you for leaving us,” my father suggested.

“No,” Yvonne said emphatically. “That’s not what I meant. I’m happy to stay here with you and Stasya. I

welcome Anastasya's presence in the house. Her spirit lingers in every room, and I find that comforting."

"Perhaps there's a scientific explanation for spirit possession," my father said. "Perhaps Anastasya's memories have been passed on to Stasya."

"Or there may be a psychological explanation," Yvonne said. "What if she has multiple personalities - dissociative identity disorder?"

"I've thought of that, too. But she knows things that only Anastasya knew—things she could not have learnt by merely watching her videos."

"Yes, I know."

"But if Stasya *is* haunted by her mother's spirit ... then she clearly wishes to be with him instead of me."

"Oh no," Yvonne interjected. "Stasya is merely returning to her mother's childhood home—that's all. Besides, Anastasya chose to be with you and not him. And that counts for everything."

"I just want her to end her obsession with Anastasya and be herself. I want my daughter back. I want her to be a normal child."

"Then she needs to interact more with other children," Yvonne said. "She needs to learn to be a child."

CHAPTER 17

I first learned of Lincoln's existence on my eighth birthday, when my father surprised me with the news that he would be coming to live with us. I was equally surprised my father allowed me to look at his family photo album.

"Why didn't you tell me I had a cousin?" I asked incredulously.

"Well ... his mother, my sister ... moved away," he said awkwardly. "Anyway, Lincoln is two years older than you, and he will be coming to stay with us soon."

"For how long?"

"For as long as he wants."

I was ecstatic and studied the photographs of my father and aunt as teenagers. They shared the same features and complexion and also appeared to be close, for he had his arm around her in many of the photographs.

"Is she your younger sister?"

"Yes – three years younger than me."

“What’s her name?”

“Sophia.”

I suddenly remembered seeing the name Sophia on the letters down in the basement and wondered if she were the same person. But her surname was Antonov, so perhaps my aunt had married a relative of my mother’s. I wanted to ask my father so many questions, but I let them rest so as not to upset him.

“She’s very beautiful,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why did she move away?”

“Well, we... didn't get along.”

“But you look so close.”

“We ... we had an argument.”

“About what?”

“We didn’t ... I didn’t agree with her choice of husband.”

“Lincoln’s father?”

“Yes. He ended up leaving her, so ... I was right.”

“Is she coming to live with us, too?”

“No. Sophia died about six months ago.”

“How?”

“She had cancer.”

“What about Lincoln’s father? Is he dead, too?”

“No, he’s still alive.”

“Doesn’t he want Lincoln?”

“I don’t know. He left them before Lincoln was born, so I don’t think he truly loves him. But I want to take care of him, and I want you to have a cousin to play with.”

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“Where does his father live?”

“It doesn’t matter. The important thing is that your cousin will be joining us soon.”

“Who’s been taking care of Lincoln since his mother died?”

“He’s been living with a foster family. They take care of children who don’t have any parents or can’t live with their parents.”

“Why didn’t you ask Lincoln to live with us earlier?”

My father avoided my stare. “I wasn’t sure if he wanted to live with us.”

“But he does want to live with us, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he knows all about you and is excited to see you. I hope you’re excited, too.”

“Yes, I can’t wait to see him. What does he look like?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any photographs of him.”

“He’ll be like my big brother.”

“Yes. I want you to take care of him and welcome him into our family.”

“I will, Papa.”

CHAPTER 18

I wore my favorite dress and nicest pair of shoes as I waited patiently for my cousin to walk through the front door. My father had gone to pick him up from the airport, and I was both nervous and excited to meet him. I wondered if he would like me, or if I would like him. We were going to live together under the same roof, so I hoped we would get along.

When Lincoln finally walked through the front door, he stared at me with piercing eyes. He didn't resemble his mother, Sophia. If anything, he resembled the boy I saw in my vision on the Sherbrooke Falls trail and in the photograph in the basement. Even though I had just met him, I felt as though I knew him. I felt a kindred spirit in Lincoln. He looked as haunted on the outside as I felt on the inside. We had both lost our mothers so I could sense his pain. However, Lincoln had the added burden of being abandoned by his father before he was born. At least I had

a father, even if he didn't show his love for me as much as I needed him to.

As I continued looking into Lincoln's eyes, I suddenly became lightheaded. The house began spinning around, morphing into another time and place. I was now inside a house I had never seen before. Everything looked different except for Lincoln standing by the doorway. At least, I thought it was Lincoln. He resembled Lincoln but appeared more self-assured and assertive. As my father called out my name, I was snatched out of my spell and was back home again.

"Stasya, this is your cousin, Lincoln," my father said as he nudged Lincoln toward me.

I noticed his bony and undernourished frame, which made him look younger than me, even though he was two years older. His pasty skin and sunken eyes made him appear frightened and helpless. He certainly didn't look happy to be here, as my father had indicated. Yet I took an immediate liking to him.

"I'm Stasya," I said, giving him an affectionate hug. However, this unnerved him, and my father gently pulled me away.

"Lincoln is a little tired after the long flight," my father said. "Let's give him space and time to get adjusted to everything."

Lincoln remained silent and stared blankly at me—and everyone else.

"Can I show Lincoln to his room?" I asked my father.
"Of course."

“Come, Lincoln.”

I clutched his thin, delicate hand and led him up the stairs, with my father following us with Lincoln’s suitcase. Lincoln looked bewildered and said nothing as I gave him a quick tour of the house, pointing out each room until we finally reached his room.

“This is your room, Lincoln,” I told him. “It’s next to mine.”

* * *

In the coming days, Lincoln spoke little and gave only monosyllabic answers to questions. He didn’t appear ready or even willing to adjust to his new life with us. But I was happy to give him my love and affection. Having never experienced my mother’s unconditional love, I compensated for it by offering all my love to Lincoln. His helplessness brought out the nurturer in me, and I desperately wanted to take care of him.

Lincoln remained cautious and unresponsive for the first week and didn’t want to play at all. He preferred to lose himself in the books he had brought with him and rarely revealed his thoughts or emotions to anyone. During the second week, I increased my efforts to ease his pain and sadness by reaching out to him.

“I’m sad, too,” I told him. “I don’t have a mother, either.”

I finally elicited a response from him, but it wasn’t what I had anticipated.

“It’s easier for you because you never knew your mother,” he said unkindly.

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“But I still miss not having her,” I said defensively.

“You never had to watch your mother grow sick and unhappy. It’s your father’s fault.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, puzzled.

“Your father refused to speak with her or even help her. She wanted to die so she wouldn’t feel sad anymore over the way your father treated us. Your father killed my mother.”

“That’s not true,” I said indignantly.

“It *is* true,” he said. “Your father killed my mother just like you killed your mother.”

I hated him for reminding me of my guilt over causing my mother’s death. I was deeply hurt by his accusation and stormed out of his room. Yet I was troubled by the revelation that my father had been cruel to his own sister and nephew, and I wanted to know the truth.

CHAPTER 19

I entered my father's study, where he was typing on his laptop, and confronted him with Lincoln's accusations. I was surprised by my new-found confidence. I felt so much like my mother.

"Lincoln said his mother died because of you. Is that true?"

My father was stunned by my brazenness. He stopped typing and slowly turned his head toward me, choosing his words carefully. "Lincoln is sad and misses his mother very much," he said in a measured tone. "He may say hurtful things because of the way he feels."

"He says you stopped speaking to her and refused to let her visit us. Did you?"

He was affronted by my interrogation. "I was doing what I thought was best for her," he said in a raised tone.

"So, it is true?"

“Stasya, the man she was with, Lincoln’s father, was not a nice man. He didn’t really love my sister or want to be with her, and we all tried to convince her not to marry him. She eventually left him before Lincoln was born because she also realized he wasn’t a good husband and wouldn’t make a good father.”

“Did Sophia want to live with us after Lincoln was born?”

“She never asked me,” he replied hesitantly.

“Why didn’t you ask her?”

“It’s not as simple as that, Stasya.”

“Were you still angry with her?”

“She knew I distrusted him and had warned her against him many times. I couldn’t forgive her for marrying him.”

“Did you know she was not well?”

“Of course not. I only found out just before she died. Otherwise, I would have asked her to come live with us.”

“Why didn’t you ask her to live with us much earlier?”

He struggled for a response before he finally revealed his true feelings.

“I didn’t want that man coming back into her life or back into this house again,” he replied vehemently. “I wasn’t going to stand for that.”

“But she was your sister and Lincoln’s my cousin. Why were you being so mean to them?”

“If Lincoln doesn’t want to live with us, he can go back to his foster parents,” he replied angrily. “I’m not forcing him to stay with us.”

“Then why is he staying with us?”

“Because I thought it would make you happy, but I guess I was wrong. I guess I’ve never made anyone happy.”

He slapped shut his laptop and stormed out of the study, leaving me torn and confused.

* * *

I stood outside Lincoln’s bedroom door as he was reading a book, hoping I could win back his trust.

“Can I come in?” I asked contritely.

“It’s your house,” he said coolly.

I entered the room, sensing it would not be easy to win him over.

“I spoke to my father. You were right. I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to be here.”

“I don’t mind being here. I just really miss my mum, and I’m angry over how she was treated.”

“I know. It was wrong. But ... my father is a good person—most of the time. He’s very strict sometimes, and I don’t like that. But I know he loves me. And I think he loves you, too, and wants you to stay.”

“What about you? Do you want me to stay?”

“Of course. You’re my cousin. You’re the only family I have. We have to stick together.”

He nodded, which comforted me.

I continued. “My father has been sad since my mother died because he loved her very much, so he knows how you feel.”

“I wish I could bring her back.”

“You can. I do it all the time.”

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“What do you mean?”

“My mother comes to me whenever I think of her.”

“You mean like a ghost?”

“Yes, but I’m not scared because she doesn’t hurt me. She’s always happy to see me.”

“Does she say anything?”

“She doesn’t stay long enough to say anything. I only see her for a moment. I think she wants to tell me something – but I can never get close enough to her. I just wish I could touch her the way you touched your mother. I’m sure your mother hugged and kissed you many times.”

“That’s what I miss the most.”

“Every time I try to touch my mother, she disappears. I don’t think I’ll ever get to know what it feels like to touch and hold her.”

“I’m sorry I said you killed your mother.”

“That’s okay. It’s true, anyway.”

“You didn’t mean to.”

“Papa says mama sacrificed her life for me, so I want to sacrifice my life for her when I’m older.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. I can feel her inside me most of the time. I want her to do all the things she can’t do anymore because she’s no longer alive. I want her to feel what I feel.”

CHAPTER 20

It took almost a year for Lincoln to fully forgive and accept my father. In that time, my father showed great remorse for disowning his sister and worked hard to make it up to his nephew. Lincoln eventually came to regard my father as his father, never having met his own father. I'm not sure I wanted to know or meet Lincoln's father, either, given he aroused so much hatred in my father. My father never referred to Lincoln's father and rarely spoke about Aunt Sophia, so I was left to imagine what might have transpired between them. Perhaps Sophia's spirit was also among us, haunting my father for the poor way he had treated her.

As for my mother, I experienced less of her presence after Lincoln's arrival. Although I missed her, having Lincoln around was a soothing substitute. I stopped sleepwalking and falling into trances, but I began displaying mannerisms that caused my father equal

concern. In Lincoln's presence, I increasingly took on my mother's persona and began speaking and acting as her. Perhaps Lincoln intensified my mother's presence within me or perhaps I merely yearned to become more like her in Lincoln's presence. I wasn't sure.

While my father welcomed my growing confidence and openness, at least in Lincoln's company, I could tell he was ambivalent about the changes within me. He was uncertain of my growing independence and wounded by my waning reliance on him. However, he was grateful to hear laughter in the house and noted the equally positive effect I had on my cousin. Lincoln was no longer withdrawn and self-conscious and became more open and relaxed in my presence.

I became so involved with Lincoln that I gradually came to think of him as more than a cousin and began to have romantic feelings for him. Or perhaps he just elicited those feelings within me. Whatever the reason, I decided to mark my childish love for him by making him a beaded stacking ring, which consisted of three sets of alternating red and black beads. I proudly presented the rings to him one day.

"They're eternity rings," I explained. "*Eternity* means 'forever.'"

"I knew that," he uttered.

"Do you like them?"

"Yes. They're nice."

"Can I put one on your ring finger?"

"Sure."

“You can then put mine on my ring finger.”

“Okay.”

After we exchanged our eternity rings, I made a solemn proclamation. “I made these rings because we’re soul mates.”

“What’s a soul mate?”

“It means we’re meant to be together, and these rings will help keep us together. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I would.”

I had never liked boys much before meeting Lincoln, so I didn’t know what to make of my strong affection for him. I wanted to spend all my time with him and took delight in pleasing him. Perhaps my romantic leanings were because I hadn’t grown up with any relatives my own age and had confused sisterly love with romantic love. In any event, I developed a deep, emotional attachment to Lincoln, and he eventually reciprocated my love for him.

Our first romantic encounter occurred while we were playing a game of tag in the rear garden under a sunny, blue sky. We were shrieking with laughter and running barefoot in dizzying circles on the thick grass before disappearing behind the tall tree shrubs and out of sight from the others. I became giddy and suddenly lunged at him, causing him to fall down with his back on the grass. We both giggled uncontrollably as I lay on top of his prone body, pinning his arms around his head to prevent him from squirming away.

As I looked into his eyes, I found myself drifting again to another time and place. But Lincoln wasn’t under me.

In his place was the young boy whose apparition I had seen at Sherbrooke Falls. I was now in a different rear garden with different sights and smells. I looked deeply into the boy's eyes and felt a deep love for him—beyond anything I had experienced before and which overtook my whole being. I wasn't sure where this emotion was coming from and I was surprised that something this strong could reside within me.

I was suddenly yanked from that moment in time and found myself draped over Lincoln again. He was laughing uncontrollably and trying to break free from under me, but I pressed my body down hard on him. We began squirming in tandem as I tried to keep him pinned down. As I rubbed my pelvis up against his in a circular motion, my body tingled with a pleasure that was new to me. Suddenly, I wanted to kiss his lips.

I stopped giggling and looked deeply into his eyes. He soon stopped struggling, and the silence between us was tinged with expectation. I pressed my mouth against his and kissed him softly. He didn't react. Or perhaps he didn't know how to react. I kissed him again and pressed my pelvis harder up against his torso and moved my hips in a slow, circular motion. When I stopped kissing him, I could see he was self-conscious and unsure what to do. I was equally surprised by my assertiveness and started giggling to mask my embarrassment. He soon joined me, and I peeled my body off him. I helped him to his feet, and we continued our game of tag as though nothing had happened.

LUIGI SANTO

From that moment on, we continued our liaison behind the closed doors of our respective bedrooms, keeping it a secret from my father and everyone else. Kissing Lincoln made me feel grown up because I knew I was indulging in things only adults did. I also enjoyed the sensation of pressing my hips up against his and would often lie on top of him whenever we kissed, although he would sometimes lie prone on top of me.

As my relationship with Lincoln blossomed, I found myself transforming into my mother. I took on more of my mother's characteristics, and often practiced her mischievous and alluring smile on him. He seemed to appreciate my affection and attention. Yet, I never could fully understand my strong attraction for Lincoln and not for other boys, which I found unsettling. Kissing my cousin felt wicked and slightly perverted, and I wondered whether there was something wrong with me. However, I couldn't stop myself and we allowed our secret romance to blossom. While my desire for him was tinged with guilt, I was also energized by our daring to do something that others might consider taboo. Yet, I also loved him in a maternal way, often stroking his hair whenever we were lying close to each other because he said it reminded him of his mother.

CHAPTER 21

My blissful time with Lincoln came to a harrowing end when I was nine, almost two years after he came to live with us. I returned home one Saturday afternoon after shopping with Yvonne and found Lincoln by the front door dressed in his best clothes. He was standing dejectedly next to two large, packed suitcases, and his eyes appeared red from crying. My father greeted me with an apologetic look as he placed his arm around Lincoln. I ran up to Lincoln, but he looked away and lowered his head in despair.

“What’s wrong,” I asked him. “What’s happening?”

“My father is taking me away to live with him.”

“Why?”

Lincoln shrugged. I looked up at my father, demanding an explanation. “Why, Papa?”

My father took my hand and ushered me into the living room to calm me down, but I was devastated. I was also

disappointed that my father and Yvonne had planned the shopping spree as a ruse to keep me away from Lincoln while they executed his exit to lessen my pain and sorrow. Yet gifts alone could not console me, as I was losing the person I loved most.

“Don’t you want Lincoln to stay with us anymore?” I asked my father.

“Of course I do. You know I love him. But his father wants him now.”

“When did this happen?”

“I’ve known about it for several months, but I didn’t tell you earlier because my lawyers and I thought we could resolve the matter without going to court. We went to a pre-court hearing, where we argued that his father had abandoned Lincoln before he was born. However, a judge has ruled otherwise, and we’re powerless to do anything. Lincoln’s father and his lawyers are coming to pick him up this afternoon.”

“But you told me his father doesn’t love Lincoln.”

“Not as much as I do.”

“You told me he was a bad person. Is he going to hurt Lincoln?”

“No, of course not.”

“I don’t understand. Why does he want Lincoln now after so many years?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps to hurt me.”

“Why does he want to hurt you?”

“We both ... wanted the same thing. I won and he lost. And he has been angry at me ever since.”

“You have to stop this,” I said.

“He is Lincoln’s natural father, and he is legally allowed to take him.”

“But we’ve been looking after him for a long time, and his father abandoned him.”

“That’s why I thought we would win, but he told the judge that he never knew about Lincoln and that my sister left him to prevent him knowing about his son.”

“Can’t you ask our lawyers to try again? I want to speak to the judge and tell him how much we love Lincoln.”

“We’re not subjecting you two to any more pain and stress by taking this to court. And even if we did, there is only a slight chance we would win. However, I’ve instructed my lawyers to demand that you and Lincoln continue seeing each other. I requested that Lincoln be allowed to visit us two weekends a month.”

“Lincoln belongs here with us,” I insisted. “You can’t let them take him away.”

“I’m as upset as you are, but the law is on his father’s side.”

“You said you were going to adopt Lincoln.”

“And so I was. It was when Lincoln’s father learned of the adoption that he stepped in and stopped it.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know.”

Tears streamed down my face at the thought of losing Lincoln. My father tried to console me, but I pulled away and ran out of the room. I needed to be with Lincoln. As I

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returned to his side, he could tell by my face that his fate was inevitable.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” he asked me glumly.

“I’m not going to let him take you away,” I said defiantly.

“Your father said there’s nothing we can do.”

“I’ll speak to your father. I’ll tell him that we love you and how happy you are living here. If he really loves you and wants you to be happy, he will let you stay with us.” I then whispered in his ear as tears welled up in my eyes, “Remember, we’re soul mates. We can’t be separated.”

CHAPTER 22

I stood staunchly by Lincoln's side as we awaited his father's arrival. When the doorbell eventually rang, it reverberated like a death knell throughout the subdued house. I squeezed Lincoln's hand as Dennis, our butler, opened the door to two imposing men wearing dark business suits. They didn't look like lawyers. One man looked to be in his thirties and was tall and muscular. The other man was in his fifties and possessed a thickset neck and barrel chest. The older man offered Dennis a folded piece of paper, which presumably was the court order decreeing that Lincoln's father was the legal guardian of his child. Dennis took the paper and looked askance at my father, who simply nodded despairingly.

The two strange men marched into the hallway and zeroed in on their target. I stood in front of Lincoln, refusing to let them take my cousin. The older man snatched me and held me in place while the younger man

charged past me to Lincoln and snatched him. Lincoln reached out his hand toward me, and I stretched out my hand to grab him. We locked hands and began screaming as the two men began pulling us apart. My father tried to calm us down, but nothing could soothe our torment. The two men continued to manhandle us and eventually succeeded in separating us by force. My father jostled with the two men and then raised his voice in anger.

“Let them go,” my father said. “You’re hurting them.”

“We have the legal right to take him,” shouted the older man.

“He belongs to Mr. Antonov,” said the younger enforcer.

“Let him go,” my father said furiously. “I will take him to his father.”

However, the two henchmen refused to let Lincoln or me go free. Suddenly, a deep, thundering voice boomed from outside the front door, cutting right through all the commotion.

“Let them go,” the voice told the two enforcers, who immediately obeyed the command.

We all stood still and turned toward the door. I smelled the man before I saw him. I remembered the citrusy and spicy cologne from somewhere but couldn’t place it at that moment. The man entered the entrance hall with great majesty. He sauntered toward us wearing a cream-colored linen suit with matching fedora, a blood-red tie, and dark sunglasses. I couldn’t immediately recognize his face, but his presence seemed familiar. He moved toward me, and I

felt like a weak prey, trembling in the presence of a powerful predator who was about to consume me.

Lincoln's father removed his sunglasses and fedora to finally reveal his face. I gasped in astonishment. My uncle was the same man I had first seen outside my mother's mausoleum and in the photograph on the basement wall. He had the same wild look in his eyes as he glared at me.

I quickly scanned his left hand and noticed the eternity ring on his index finger—the same ring I wore around my neck. I glanced back at him, and his stare cut right through me, paralyzing me with his presence. I was powerless to do or say anything. I wanted to despise him, as my father despised him. I wanted to berate him for taking Lincoln away from me, but I stood there staring at him, inexplicably drawn to his face and unable to look away from his penetrating eyes. I was ashamed of myself for not standing up for Lincoln as I had promised, but I was consumed in my uncle's presence.

My uncle appeared to be equally entranced by me. He offered me a friendly smile, but even that looked menacing to me. He then moved toward Lincoln, who was likewise intimidated by his commanding presence, and extended his hand with a smile. Lincoln offered a cautious, limp hand in return.

"Hello, Lincoln," my uncle announced. "I'm your father."

Lincoln remained silent, unsure how to respond to the man who had caused his mother so much pain and was now causing him further pain by separating us. I suddenly

remembered my pledge to Lincoln and regained control of myself. I moved in between the two and looked directly at my uncle.

“Please let him stay with us,” I said in a soft voice.

He lowered his gaze toward me and went down on one knee. His warm breath was as overpowering as his cologne. For a moment, I was afraid of what he might do to me.

“Hello, Stasya,” he said with disarming affection. “Do you know who I am?”

I was too stunned to speak and merely shook my head.

“My name is Gabriel Antonov. I grew up with your mother. We’re first cousins, just like you and Lincoln.”

He offered me his hand, which I took cautiously. His handshake was strong yet gentle. However, the only thought going through my mind was that he had grown up with my mother. He knew my mother longer than my father had, longer than anyone standing there at that moment had known her. I was caught completely off guard. I desperately wanted to ask him questions about my mother and her childhood, but I was also mindful of the fact that he was responsible for my current pain.

“Please don’t take Lincoln away from us,” I implored him. “We love him so much.”

“I want to love him, too,” my uncle replied. “He’s my son, and I want him home.”

“But I’ll miss him.”

“Stasya, you’re always welcome to visit Lincoln at my home any time. I don’t live very far from here. You can

visit him every day if you wish, so you won't actually be separated."

My father threw a searing look at Gabriel before wedging his body between us, unwilling to let my uncle even look at me. Gabriel stood up and confronted my father with a condescending smile. He wasn't intimidated by my father's show of aggression. I moved out of my father's shadow and approached my uncle again. However, my father quickly grasped my shoulders and held me close to him, standing his moral ground against the more physically and mentally imposing Gabriel.

My uncle reached out his hand to Lincoln, who reluctantly accepted it. He knew resistance was futile and followed his father out the door, along with the two minders. Lincoln looked back at me one last time as tears ran down his face. I was heartbroken but also ashamed I had not fought harder to stop my uncle from taking him away. I started crying, and my father put his arm around me. I then sensed something in my clenched fist. I opened my hand and looked down to reveal the eternity ring I had made for Lincoln. I must have pulled it off his finger as we struggled to grab hold of each other. The special bond that had kept us together had now been completely severed.

CHAPTER 23

The loss of Lincoln affected me more deeply than anyone knew, and I was never the same person afterward. I held on to my melancholia longer than I should have because I felt empowered by my misery. I preferred pain to feeling numb. I desperately missed our secret liaisons and didn't want to return to the lonely life I had lived before Lincoln's arrival. I didn't want to get used to life without him.

With Lincoln gone, I had lost my other half, and I struggled to adjust to his absence. I had also lost my connection to my mother's lively spirit. Gone was the confidence and vitality that Lincoln had brought out in me. I quickly reverted to my former introverted and self-effacing self.

I asked my father many times to let me visit my uncle's house to see Lincoln, but he steadfastly refused. And my uncle refused to send Lincoln to our house. My father also

refused to tell me where Gabriel lived, afraid that I would try to visit him. As such, Lincoln and I were caught in the middle of a standoff between my father and my uncle—casualties of their own personal war. I did not understand why my father hated my uncle so much and I gradually grew to resent being kept away from Lincoln. As for Gabriel, I was attracted to and repelled by him in equal measure.

I had become so fixated on my love for Lincoln that I began blocking out the outside world. I entered a transcendental state in which I focused solely on my heart and mind to the total exclusion of my outer world, which seemed to hold no happiness for me. Mired in depression, my sleepwalking and trances resumed and I began seeing apparitions of my mother again. Yet even those did not comfort me, as I was still not able to get close enough to touch her. My mother's apparitions tantalized me with something I could never attain, and I eventually accepted the sad fact I would never be able to hold her or experience her unconditional love.

My mind deteriorated to such a fragile state that during one of my daytime trances I found myself in the rainforest one Saturday afternoon with no knowledge of how I got there. I may have been following an apparition of my mother but I couldn't remember. Once within the forest, however, a compulsive desire to explore it overcame me. I trekked deeper and farther into the woodland than I had ever done before. I soon realized it wasn't the rainforest that intrigued me so much but what lay on the other side

of it. My body tingled with excitement as I approached the heart of the rainforest. Although I didn't know what delight or danger would await me on the other side, images of Gabriel's face and the sound of his voice reverberated in my head with each step I took. I plodded through until I gradually saw more daylight between the trees, and was thrilled by the prospect of getting closer to some highly anticipated revelation.

However, before I could go any farther, my father found me and put an end to my journey. As he escorted me back home, I kept looking back, hopeful and yet anxious of catching a glimpse of my uncle. I hoped he had also entered the rainforest to meet me. In any event, I did not discover what lay on the other side of the rainforest that day.

* * *

My father became distressed by my miserable state, but he believed it was caused by something other than Lincoln's absence. Instead, he blamed my behavior on the malicious influence of the house or, more specifically, my mother's spirit. Although he had refused to fully acknowledge this notion, my increasingly erratic behavior finally convinced him otherwise. After discussing my situation with Yvonne, they both agreed that the best thing for all concerned was to separate me from the house. Because the house had been in my father's family for over eighty years, there was no question of him parting with it. Therefore, the only other option was to send me away to boarding school. I

was devastated when I learned the news and was determined to change my father's mind.

"Why are you sending me away?" I wailed.

"Because you'll have far greater adventures and experiences in boarding school," my father said.

"But I like it here."

"You've been lonely here ever since Lincoln left. At boarding school, you'll be sharing a room with a girl your own age so you won't ever be alone."

"I like being alone."

"I want you to spend more time with children your own age," he said, raising his voice.

"I can do that here."

"I want you to spend more time away from the house."

"But why?"

"This house is making you ill. Your situation is getting worse. I've made up my mind. You're not staying in this house any longer."

His tone had such finality that I knew I couldn't argue with him. First, Lincoln had been taken away from me; now, I was being taken away from my beloved home. I felt betrayed by my father for not only keeping me away from Lincoln but also separating me from my mother's presence, which, ironically, was the only thing that seemed truly real to me.

My father continued. "Besides, you'll be coming home two weekends a month, so it's not as though you won't be seeing us or this house again."

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I wasn't placated. I had never spent more than one night away from this house, and now he was asking me to spend weeks away from it and my mother. As I counted down the days to my exile, I prayed for divine intervention to change my father's mind or to change my own fate. I hoped a guardian angel was watching over me, and would take pity on me to ensure I would not have to endure this ordeal.

CHAPTER 24

Salvation was not at hand. On the day of my confinement, I sat dejectedly in the car as my father drove for over two hours to reach my new school. We were so far away from home that I may as well have been sent to another country.

As we drove into the grounds of the boarding school, I looked up at the imposing, high walls that were to imprison me. My enforced separation had widened the tenuous divide between my father and me, and I chose not to hold his hand as he escorted me inside the school. I could never forgive him for abandoning me.

* * *

Even though the school staff and other students were kind and welcoming, I chose not to speak from the moment I stepped inside the school. I felt as though I didn't belong there and would never find my place within the walls. On my first night there, I was completely desolate after having

lost my connection to my mother. That night was the most painful of all. I remember clutching my mother's eternity ring and holding the chain like a rosary bead, praying to be sent home so we could be reunited.

During my first week of classes, I kept to myself and rarely spoke to anyone. I avoided my buddy—an older student who had been assigned to orient me to the school. In my distress, I had no appetite and refused to eat or drink. I eventually fell sick and was hospitalized in the school infirmary.

* * *

The school principal quickly summoned my father, who rushed to my school and was eventually referred to the residing doctor on campus. When my father saw me lying on the infirmary bed, he was shocked to see me connected to an intravenous drip and a heart monitor. My body was shaking with a fever, and it hurt my eyes to open them. I saw his shocked face and was grateful to see him again, but I couldn't keep my eyes open. I could barely make out what he was saying but could sense the pain and anxiety in his voice.

“What's wrong with my daughter?” he asked.

“To be honest, we're confounded by her symptoms,” the doctor said. “Has she been seriously ill in the past?”

“No.”

“Has she displayed any unusual behavior or exhibited any mood swings?”

“Well, she wasn't happy with my decision to send her to boarding school.”

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“This will sound horrible, but I must ask you a difficult question.”

“Go ahead,” my father said, bracing himself for the worst.

“Has she ever suffered from any type of ... substance dependence?”

“You mean like drugs or alcohol?” my father asked incredulously.

“It’s a horrible question, I know.”

“No, of course not. None. Why would you even ask that?”

“Well, she’s displaying the same physical and mental symptoms of someone experiencing withdrawal. Her body keeps shaking in a frenzy as though she is experiencing delirium tremens.”

“Like alcohol withdrawal?”

“Or barbiturate withdrawal.”

“No, no. That’s not possible.”

“She’s been unable to sleep at night or concentrate during the day, and she exhibits behavior that is typical of acute substance addiction. Do you have any idea what would account for her condition?”

My father knew the true reason for my symptoms but was unwilling to believe it or even acknowledge it. If I truly were possessed by my mother’s spirit, then it was pining to return home to reenergize its life force. The distance from home had caused my mother’s presence to wither within me, and it was taking me down with her. It was as though my mother’s eternity ring had been

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weakened by its separation from the other two matching rings and was demanding to be reunited. From that moment on, I knew my father began to think of my mother's spirit as a malevolent force—one that could not only enliven and embolden me but also deplete and destroy me. He knew he had no choice but to take me back home as soon as I was well enough to travel.

CHAPTER 25

I began to recover as soon as I returned home. My body stopped shaking, my skin regained its color, and life gradually returned to my eyes. Even though my health had not fully returned to normal, I was happy to be home again and to sense my mother's strong presence within me and around the house.

However, my father was still concerned for my well-being. My affliction was taking its toll on me, and he wanted his daughter back and well again. Over the many years he had sought medical and psychological help for me, no one had been able to cure me, let alone explain what was wrong with me.

That's when Yvonne suggested he turn to an unorthodox healer—a counselor and therapist who dealt with children afflicted with spirit possession. My father was cautious about handing his child over to an untrained and non-credentialed layperson. However, Yvonne

convinced him they needed to look beyond the usual array of doctors and psychologists for my condition. They needed to look beyond the science they knew.

Bronwyn Harris resembled a middle-aged elementary school teacher and possessed a booming voice despite her short stature. What she lacked in medical and scientific knowledge, she made up for in practical experience in helping many children with similar afflictions progress to a full recovery. Yvonne would later tell me how my father sat squirming in Ms. Harris's office, scoffing at the plaques and diplomas on her office wall that were all made to resemble university degrees. My father got right to the point.

"Can you cure her?" he asked.

"Before I can answer that, I would need to see your daughter," Bronwyn replied.

"What is the average length of time you're used to dealing with?"

"It can take days, weeks, or months. Every case is different. Firstly, I need to establish the reason your daughter has been chosen as a vessel for her mother's incarnation."

"So you think my daughter is possessed by my wife's spirit?"

"No, I'm not saying that. Stasya may be recalling past memories that belonged to her mother. She may have psychic abilities and be able to read thoughts. Or she may need psychiatric or medical assistance and have no use for

me at all. But I do need to see Stasya before I make a diagnosis.”

“If, for argument’s sake, my daughter is possessed by her mother’s spirit, how would you go about treating her? Generally speaking.”

“Well, generally speaking, I would need to establish the motive of the spirit’s return. Why has it returned? Why has it chosen this child as a conduit for its return? Is it acting as a caretaker or guardian, or does the spirit need to take care of unfinished business? That’s why I need to know as much as I can about your wife and her state of mind at the time of her death.”

My father shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Yvonne knew he was regretting being there.

“Why would you need to know that?” he asked Bronwyn.

“By knowing the reason a spirit has returned, I am able to help it resolve any issues it may have. The spirit can then leave the child’s body and return to the spirit realm.”

“Can’t you just release whatever spirit has taken hold of her?” he asked impatiently.

“No, I cannot,” she said emphatically. “I need to know everything about your family history.”

“I don’t like to speak openly about my family.”

“I appreciate that. It may take time for you—and Stasya—to open up to me. Or it may not happen at all. I am aware of my intrusion into your private lives, but I also need to know the purpose for Anastasya’s return into your daughter’s life.”

“Assuming you can uncover the reason, how can you be sure that she can be—”

“Exorcised from your daughter’s mind and body?”

“Yes. What if she doesn’t wish to leave – or if Stasya is unwilling to let her go?”

“That has happened several times in my experience, which is why it is important that we act quickly before her mother’s spirit establishes an irreversible hold on your daughter.”

“How?”

“As part of her recovery, Stasya must return to her mother’s final resting place to help them both say good-bye to each other.”

“It can’t be done any other way?”

“Not in my experience. To ensure the spirit’s permanent release, the host must return to the place of burial. Why? Is there a problem?”

“I’m uncomfortable with all of this.”

“I understand, Mr. Andersson. But you must also consider the strain your daughter has been under. She has gone through a lot and needs to get better and be herself.”

However, my father remained staunchly silent as he deliberated on the intrusion into his family life. Bronwyn and Yvonne exchanged knowing glances. Predictably, my father declined to use Bronwyn’s services. He thought he could cure me all by himself.

CHAPTER 26

My father carried me through the cemetery, for I was still too frail to walk. When we reached the family mausoleum, he lowered me to the ground and took out his keys. As he unlocked the iron doors, I glanced at the two winged angels and wondered if they would come to life again. Their eyes appeared to be staring directly at me; I was transfixed. Suddenly, one of the stone angels twitched. At least, I thought it did. As I waited for the angel to move again, my father called out to me.

“Stasya. Let’s go inside.”

He took my hand and escorted me inside the mausoleum, where we stood directly in front of my mother’s photograph.

“Are you ready?” he asked me.

“Yes, Papa.”

“I want you to say good-bye to your mother. Exactly like we rehearsed.”

I nodded reluctantly.

“I know it’s very difficult for you to let her go, but you’re hurting Mama,” he said.

“Because she can’t enter heaven?”

“That’s right. And you’re hurting yourself because you can’t be yourself. I know you want to hold on to Mama because you love her, but she wants you to live your own life and be your own person. She wants you to let her go, but she won’t because she thinks you’re afraid to be without her. We both want you to be brave and prove you are old enough and strong enough to let her go. It’s important that you say good-bye to your mother now. Can you do that?”

I nodded.

“Good. Go ahead.”

I opened my mouth and mumbled inaudibly.

“Louder, Stasya,” my father said.

“Good-bye, Mama. I won’t hold you back anymore. Please go to heaven.”

We then said the Hail Mary prayer, and I said my final good-bye to my mother—that is, I tried to say good-bye to her. My mind wanted to say good-bye to her because I didn’t want my father to be unhappy with me anymore, and I was tired of feeling powerless and confused. My body also needed to say good-bye to her because my mother was making me unwell. However, my heart had a much harder time letting her go.

As I attempted to disconnect myself from my mother, I could not sense her spirit leaving my body. Instead, it felt

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as though I was suppressing her presence deeper within me, exiling her to the darkest corners of my mind, where I needed to keep a guarded distance from her; much like caging a wild animal that appeared tame but would spring out and attack without notice if I failed to keep the cage locked. I knew I had to be vigilant from then on and keep my distance from her. Otherwise, I would fall under her spell again. As much as I loved her and wanted her presence within me, I knew she was hurting me, and this was hurting my father. In the end, I was unable and unwilling to say a permanent farewell to my mother. The best I could do was to keep her locked inside the basement of my soul.

* * *

Over the next few days, my condition improved to the point where I could go outside the house. I sat in my sun chair and smelled the fragrant flowers in the air, as the warm, soothing sun caressed my skin. I heard the delightful songs of birds in the distance and searched in the direction of the tall tree shrubs, where I saw movement underneath. I raised my head from the sun chair and thought I had seen a flowing white dress disappearing behind one of the tree shrubs. I slowly pushed myself up from my sun chair and ambled in that direction. However, I quickly tired and had to stop. It was then I heard a woman's voice calling my name. I looked toward the forest for my mother but couldn't see her. I heard my name again—this time from behind me. I turned around and saw Yvonne and my father approaching me.

“Don’t exert yourself too much, Stasya,” Yvonne said.

“Are you feeling better?” my father asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good. Now, I really would like you to stay home with us, but not if it means you are still seeing and hearing things,” my father continued.

I lied. “No, I haven’t seen anything.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a full-length white dress fluttering between the trees like a butterfly, but I ignored it.

“Are you sure?” Yvonne said.

I deliberately avoided looking in my mother’s direction, but I could still sense her presence nearby.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” my father added. “Because I want you to stay here with us.”

“I want to stay here, too,” I said.

In the following weeks, I occasionally saw and heard my mother’s apparition but always looked away from her or ignored her calls. In time, I refused to acknowledge her presence altogether. Desperate to remain at home, I was prepared to deny my mother’s existence, to the point where I no longer saw or heard her at all. My sleepwalking and sudden trances also eventually stopped. Yet I knew my mother forever resided within me, constantly pressing me to let her out. However, I had to ignore her pleas. From then on, the eternity ring around my neck was the only connection to her I would allow, even though she would never stop being an important presence in my life.

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Unsurprisingly, my life became increasingly dispassionate in the years after my forced separation from Lincoln and my mother—until I met someone who would come to impassion my life in a way I had never anticipated.

CHAPTER 27

As I maneuvered through my early teens, I began to transform physically. My body developed prematurely, and I inherited my mother's shapely figure. However, my burgeoning physical transformation into my mother confounded my father, which made me feel uneasy. Perhaps he wanted me to remain forever a child, as many fathers do, or perhaps he merely didn't want me resembling my mother.

My time with Lincoln had sparked off a sudden desire for romantic love, but I wasn't interested in any of the boys I knew, and this left me frustrated. I yearned for someone who understood me and could match the depths of my emotions. I also began to experience an intense sexual awakening, which was both exciting and bewildering. Did I feel more deeply than other people, or was I merely recalling my mother's strong thoughts and emotions? I often sought release from my sexual

frustration by pleasuring myself, but although this eased my anxiety it never fully satisfied me, because what I most craved was not sexual release but a soul mate.

I didn't know how many other fifteen-year-old-girls yearned for a soul mate, but I did. I believed my amorous cravings were more than an adolescent desire for romantic love. When I fantasized about being in the presence of my soul mate, it felt more powerful than the sum of two hearts beating as one. It made me complete. Yet no one I already knew had the power to make me feel this deeply and sensually, and the realization left me despondent. My passion was as deep as it was intense, and my inability to fulfill this need only intensified my frustration.

As if in answer to my prayers, someone came unexpectedly into my life. The moment was so significant it made me realize there was more to life than could be experienced through the usual five senses. My first meeting with this person confirmed my belief that my mother's spirit was possibly guiding me for some unknown purpose.

One Saturday morning, I experienced a sudden and inexplicable desire to visit the rainforest behind my house, something I had not done for several years. I was impelled to enter it and to venture deep inside, as though something from within the trees were calling me.

As I made my way through the rainforest, I began experiencing memory flashbacks of places that were not my own. I wasn't experiencing an eidetic vision; I hadn't done so for many years. The memories were so strong and vivid that they had to belong to my mother. I could recall

her reminiscences of certain parts of the rainforest with all its sights, sounds, and smells. I soon began hearing distant, muffled voices and ventured deeper into the rainforest toward their source. Strangely, the closer I traveled toward the voices, the less audible they became until they trailed off altogether.

Unexpectedly, I sensed a presence nearby, much like the sensation I experienced in my mother's presence. Once again, I had an out-of-body experience of looking down at myself from above. However, on this occasion, the sensation felt slightly different, as though the presence belonged to someone other than my mother, although I sensed it was someone I knew intimately. For reasons I could not explain or understand, I believed I had sensed Lincoln's presence and proceeded toward him.

After several minutes of walking, the sensation grew stronger, but I still saw no sign of Lincoln. I stopped for a moment, hoping he would soon appear. But he didn't. After waiting dejectedly for a while, I decided to turn back and go home. As I turned, I saw a teenage boy standing a short distance from me, staring directly at me. It wasn't Lincoln. He was probably a year or two older than me—about sixteen or seventeen. He possessed a rugged handsomeness, unlike Lincoln's boyish good looks, and possessed my mother's dark brown eyes. He remained quiet and still, deceiving me into believing he was an apparition. To my surprise, I felt an intense connection to him and couldn't stop myself from approaching him. That's when I realized he wasn't an apparition.

“Hi,” I said curiously.

He didn’t reply.

I tried again. “I’m Stasya.”

He moved toward me. I clenched my fists.

“You look exactly like your mother,” he told me.

I unclenched my fists and moved toward him.

“How do you know what my mother looks like?”

“There are photos of her all over my house. She was very beautiful.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Harrison—Lincoln’s cousin. And your cousin, too.

“What do you mean?”

“Your mother is my aunt.”

I edged closer.

“Do you live with Lincoln and his father?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How’s Lincoln?” I asked excitedly.

“Spoilt as always.”

“I don’t believe you know him at all.”

“I don’t believe you know him, either.”

“Yes, I do. And he’s nothing like the person you described.”

“Well, then, he must’ve changed since he left your house. His father gives him everything he wants. He’ll probably give him his company when he’s older.”

“Well, then, you must be spoilt, too, since you live in the same house with Lincoln.”

“Me?” He laughed to himself. “My uncle doesn’t spend too much of his time with me, which is the way I like it.”

“Why do you live with him?”

“My parents died when I was young.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. My uncle was my father’s older brother. He took me in at the same time he took custody of Lincoln. In fact, the only reason he got custody of Lincoln was on the condition that he become my legal guardian.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“My mother died when I was five. My father began drinking a lot after that, and he died a few years later. I lived in foster homes for a few years until my uncle took me in.”

“Do you live near here?”

“You mean your father never told you?”

“Told me what?”

“We live on the other side of this rainforest, about a ten-minute walk from here.”

“No, he’s very secretive, which I don’t like.”

“I’m sure he’s better than my uncle.”

“What’s he like?”

“I don’t think he likes people. He prefers to be alone. Lincoln and I were raised by nannies and governesses. I’ve never seen him be affectionate, even with Lincoln.”

“Maybe something happened to him in the past that made him that way,” I suggested.

“I think it may have something to do with your mother,” he explained.

“Really?”

“Yeah. He seems to have a love–hate relationship with her, but then again both families have a love–hate relationship with each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your father never told you about our families?”

“No, and I haven’t even see any photos of them.”

“It’s probably a good thing. It’s a little bizarre.”

“Now I really want to know.”

“Well, your maternal grandfather and his brother married twin sisters and even had their wedding on the same day. They were really close and did everything together until they had a falling out, which is why Gabriel’s father left his family.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, but apparently our closets are bulging with skeletons. Gabriel’s mother died three years later in a car accident, so his uncle took him in–your grandfather. But he never got along with his aunt or my dad.”

“What about my mother and Gabriel? Did they get along?”

“I think so, but he says strange things about her when he’s drunk.”

“Like what?”

“Things that only make sense to him.”

“I feel bad for him.”

“My uncle?”

And Lincoln.”

“What about me?”

“I don’t know you well enough to feel anything for you.”

“You’re just as cold as Lincoln said you were.”

“He did not say that.”

“Relax, I’m joking. He always talks about you.”

“Is he here, too?”

“No way. He’s in Switzerland.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“My uncle sent him to an international school. He hates it and wishes he were with me, but he doesn’t know how lucky he is, traveling all over Europe on weekends with the school. Everything paid for. Having fun all the time. Well, at least that’s what I would do.”

“Why aren’t you there with him?”

“I’m not the one taking over my uncle’s business.”

“What are you doing out here in the rainforest all alone?”

“Planning.”

“Planning what?”

“My escape.”

“You’re running away from home?”

“One day.”

“Is your uncle that bad?”

“I just don’t like being controlled by anyone. I want to start living my own life because it could all end so quickly. I’ve seen it happen with my parents.”

“I wish I had your courage. I don’t think I could leave home for a while.”

“You’re stronger than you think.”

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“You clearly don’t know me at all.”

He moved closer to me. “I can see it in your eyes. You have your mother’s eyes. You just need to believe in yourself.”

He held his stare for too long, and I looked away self-consciously. He was about to ask me something when I heard a booming male voice that sent a shiver down my spine.

CHAPTER 28

I heard Gabriel's voice, calling out Harrison's name with frustration. I turned to Harrison, who rolled his eyes at me.

"My uncle," he said. "I'd better get going. Anyway, it was nice meeting you."

"Me, too."

He didn't seem to want to leave and just stood there staring silently at me for a few moments before saying what was on his mind.

"Lincoln misses you a lot," he uttered.

It wasn't what I was expecting him to say. "Tell him I miss him, too," I replied.

As he turned to leave, I grasped his hand, which was warm and firm. "Could you give this to Lincoln for me?" I asked. I unclasped the gold-chained bracelet from my left wrist and dropped it into his palm. He scrutinized me as I folded his fingers to secure Lincoln's gift.

“He’d like that,” Harrison said. “He likes shiny and expensive things.” He looked into my eyes and suddenly said something that surprised me. “Can I have something, too?”

I was delighted by his request but disappointed I had no other jewelry on me. “I don’t have anything else.”

“What about your hair ribbon?” he asked boldly.

“Haven’t you seen a hair ribbon before?”

“My uncle sends me to an all-boys school.”

“Yeah, my father sends me to an all-girls school.”

“So, can I have your hair ribbon?”

“Sure,” I said, smiling.

I unwound my red hair ribbon and offered it to him. He slipped it around his neck and tucked it under his T-shirt, away from view. We both stared silently at each other, not knowing what to say or do. The spell was suddenly broken by Gabriel’s voice, which cut through us.

“Can we meet again?” Harrison asked before taking out his mobile phone.

“Okay,” I said eagerly.

I took out my mobile phone, and we exchanged phone numbers. As I finished entering his number, he leaned toward me and kissed my cheek. It happened so quickly I didn’t have time to react.

“Bye, Stasya.”

I watched him disappear into the trees and mulled over the difference between my two cousins. Harrison seemed earthy and unpretentious, whereas I could picture Lincoln being stylish and elegant. Somehow, I believed Harrison

would still have asked for my hair ribbon over my bracelet if given a choice, possibly because he could smell my scent on the ribbon more distinctly. At least, that's what I believed. I also sensed a mental affinity to Harrison as opposed to the more emotional connection I felt with Lincoln.

As Harrison darted between the trees, I caught a sudden glimpse of Gabriel. I was intrigued by him and his relationship with my mother. Knowing Gabriel was adopted prompted more questions about my mother's relationship with him. I suspected my mother and Gabriel had an extremely close relationship, possibly a romantic one, which is perhaps why my father disliked him so much.

I rushed forward to get a better view of Gabriel. He suddenly looked in my direction. We both froze and stared at each other. In that short moment, I sensed him inside me, exploring me with his penetrating gaze. I was unable to bare his intrusion any longer and looked away. I turned around and scurried back, feeling his presence in me all the way through the rainforest, waning only when I finally reached home.

CHAPTER 29

Meeting Harrison had the same overwhelming impact as first meeting Lincoln almost ten years earlier, although they had each affected me in different ways. While I saw my own fragility and insecurity mirrored within Lincoln, Harrison reflected the person I wanted to be more like. Even though he had been haunted by the loss of both parents, he was still filled with hope about the future. He also had a lot of courage for someone who had been thrown into a household where he was unloved. He had great belief in himself, which is why he seemed to believe in me. But I was not like him. When I saw my father later that afternoon, I interrogated him about Harrison.

“Why didn’t you tell me I had a cousin called Harrison?”

He was blindsided by my question. “Who told you?”

“Nobody. I met him in the rainforest.”

“Even after I told you never to enter it?”

“Why didn’t you tell me they both lived near us?”

“Because I knew you’d try to meet them.”

“But they’re my cousins.”

“I was trying to protect you from your uncle. I did what I did out of love for you.”

“If you really loved me, you wouldn’t keep me away from my cousins.”

“Both Harrison and Lincoln are welcome in this house anytime. I’ve made that request to your uncle many times, but he has continually refused me. There’s nothing more I can do.”

“Why can’t I visit them?”

“Because I don’t want him near you.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

“Because he’s cruel and vindictive.”

I thought my father was being cruel and vindictive for keeping me away from my cousins.

“It’s not fair,” I wailed.

He put his arm around me and softened his tone. “Listen, Stasya. After your cousins turn eighteen, they will no longer be minors, and your uncle will have no legal guardianship over them. If they wish to visit you here, I will gladly welcome it. But until then, there is nothing I can do. Understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“I don’t like this situation any more than you do.”

“I know.”

“Please do me a favor. Please don’t mention *him* in this house anymore.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

As my father walked away, I sensed I had struck a deep nerve in him and wondered what had happened between them that had made him so bitter toward Gabriel. I wanted to know more about Gabriel, but I knew my father would never discuss him. When I quizzed Yvonne about Gabriel, she refused to say anything and begged me not to delve any further into the matter. However, this only served to deepen my curiosity about him.

* * *

I spent most of the following week at school constantly checking my mobile phone in the hope of receiving a text message from Harrison. Yet I also was confused about my feelings for him. Although I was grateful to have someone I could confide in, I feared my attraction to him was purely due to my desire for a passionate relationship—one that was also taboo. Perhaps that was why he was more enticing to me than were other boys. Nonetheless, Harrison felt like a kindred spirit, more so than Lincoln and I desperately yearned to connect with someone deeply. My connection to my mother had waned in the intervening years, and I had never truly connected with my father. Therefore, Harrison was the strongest hope I had for a connection at that point in my life. I did not like how dispassionate my life had become; I felt rootless and ungrounded, as though I were drifting through life without any purpose or meaning, which is why I empathized with Harrison’s restlessness and his desire to be a part of something greater than himself or his family. He was eager

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to chart his own course, as I was, which is probably why we gravitated toward each other.

That Friday, during my lunch break at school, my phone suddenly rang. It was Harrison. We arranged to meet the following day at the same time and place. After that, I couldn't concentrate in my classes, and the whole day dragged as I waited for Saturday to come.

CHAPTER 30

I woke up early the next morning, unable to contain my excitement at seeing Harrison again. That afternoon, I said I was going for a long walk and sneaked into the rainforest for my rendezvous with him. The sky was overcast, and daylight had barely peaked through the tree canopies as I delved into the rainforest. After about ten minutes, when I had reached what I thought was the heart of the rainforest, I was overcome by a disconcerting feeling. I felt as though I had not only lost my way, but that something terrible was about to happen. I buried my fears and remained steadfast, even as the forest grew darker and quieter around me. All I could hear was the rapid beating of my heart as I waited for Harrison's arrival. I held on to my mother's friendship ring like an amulet, as though it would help me ward off any malevolent spirits.

Suddenly, the rainforest grew brighter as the sunrays shone through the treetops. I then heard footsteps running

along the forest floor. Harrison came bursting through the foliage like a tiger bursting through bushes. He seemed comfortable with his physicality, unlike Lincoln, who preferred more intellectual pursuits. Harrison smiled as he caught his breath. I couldn't disguise my delight at seeing him again. I was also touched that he had worn my ribbon around his neck.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said breathlessly.

"That's okay."

"I can't stay long. My uncle will be coming home soon."

"Me, neither. I told my father I was going for short walk to the store."

I waited for him to catch his breath and I suddenly became nervous. I didn't know what to say. He kept staring at me, which made me even more nervous. Neither of us knew how to start the conversation. I was worried our time together was going to be awkward.

"Tell me more about your plans." I said.

"What plans?"

"About running away."

"I want to see as much of the world as possible. I don't want to live in one place too long."

"What would you do?"

"Work from city to city and country to country, learning new languages and meeting lots of new people all the time. I want to experience life. I want to experience everything life has to offer instead of just making a living. I want to feel alive. Living with my uncle is like living in a

cemetery. I don't want to waste my life doing things that don't make me feel alive."

"Me, too. I want to live an impassioned life. I don't want to live life like my father. I think his soul died when my mother did. He's mourned her longer than he knew her. That's too long to waste on sadness. I wish he would move on and find someone else to love again."

"Maybe your mother had that effect on people. My uncle has no one in his life, too. At least, none that I know of. He's becoming colder and more cynical with each year he spends alone. I don't think he has any love left to offer anyone."

"My mother appeared so alive and vibrant in all her videos and photos. I'd love to feel like that all the time."

He gazed silently at me until it became unbearable. "Lincoln was lucky," he said unexpectedly. "I wish I'd known you when I was younger, too."

I blushed and wondered what Lincoln had told him about us. I looked away, embarrassed by his intrusion. Suddenly, his hands were around my hips, and I looked up to see him gazing into my eyes. He tried to look confident and self-assured, but I sensed the wounded child within him, the side he hid from others. I wanted to comfort him and moved my head closer until we touched.

He moved in slowly to kiss me but kept his lips only inches away from mine. It was an unbearably long time but probably only a few seconds. His warm breath touched my skin, and I waited eagerly for the kiss to come. But it never

did. He suddenly pulled his head away from me, as though he had changed his mind.

He raised his head to meet my eyes, but I glanced away in embarrassment. I assumed he didn't find me attractive, and I wanted the moment to end so I could go home and forget about this. However, I knew I would probably dwell on the rejection for days. I didn't want to meet his eyes, but he forced me to by lifting my chin until our faces were so close that we had no choice but to stare at each other. He smiled, and his eyes widened with mischievous delight.

"I want to kiss you so much," he whispered to me.

"Then why don't you?" I asked with a hint of resentment.

His reply totally surprised me—in the best possible way.

"We'll only get to have one first kiss," he said. "I want to delay that moment for as long as possible so we can savor it."

"How long?" I asked with an equally mischievous smile.

"Until it becomes so unbearable that it aches not to kiss each other. That way, our first kiss will be magical."

I never expected him to have such romantic notions. He surprised me with the depth of his feelings. I silently regarded him and must have given him a sassy smile because he chuckled to himself.

"Okay, but you're gonna give in first," I said, taunting him.

"We'll see."

For a moment, I wished I hadn't dared him because he would be liable not to kiss me merely to spite me. I wasn't sure if he were toying with me because he knew I liked him or if his desire for me was genuine. I was as confused about his feelings for me as I was about my feelings for him. I needed to be away from him to understand what we had—or what we hadn't. I made my exit as quickly as possible.

"I'd better go before my father finds out," I told him.

He looked disappointed, which pleased me.

"Yeah, I'd better go, too, before my uncle finds out," he said despondently.

I instantly sensed he would miss me when I was gone. I would certainly miss him. But we would have the expectation of our next encounter. I tried to leave but couldn't move and realized he was holding my hand. He may have been holding it this whole time, but I had felt it only then.

He pulled me toward him to kiss my cheek but caught the side of my mouth. I sensed he wanted to kiss me as much as I did, but I was determined to keep him to his word about delaying our first kiss and pulled my face away. He looked even more disappointed, which brought a tender smile to my face. I couldn't wait to leave him so I could see him once again and experience the overwhelming passion of being reunited.

We quietly said good-bye and went in opposite directions. The farther I moved away from him, the stronger my thoughts and emotions became. I was

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invigorated—but also uncertain—about my feelings for Harrison. Perhaps the fact he was my cousin was the reason I found him intoxicating. It was daring and exciting to be attracted to him, but it was also slightly decadent. Perhaps it was wrong for us to be together. I was not the naïve and innocent child I had been when I knew Lincoln. But maybe that's why I wanted to be with Harrison so much.

CHAPTER 31

Harrison and I met again the following weekend, but I couldn't recall what we spoke about. All I could think of was how long we could both last before one of us lost the waiting game and kissed the other. I refused to yield, but I sensed he was adamant not to break before I did. I stopped talking and moved as close as possible to him until our faces almost touched. I looked defiantly into his eyes and hovered my lips over his, swaying my mouth left and right as I breathed on his skin. I never broke eye contact with him, willing him to surrender to me.

“You're not playing fair,” he said, pouting.

“Surrender to me,” I told him.

He took my hand and gingerly placed it on his chest.

“Feel my heart,” he said.

I was more interested in his muscular chest, which was firm and defined. But he was right. His heart was beating rapidly.

“You did that,” he said with a grin.

“Good!” I said with a smirk.

“I can’t wait anymore.”

He moved his mouth closer to mine, yet it was only a bluff. He made a brief feint toward me and eventually lost the battle. He kissed me—lightly at first, with our lips barely touching—but then he pressed his mouth hard against mine. I pressed my body up against his and wrapped my arms around his neck. He wrapped his hands around my waist so tightly I became breathless, but I didn’t want to come up for air and kept on kissing him.

We were locked in embrace, and our desire quickly spilled over as we continued kissing passionately, delighting in our first real kiss. Suddenly, I found myself drifting into uncharted memories and recalled being kissed like this before in another time and place. I sensed a warm body leaning hard against mine. Images of Gabriel came to mind. Were the memories my mother’s or purely my desire for him? I tried to get Gabriel out of my thoughts by concentrating on Harrison’s warm breath. It finally worked. It felt so right kissing Harrison that I pulled his body closer to me.

Kissing Lincoln had been fun and playful. Yet, kissing Harrison aroused me in way I had never experienced before. It was exhilarating and daring at the same time, even though I knew I would feel uneasy afterward in reflection. However, I just wanted him to keep kissing me and holding my body, which tingled even more than my lips. I found myself feeling aroused by my desire for him,

and any notions of guilt or remorse were lost in a sea of unbridled passion. The more I realized how taboo our love was, the more aroused I became.

We eventually stopped kissing. I resumed looking into his eyes, searching for his true thoughts. I could see by his yielding smile that he was not toying with my affections and was now beholden to me. We stared silently at each other for a while. I couldn't recall if we did speak or what we spoke about. All that flashed through my mind was the memory of his touch—until I saw images of Gabriel again. However, this time it wasn't so easy to eject his face from my mind. That came only when I left Harrison and lost myself to the forest.

Harrison and I saw each other most Saturdays over the following weeks. On some occasions, we would meet after school when we finished early. But because we went to different schools that were located far apart, we could spend only little time together before we had to go home. We mostly kissed, had dinner, watched movies, and kissed some more.

As for sex, we made the same pact to delay it for as long as possible so that we could savor our first time together. To be honest, I think I was the one who made the suggestion. Harrison was gracious enough—and prudent enough—to adhere to the rules. In any event, I was certain to win this battle of abstinence. While I had already lost my virginity before I met Harrison—more out of curiosity and peer pressure than out of any real desire—my first sexual experience was more painful and less

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pleasurable than I had hoped it would be. Therefore, I just wasn't ready to explore my sexuality. However, it was certainly ready for me.

CHAPTER 32

My sexual awakening had its first stirrings during the middle of a cold, wet and windy night, when a loud noise outside my bedroom window awakened me. At first, I thought it was my mother, even though I hadn't been disturbed by her presence for several years. When I heard the noise again, I realized it was thunder. Raindrops tapped lightly against my window. I knew it was going to rain heavily soon because the large tree outside my window swayed in the strong wind. I buried my head under the blankets, listening to the tree branches caressing the window.

Yet, I still couldn't shake the feeling of a strong presence in the room with me. Once again, I heard a tapping against my window. Only this time, it didn't sound like raindrops or tree branches. I raised my head from under my blankets and glanced at the window, where I saw a shadow against the curtain. Someone was outside my

bedroom window. I heard a voice calling my name. I recognized the voice and leapt out of bed. I pulled the curtain and saw Harrison's pale face. I quickly opened the window, letting in a gust of cold wind and splashes of rain.

"Quick. Get inside," I whispered.

His hands were cold as I pulled him inside. His clothes were slightly damp, and he had a large sports bag slung over one shoulder. I shut the window behind him and switched on the lamp. I then ran into my en suite and returned with a towel for him. He was shivering that much he needed my help drying his face.

"How did you get up here?" I whispered to him.

"I climbed the tree," he said as his teeth chattered.

"How did you know where to find my bedroom?"

"Lincoln told me years ago."

"What are you doing out so late?"

"I had a huge fight with my uncle, so I've decided to leave."

"Does he know you've gone?"

"I doubt it."

"You couldn't have picked a worse night. It's going to start raining heavily soon."

"That's why I came by here. Sorry, I didn't know where else to go."

"It's okay. I'm glad you're here. Where were you planning to go?"

"I don't know. I was heading into the city, and I was going to take it from there."

"You weren't even going to tell me?"

“I wasn’t planning on running away until a few hours ago. I called you but your phone was off.”

“Well, you’re not going anywhere in this weather. In the meantime, you need to get your body warm. I’ll run a bath for you.”

“No, I only stopped by to let you know.”

“Don’t argue with me.”

“Okay,” he said. “But I can’t stay long.”

I ushered him into my en suite and turned on the bath tap. I gave him some bath towels and closed the bathroom door behind me. Suddenly, I heard a knock on my bedroom door. I froze. Yvonne called out my name, but I didn’t answer. I didn’t want her to come in, but I didn’t know what to say to keep her out. The door handle started turning slowly. I raced to my en suite and quickly rapped on the closed door.

“Can I come in?” I asked frantically.

“Sure,” Harrison responded.

I saw my bedroom door slowly opening just as I was closing the bathroom door behind me. I stood with my back against the door, forgetting for a moment there was a naked boy in my bathtub. However, I was more concerned about Yvonne discovering Harrison than I was about seeing Harrison naked. Actually, I was fazed at how unfazed Harrison was by my presence. I caught a quick glimpse of his tanned, well-defined body, and my face blushed. I heard footsteps coming toward the bathroom door and signaled for him to remain quiet. Someone

knocked on the door, and I heard my father's voice. I rolled my eyes in frustration. He was there, too.

"Stasya, are you okay?" my father asked.

"I'm taking a bath, Dad," I shouted through the door.

"Is everything alright, honey?" Yvonne asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just felt cold and wanted to take a hot bath."

"Are you coming down with something?" asked my father.

"Do you want me to get anything for you?" Yvonne asked.

"No, I'm fine," I said, exasperated. "Please go back to bed, both of you. I'm fine."

I rolled my eyes toward Harrison, annoyed at their intrusion.

"Okay, then," my father said.

"Let us know if you need anything," said Yvonne.

"I will," I said.

I motioned for Harrison to remain quiet until I was certain they had both left my bedroom. I relaxed only when I heard my bedroom door being closed.

"They're so overprotective," I said.

"At least you know they love you."

"Sometimes I feel like running away, too."

"They don't seem that bad."

"They don't understand me. I don't feel like I belong here."

"You can always come with me."

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I was caught off guard by Harrison's invitation and wasn't sure if he meant it or was merely sympathizing with me. I wanted to accept his offer, but I knew that running away with him was never going to happen, not only because I was too intimidated by my father but also because I felt less mature than Harrison. Even though he was only slightly older than me, he seemed more worldly and experienced. And yet I couldn't bring myself to decline his offer, either, so I just avoided the suggestion altogether.

"I'll put your wet clothes on my heater," I told him. "It won't take long for them to dry."

"Thanks."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yeah. A little."

"I'll get some food for you. And something for you to take."

CHAPTER 33

I watched Harrison eat a ham and cheese sandwich as we sat on my bed listening to thunder and heavy rain splashing against my window. I admired his resolve and maturity to leave home at such a young age to start a brand-new life, although I also knew he disliked living with Gabriel, so leaving home was probably the lesser of two evils.

“Do you have any money?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah, a little,” he said, pretending not to care.

I walked over to my dresser, pulled open a drawer, and took out a large jewelry box. I returned to my bed, opened the box, and retrieved a large amount of cash.

“Here, you can have this,” I told him.

He looked at it with astonishment, as though he had never seen that much money before. I had seen plenty of it, to the point where it may have lost its value to me. But

Harrison certainly realized the value of my gift and was overwhelmed.

“I can’t take this,” he said. “It’s too much.”

“I didn’t earn it. Don’t worry. I’d rather spend it on you than some frivolous possession. Please take it. It’ll make me feel better knowing I helped you.”

I placed the money in his palm and closed his now warm hand.

“Thanks.”

“I wish I had your courage and independence,” I told him.

“Maybe I’m just stupid and reckless.”

“No, you’re not. You’re like my mother. She was confident and independent at my age. Not like me.”

“You’re more like your mother than you think.”

“You keep saying that, but I know it’s not true.”

“It *is* true. You’re just afraid to let that person out. When I look in your eyes, I can see the same inner strength she possessed.”

I was grateful he could see the real me behind my confused and insecure shell.

“But I certainly don’t feel strong,” I said.

“Maybe you need the right moment to let it out. My turn is now. Your turn will come one day. Trust me.”

“I don’t want to hurt my father.”

“Well, I don’t think my uncle would miss me that much. I’ve been so argumentative and moody lately, he’s probably relieved he doesn’t have to put up with me

anymore. I'm glad I don't have to put up with him anymore, either."

He looked out the window. It was still raining, but the worst had passed. "I guess I'd better get going soon," he said with a slight quiver in his voice.

"Nothing will be open for hours. Why don't you just sleep here until morning?"

He looked surprised and grateful at the same time. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"What if someone sees me?"

"I know everyone's movements in this house. They all run like clockwork. Nobody will see you. Trust me." I winked. "What time should I set the alarm?"

"How about five?"

"Okay. Let's get some sleep. It's a big day for you tomorrow."

I set my alarm clock for five and saw him placing his sports bag on the floor.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"I can use my bag as a pillow. Do you have a spare blanket?"

"Don't be silly. Sleep in bed with me."

He wasn't expecting that. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, it'll be cold on the floor. I'll get an extra pillow for you."

"Thanks. Can I use your bathroom to brush my teeth?"

"Sure."

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As I watched him walk into the bathroom, my pulse quickened.

CHAPTER 34

Harrison switched off the light to my en suite and entered the semi-darkened bedroom, which was illuminated only by my bed lamp. As he sat on the bed next to me, flashes of lightning intermittently lit up his face and flooded the darkness. Distant thunder filled the silence between us. I could see hesitancy in his eyes, as though he didn't know where he would be sleeping the following night. Surprisingly, I didn't feel nervous at all. I was happy to be with him.

“Are you scared?” I asked him.

“A little.”

I gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I'm always here to help.”

“Thanks.”

“I wish you didn't have to leave.”

“Me, too.”

“Then stay so we can be together.”

“What would be the point? My uncle wouldn’t let me come here, and your father wouldn’t let you visit me.”

“But we’re together now.”

“Yeah ... true.”

“You can visit me during the night when everyone’s asleep.”

“I don’t want to have to sneak around to see you.”

“If you wait until you’re eighteen, my father said you could visit me any time.”

“Really?” he asked excitedly.

“Yes, both you and Lincoln can visit me.”

Harrison grimaced at the mention of Lincoln’s name, and I regretted bringing it up.

“I don’t know how much longer I can put up with my uncle.”

“I understand,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

“But ... I guess I don’t have to leave right now.”

“Who knows? You may even change your mind about running away,” I said.

“I’ll never change my mind about that,” he insisted. “When I leave, I don’t ever want to come back. It’ll be like going backwards.”

“What about Lincoln?”

“What about him?” he asked guardedly.

“I mean, won’t you miss him?”

“I hardly see him, and we don’t have that much in common, anyway. I don’t feel like I belong to that family. I’m not sure I belong anywhere.”

“Neither do I. But we have each other.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So ... you’re staying?”

“For now.”

I was thrilled and threw my arms around him, kissing him excitedly. He reciprocated, and we began kissing passionately. I suddenly stopped and pulled myself away. He looked confused as I threw him a mischievous smile. I held his hands and lay down on my bed, pulling his body on top of me. My body tingled. I raised his head to look into his eyes. His cheeks were flushed, and his pupils were dilated. We stared silently at each other, intoxicated by our desire. We resumed kissing, moving our bodies together in a slow, rhythmic dance, until I felt him go hard. I raised his head and asked him something that surprised us both.

“Do you have a condom?” I whispered.

He hesitated for a moment and then nodded slowly.

“You were expecting this?” I said, teasing him.

He fumbled for an excuse, but I let him down gently.

“Relax, I want to do this, too.”

“So you gave up first, right?” he said, smiling.

“Do you really want me to answer that, or do you want to have sex?” I asked drolly.

“I gave up first,” he said. “It was me.”

“Correct answer.”

I reached over to my bedside table and switched off the lamp. In the comfort of darkness, I pulled down my pajama pants, and he undressed. As I waited for him, my mind suddenly drifted to another time and place, which

was also in complete darkness. I glanced around the room and saw the shadow of a man reclining against the wall. Was it Harrison, or was I recalling my mother's memory? I felt déjà vu and recalled having sex with someone I knew intimately, even though this was my first time with Harrison.

I sensed a huge weight upon me and was jolted back into the present. Harrison lay on top of me, kissing me passionately. It took a moment for my mind to return to him, and I kissed him back with equal ardor.

"Hold me from behind," I whispered impulsively, catching him off guard.

He placed his hands behind my backside, and I moaned with pleasure. My lack of inhibition and my sexual assertiveness in his presence surprised me. I held his erect penis in one hand and guided him into me, gasping softly as I did so. He slowly began gyrating his body and buried his face into the cushion next to my head. I raised his head up with my hands and looked at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing," I told him. "I just want to see your eyes."

We moved in unison, staring at each other as the heavy rain suppressed our shrieks and moans. But all I could hear was my heart beating in my ears. We swayed to the rhythm of the pounding rain until we reached a crescendo. He finally came and lay on top of me, breathless and exhausted. He raised his head and smiled at me. I kissed him on the lips.

"Did you come?" he asked me.

I wish he hadn't asked me. "No, but you've made me very wet. Naughty boy."

He looked disappointed. "You didn't come?"

"It's okay. I enjoyed it."

But it wasn't okay for him. "I want to try something."

"What?"

"Just lie still."

He raised his upper torso and rested on his forearms. He was still inside me as he moved his pelvic bone until it was directly against my clitoris. It felt slightly uncomfortable at first, but as he started swaying in a rhythmic motion, it felt sensual.

"On my God," I said breathlessly. "Please stop."

"Not until you come," he whispered, gyrating faster, and causing my whole body to shudder.

"Yes, yes, yes," I whispered in quick succession. I put my hand over my mouth to silence my shrieks but it felt so pleasurable I couldn't keep it in. As he gyrated even faster, my torso burned. I raised my hips and pressed my pelvis right up against his, helping him as we gyrated. I sensed I was about to come and held my breath with anticipation.

"I'm coming," I whispered breathlessly.

I saw him grimacing and sensed he was about to come, too. We urged each other on, thrilled at coming together. Suddenly, my body began to tense up in anticipation as he continued thrusting and gyrating. My pelvis started shaking uncontrollably as waves of pleasure surged through my body. I had come, but he kept thrusting until he came shortly after.

CHAPTER 35

Harrison lay down next to me. I peered into his eyes as he caught his breath.

“That felt like an out-of-body experience,” I said.

He looked perplexed. “Is that a good thing?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” I said with a reassuring smile. “It felt like I was above my body, looking down at me. I used to get that feeling whenever I sensed my mother’s presence.”

“I don’t know which part of that answer is more disturbing.”

“Lincoln never told you about my mother?”

“Yeah, he said you used to see her ghost when you were young.”

“I felt so happy and confident whenever I sensed her near me. It felt like she was part of me and I was part of her. I still sense her presence sometimes.”

“You know, there are so many photos of your mother at my uncle’s house, it feels like she’s still alive.”

“That’s how I feel, too.”

“My uncle used to scare us when we were young by telling us your mother’s spirit was always watching over us so he would always know if we were naughty whenever he wasn’t around.”

“I’d love to visit your uncle’s house one day to see her photos,” I suggested.

“What does it feel like when you sense her presence?”

“Most of the time it feels like her spirit is guiding me or leading me somewhere.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I have to figure out.”

He looked silently at me, which was a little unsettling.

“What?” I asked him.

“Just now, in the darkness, you have the same look your mother has in her photos.”

I beamed and rewarded him with a kiss.

“I used to have a crush on her when I was young,” he admitted.

“Really?”

“Yeah. She looked so beautiful and lively. It’s like you’ve brought her back to life.”

I suddenly questioned whether Harrison desired me or my mother. But I needed all the love I could get at the moment, and was willing to accept his adoration.

“How did your mother die?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, and I regretted asking him. But I felt close to him and wanted to get closer.

“She died of ALS when I was eight,” he finally said.

“Is that the same illness Stephen Hawking has?”

“Yeah, she didn’t know what it was at first. Her muscles gradually became stiff and started twitching. Then they began wasting away, and she couldn’t walk or talk properly. She finally had trouble swallowing and breathing. She died a few years after her first symptoms appeared. Most people with ALS die of respiratory failure in three to five years. Hawking is one of the rare exceptions.”

“He’s lucky.”

“I wouldn’t want to live like him for the rest of my life. Nothing would depress me more.”

“But he has such a brilliant mind.”

“That’s his saving grace, which I don’t share,” he said with a chuckle. “But you already knew that.”

“Is ALS hereditary?”

“Yeah, but inheriting the gene doesn’t mean you’re going to develop ALS.”

“It must have been hard for you.”

“It was harder on my father. He stopped living long before he died.”

He suddenly became quiet, and I saw pain in his eyes, so I changed the subject. “What does your uncle do?”

“He owns a software development company. A very successful one.”

“Why does he live in that same house when he could afford something bigger and better?”

“Sentimental value, I guess. It’s where your mother was born.”

I wanted to ask him many more questions about Gabriel and my mother, but he looked tired. He yawned, and our conversation gradually petered out as we both succumbed to drowsiness. We eventually fell asleep with our arms around each other, and I enjoyed a restful sleep.

* * *

When the alarm went off at five, he jumped out of bed to wash his face and quietly put on his clothes. I struggled to get out of bed, as I was still tired. I eventually woke up when he was ready to leave. I got up and looked out my bedroom window to ensure it was safe for him. The rain had stopped, and the dawn sky was clear. He threw a leg over the ledge and halted. His eyes were wide; I assumed someone had seen him. He then leaned toward me and surprised me with a kiss on the lips. I put my arms around him and gave him a hug. He hugged me back but quickly let me go. He climbed out the window and clambered down the side of the house before landing on the grass. He looked up, waved good-bye, and scurried across the lawn to the tall tree shrubs near the edge of the rainforest.

I went back to bed to get more sleep, but images of Harrison’s face and body kept lingering in my mind. I tried to think of something else but began seeing images of Gabriel lying naked in bed with me. It was too confronting, and I tried to push those images out of my mind. However, they kept haunting me. I put on my headphones and listened to music to stop me thinking

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about Gabriel. It worked, and I gradually fell asleep with Harrison on my mind.

CHAPTER 36

Harrison and I continued our clandestine affair for several months, and it didn't take long for me to think of him as my soul mate. It may have been youthful exuberance or emotional immaturity on my part, but that's how I thought about him and I hoped he thought the same. Anyway, I decided to mark my intensified feelings for him by buying him a special gift, which I presented to him one night in my bedroom. He eyed the small, wrapped box with deep suspicion.

“What is it?” he asked tentatively.

“Open it and see.”

He unwrapped it to reveal a small jewelry box.

“Is it a ring?”

“Maybe.”

“Just letting you know upfront that I don't really wear jewelry.”

“That’s okay. You can wear it on a chain around your neck if you want.”

He looked even more unenthusiastic.

“You don’t like wearing chains around your neck, either?” I asked.

“I don’t have any.”

“I’ll buy you one.”

“I’m not really a gift person.”

“Just open the damn present.”

He opened the ring box and revealed a black tungsten carbide ring with a brushed center and chamfered edges across the circumference. I had it made especially for him and waited eagerly for his reaction as he inspected it.

He smiled. “I like it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I do,” he admitted with genuine affection.

I was relieved. Without any prompting from me, he slipped it on his left ring finger. It was a good fit, and he seemed genuinely happy. What I didn’t tell him, however, was that I had a matching ring, which I didn’t wear so as not to overwhelm him. Instead, I wore my ring on my necklace alongside my mother’s eternity ring and well hidden from view. I was so happy and in love with Harrison that I wanted the moment to last forever so I could feel that way all the time.

* * *

Sadly, that night was the last time we were ever this happy. From that day on, our relationship slowly began to unravel. We never had any serious disagreements, but we

soon began arguing a lot, mainly about me. He accused me of changing into someone else—someone he had not fallen in love with. I understood what he meant, for I sensed I was slowly transforming into my mother. But I didn't see this as a bad thing.

Our relationship had allowed me to come out of my sexual shell, and I felt liberated. I began to dress more provocatively, like my mother, who had favored clothes that expressed her sensuality. I wore tight-fitting clothes that hugged my figure and tops with low necklines. Not only had I transformed physically into my mother, but I also took on more of her mannerisms. I was becoming more confident and self-assured, largely because of Harrison's love for me. I liked the changes within me, and I thought Harrison would like them, too. But I was wrong.

Things eventually came to a head when we decided to treat ourselves to a two-night stay at a five-star hotel. I lied to my father by telling him I was spending the weekend at my friend's house. It was our first romantic getaway together, yet we spent the last night in our hotel room arguing about something that had been simmering between us for quite a while.

"You're pretending to be someone you're not," he said.

"Maybe this is the real me," I said.

"I don't know who you are anymore, and I don't think you do, either."

"I'm just trying to work out who I am away from my mother, away from everyone else. Sometimes I don't know where I end or where my mother begins."

“Maybe it’s because you don’t want people to know the real you,” he said. “Even me.”

“Or maybe you’re beginning to realize I’m not as desirable as my mother. Now you can go back to having a crush on her.”

“I love you for you, not because you remind me of your mother.”

“Do you even know what love is?”

“Yes, I do. It means accepting someone despite their faults—loving them especially for their faults.”

I had never thought of love in those terms, and it made me love him all the more.

“I’m sorry for what I said before,” he said contritely. “I’ve got a lot of things on my mind.”

“Is it your uncle? Do you want to talk about him?”

“Do *you* want to talk about him?” he asked sarcastically.

“What does that mean?” I asked defensively.

“Lately, it seems as though you want to talk more about my uncle.”

“I don’t know anything about my mother, and he’s the only one that knew her really well. I’m sorry if you think I’m using you, Harrison.”

“I’m just frustrated with our relationship,” he said bluntly. “I can’t tell my friends about you. We can’t go out together like a normal couple.”

“That’s because we’re not a normal couple—we’re cousins. I don’t want people talking about us behind our backs. And I don’t want my father or your uncle finding out about us and stopping us from seeing each other.”

“So it’s going to be like this for the rest of our lives?” he asked with frustration.

“We’ve talked about this before,” I reminded him. “Now is not the right time.”

“I don’t think there will ever be a right time,” he shot back.

“Is that what you really think?”

“I don’t really know, Stasya. But lately you seem distant. Your body is here, but I feel like your mind is somewhere else. And you don’t say much when we’re together, so I don’t know what you’re thinking.”

“They’re stupid thoughts,” I assured him. “They’re not that important.”

“They’re important to me. I want to understand who you are, but you won’t let me in. You’re not the person I thought I knew.”

“If I’m changing, it’s because of you,” I replied, edging closer toward him. “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been because of you. I can’t express my thoughts and feelings as easily as you can.”

“This is not the way I pictured being with someone,” he said, glancing away sadly.

“Do you want to end our relationship?” I asked him.

“I don’t even know if our relationship ever began.”

“I can’t offer you anything more than this for now,” I explained.

“Well, I want to leave my uncle, and I want you to come with me.”

“You know I can’t do that just yet. Wait a while.”

“I can’t lead this life anymore. We seem to be going in different directions.”

“No, you’re the one going in a different direction,” I accused him.

“Well, this is who I am.”

“And this is who *I* am.”

We stared silently at each other, stewing in our resentment. We knew this was the end, but we didn’t know how to end it.

“I should go now,” he said sadly.

“No, not now,” I said, pleading with him. “Please stay.”

“We’re only delaying the inevitable, Stasya.”

“I don’t want us to end like this.”

“There’s no other way to end it.”

“Make love to me one last time,” I asked him.

He looked surprised and didn’t know how to respond. He stood there staring at me. I could sense he didn’t want to end our relationship like this, either. As I moved toward him, I experienced an intense passion for him, as though I were aroused by my pain and sadness. I yearned to lose myself in overwhelming pleasure one last time.

“Please, Harrison,” I said. “Let’s not end it like this.”

I moved closer, and kissed him softly on the lips. He didn’t respond, but I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him passionately. He soon became aroused, too, and we fell on the bed and made love.

When it was over, I was empty and depressed. I didn’t want to feel like this and forced him to make love to me

again and again until we were both so exhausted we didn't have the energy to talk or think anymore. I was totally spent and consumed by my emotions. As we lay silently next to each other, a tear ran down my face.

As morning came, he kissed me good-bye, but I remained curled up in bed. I didn't want to get up or watch him walk out of my life. After he was gone, I lay in bed for hours. I pulled out my necklace and stared at our eternity ring. From now on, it would serve as a painful reminder of our brief but tumultuous relationship. So much for my desire for an impassioned life.

After I checked out of the hotel, I wandered aimlessly through the crowded city streets, staring enviously at other couples as they relished the last few hours of their weekend before the Monday-morning shuffle. But I had nothing but emptiness in my heart, like a bottomless pit that no one could ever fill.

My first adult experience in passionate love had not turned out as I had hoped. I had yearned for an intense love filled with dark and light emotions that would make me feel alive. Yet I only felt disconnected—with myself and with the world. Perhaps that was the downside I had to endure for my desire for an unconventional love. I wondered whether I had unconsciously sabotaged my relationship with Harrison before it could become too conventional. I had naïvely assumed we could continue our illicit affair indefinitely without any thought for the future. However, I was not completely discouraged. I had tasted passion and was determined to experience it again.

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Even so, I sensed I would have to endure more pain and sadness before I would ever find the happiness I was looking for.

CHAPTER 37

Harrison left his uncle shortly after we broke up. He had not told me where he was going and he didn't keep in touch with me, either, which hurt more than losing him. Without him in my life, I felt as bereft as when Lincoln was taken from me. I felt completely disconnected from the world.

I had trouble concentrating in school and become more distant with my father. My unhappiness became so overwhelming that one day I couldn't bear going to school and needed to get away from my life. I needed to go somewhere to clear my mind and put everything into perspective. I decided to go on a day trip outside the city, but told my father I was having dinner with friends after school before watching a movie. I also told him I would be home late.

I chose to go on a day trip along the Great Ocean Road to be near the sea. Ever since my near-drowning

experience I didn't like being in the water, but I loved looking at the ocean waves as they came to shore, crashing on the rocks and the sandy beaches. The day was overcast and windy, and the ocean waves were huge and choppy, which reflected my turbulent mind. Yet they had a calming effect on me.

The bus was filled mainly with tourists. We first headed to the seaside resort town of Apollo Bay, where along the way I caught sight of an unusual house. It was a pristine, white house ensconced in the steep, wooded cliffs atop cylindrical columns and overlooking the majestic coast. The house was similar to the one I used to draw as a child. It occupied a picture-perfect position, with a national park behind it and a beach frontage that gave the impression the waves were breaking at the front door. I wished I could live there to wake up to morning views of the sea.

The bus eventually made its way to the Otway mountain ranges, where we stopped and went on a guided walk through the cool, temperate Otway Rainforest, home to some of the tallest eucalyptus trees in Australia. I enjoyed making small talk with the tour group, who were all in a relaxed, holiday mood and helped me forget my troubled mind. The bus then wound its way through Port Campbell National Park, with its towering limestone cliffs, before we returned home.

It was a long day, and by the time I arrived home, it was almost ten at night. I went straight to my bedroom without saying much to anyone. Even though I tried to hide my feelings, Yvonne knew something was wrong. I

later told her I had broken up with a boy, but I never told her it was Harrison.

* * *

Harrison's rejection caused me to reject my own identity, even though I didn't really know who I was or who I wanted to be. I began to reject my mother's hold over me and wanted to find my own identity and voice. Like most teenagers looking to establish their own place in the world, I started by rejecting and questioning my parental influence over me.

I needed to break free from them and realized the best and quickest way to do that was to change my appearance. I no longer dressed like my mother and took on a goth look, which suited my dark thoughts and turbulent emotions. I relinquished my mother's positive and vibrant persona to explore my own inner darkness. I wore dark colors all the time, favoring blacks and purples, and wore dark makeup. I wanted to bury my mother's presence ever deeper within me. It worked, as I began to think less about Gabriel and eventually stopped picturing his face altogether.

At first, I was empowered by my new identity, but I soon began to feel torn, as though I were losing my sense of being rather than discovering my true being. Although I had never been comfortable in my own skin, I felt more disconnected with myself and with the world around me. However, I persisted with the exploration of my darker side in the hope of eventually finding light at the end of my darkness.

I continued to suppress my mother's presence during the remainder of high school as I searched to connect with my true self. Ironically, this made me feel only more disconnected. I was like my mother's spirit was, moving through life and people like a ghost without making a connection with anyone or anything. The world passed right through me; nothing seemed real or solid. To make matters worse, wallowing in my dark thoughts intensified my guilt and shame about causing my mother's death. That was when I first experimented with self-harm and found that cutting my forearms helped release my pent-up anxiety. Strangely, it also amplified my mother's presence to the point where I saw a brief glimpse of her apparition on one occasion. Or perhaps it was merely the remnants of my eidetic imagery that had left me as I grew to adulthood. In any event, I saw her only once and very briefly.

As for romance, I wasn't interested in a serious relationship and pushed away suitors. I sensed they liked me only for my looks—or my mother's looks, that is—and were not interested in knowing the real me. Or maybe I didn't want them to know the real me because I was afraid they wouldn't like me or would find me wanting. All I knew was that I was still uncomfortable in my own skin after all those years.

With Harrison, I had used my mother's persona—the way she looked, dressed, and acted—to lure him because that's what I thought he wanted. It's what I thought all men wanted because my mother was so desirable to the

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men in her life. In reality, though, I was using her as a crutch to stop Harrison from knowing my true self.

Now, I was using dark makeup, gothic clothing, and aloofness to keep people away—or keep them from knowing the real me. But all I had done was replace one crutch with another. My new persona was an extreme reaction against my mother's natural beauty, but it also fed my frustration and resentment, causing me to become more withdrawn and conflicted.

CHAPTER 38

By the time I commenced my tertiary studies at the University of Melbourne, I had decided to leave home in search of more independence. My father had offered to pay for one of the exclusive dormitory rooms on campus, but I chose to live in a nearby student apartment building that my father's company built. I had been a privileged child all my life, and I was desperate to reject that lifestyle, or at least give the impression I had rejected it.

Campus life was not as restrictive as high school, and it allowed me more scope to experiment with my identity. I felt more comfortable and liberated. Yet I always sensed I was different from other students. I couldn't fully connect with any one person or group. During my graduation year, I began to believe I needed to go overseas to find my place in the world after being rootless all my life. Perhaps I would find the connection I was searching for in another country, culture, or language.

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* * *

In the final frantic months leading up to graduation, something wonderful happened that breathed new hope into my life: I was reunited with Lincoln after almost ten years apart. I was studying for my final-year exams late one evening in the campus library when I saw him in the distance browsing the bookshelves. At first, I thought it was Gabriel and momentarily froze with indecision. However, I soon realized it was Lincoln. He was dressed in smart business attire and looked remarkably like his father. If anything, he looked more handsome than Gabriel. He was also taller than him but less imposing and lacked his father's self-assured stance. Lincoln's sensual and boyish looks had a vulnerability that I found enticing, even more so than Harrison, whose sexiness was more primal and masculine.

My heart began beating faster as I stared at Lincoln. I was both excited and anxious to see him, although I wasn't sure if he wanted to see me or felt the same about me after all this time. I eventually decided to approach him and experienced a sudden *déjà vu* of meeting him like this once before, but I couldn't picture where or when. It was as if I were seeing Gabriel as a young man. I suddenly sensed my mother's presence within me with an intensity I hadn't experienced for many years. Perhaps I was experiencing a lingering memory from my mother, or perhaps it was wishful thinking about reuniting with Lincoln after many years apart. As I neared him, he turned in my direction, jolting me back into the present. He gave me a huge smile,

and I was relieved. He hugged me affectionately, calming my nerves.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” I whispered excitedly.

“I can’t believe it’s you too... behind all that black makeup,” he said, teasing me. “You’ve certainly changed.”

“You, too. You’re so tall.”

“And you’re so ... different. What’s with the gothic look?”

“Well, it’s slightly more emo than goth.”

“I wouldn’t know the difference.”

“So what’s with the preppy look?”

“My father has notions of me taking over the company one day,” he said derisively. “So I’m trying my best to look the part.”

“You look just like your father.”

“Don’t hold that against me.”

“No, I think your father is handsome.”

He winced slightly. “How’s *your* father?” he asked me.

“Good. He often talks about you.”

“I’ll have to catch up with him one day.”

“He’d love that. So what are you doing here in my library?”

“This is my library, too. I’ve been taking night class as part of my MBA.”

“You’ve been here all this time?”

“No, just for the past few months before I return to Harvard. What are you studying?”

“Harvard!” I said, impressed. “I’m studying English and Theatre Studies, but I don’t really know what I want

to do after I graduate. I'm planning on traveling the world for a year before I start applying for jobs."

"If you're passing by Boston, you'll have to visit me."

"Definitely. Were you looking for a book?"

"It can wait. Are you free to go for a coffee?"

"Sure."

We made our way to one of the campus cafés, where we spent an hour reminiscing about our childhood. We constantly touched each other's hands and arms as we spoke. We were still attracted to each other, and so oblivious to everything around us that we didn't notice we were the last ones left in the café, which was now closing. I wanted to keep talking with him, and invited him back to my apartment. To my relief, he agreed.

CHAPTER 39

The urbane and sophisticated Lincoln looked out of place amid the grungy surroundings of my apartment. But he liked it—and especially my new appearance—perhaps because he knew his father wouldn't approve of either. As we continued our conversation, I could feel a connection between us that went beyond childhood affection. But I still cared enough about Harrison to ask Lincoln about him.

“Have you heard from Harrison?”

“No,” he replied icily. “We haven't heard from him since he left. I'm sure that's the way he would like it to be.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

“You know, I was envious of him. He told me about his relationship with you.”

I was hurt that Harrison had divulged our secret and equally hurt that Lincoln had brought up the matter. I was

afraid he would now think unkindly of me. But that wasn't so.

"It was the only time in my life I wished I were him," he said sincerely. "Living with you was the happiest time of my life."

"It took me a while to get over you when you left."

"I never did," he said adamantly.

He gazed into my eyes without saying anything. I broke the connection and glanced away. When I glanced back, his face was directly in front of me. He gave me a long, slow kiss, and I experienced the same rush as when we kissed as children. His lips were soft and moist, and his warm breath tingled my face.

"What was that?" I said, teasing him.

"Just rekindling our childhood," he said with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, you remembered that?"

"How could I forget your kisses? I missed them most of all."

I returned his look with equal ardor, unable to disguise my desire for him any longer. I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him passionately. Gabriel's seductive face suddenly came to mind. At least, I thought it was Gabriel. It may have Lincoln's equally seductive face I was picturing, as they both looked so alike. Either way, I quickly became aroused and didn't want to stop kissing Lincoln.

I maneuvered him forward with his back to my bed and with our lips still locked together. As the back of his

legs touched my bed, I pushed his chest down until he was lying on his back. I took off my top and sat astride on top of him. We resumed kissing fervently without saying anything before I stopped to unbutton his cotton pinstriped shirt. We locked lips again, and I gently rubbed his penis with one hand. He soon became hard, and I kissed his bare chest all the way down to his toned stomach and then undid his belt. I unzipped him and gave him a mischievous smile before pulling out his erect penis. He looked pleasantly surprised.

“I can’t remember us doing this as kids,” he said jokingly.

“I’ve learnt a few tricks since then,” I said.

“I can see.”

“Sorry, shouldn’t talk with my mouth full.”

I promptly placed his penis inside my mouth. It was warm and hard and throbbing lightly inside me as I moved my mouth up and down his shaft. I playfully bit the head of his penis, causing him to wince. I looked up and gave him another mischievous smile. He smiled tentatively, afraid of what I was about to do next. I winked at him and placed the head of his penis back inside my mouth again. I sucked it softly as I wrapped my hand around his shaft. I quickly slid my hand up and down his shaft as I kept sucking the head of his penis. The sensation must have been intense, as he almost came. I glanced up and saw how aroused he looked. This aroused me even more. He also looked surprised by my sexual assertiveness. I surprised myself; I had never been this adventurous or spontaneous

before, not even with Harrison. Moments later, I raised my head and took a breath.

“Wait,” I said breathlessly.

I reached over his torso to my bedside table, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a condom pack. I bit off the top of the pack, spooled out the condom, and slid it down his penis. I took off my underwear and straddled his torso, gently guiding his penis into me. He raised his hands, and I held on to them for support. I began gyrating my hips and sliding them back and forth.

I stopped for a moment and let go of his hands. I unhooked my bra and tossed it aside. I lay down on top of him and pressed my breasts against his chest. I kissed him passionately and began gyrating with increasing intensity until he finally came. But I hadn’t come yet and sat up. I continued gyrating more vigorously and dug my nails into his bare chest as he placed his hands on my hips and helped me gyrate back and forth. I shrieked in ecstasy until I finally came. I was exhausted and flopped breathlessly over his body, resting my head on the pillow. After we both caught our breath, I kissed his lips tenderly.

“Well, that went well,” I said.

“Much better than old times.”

“I wonder what came over me.”

“I think you just came over me,” he quipped.

“Who would’ve thought an emo/goth and a preppy could have this much fun together?”

“Well, we are soul mates after all.”

“Don’t tell me you remembered that, too.” I cringed with embarrassment.

“How could I forget? We had so much in common as children. Probably still do.”

“How?”

“Our parents haunt us both. I’m haunted by my overbearing father, and you’re haunted by your mother’s ghost.”

“Harrison didn’t like your father.”

“Even now that I’m older, I still don’t feel as though I’m living my own life. I feel like I’m living my father’s life by proxy.”

“Sometimes I feel that way about my mother,” I admitted. “Not lately, though.”

“That’s good.”

Our conversation suddenly turned somber, yet I didn’t want to be reminded of how we were haunted by our parents. Even though sex with Lincoln was sensual and spirited, our after-sex talk left me feeling dispirited. This was in contrast to Harrison, who had always been lively and energetic during and after sex. Even though I was emotionally compatible with Lincoln, I was more mentally compatible with Harrison, but I wished it were the other way around. Lincoln fed my insecurity and self-pity, whereas Harrison fed my optimism and courage.

Lincoln felt as inadequate and as disconnected to his father as I did with my mother. I loved being with Lincoln, but I missed having Harrison in my life, although I’m sure I would equally miss Lincoln if I were with Harrison right

now. If only I could somehow combine the two of them into one person or have both of them in my life at the same time to balance each other out.

I hated myself for being so indecisive in love, unsure who was right or wrong for me. I was so blinded by love I couldn't even think clearly. Perhaps my mother's presence within me was clouding my mind and making it difficult to know who or what was best for me.

"What are you thinking?" he asked uneasily, sensing rightly that my mind was conflicted.

"Nothing," I said with a smile and began stroking his hair.

"I loved the way you stroked my hair when we were kids," he told me. "I miss that, too."

"I loved stroking your hair," I assured him.

I wondered whether he still saw me as a mother figure or whether he was trying to return to our childhood. It didn't matter—not at this moment, at least. I was just happy to finally reconnect with Lincoln.

"If you're free, you should come by my father's house," I said.

"Sure. And I suppose you should visit my father, too. I'd love to see his face when he sees your new look."

"It's probably best that I don't."

"I'll make sure he'll behave."

"No, I feel bad visiting him behind my father's back. I know he wouldn't be happy."

"He's still holding that grudge?"

"Yes."

“I have an idea. We could go out for dinner and ‘accidentally’ bump into my father. That way, you wouldn’t have to lie to your father. How about that?”

I should have said no. I wanted to say no, but I also wanted to know more about my mother, and Lincoln’s father was the only one who knew her better than anyone else. At least, he was the only one who was willing to talk about her, unlike my father and Yvonne. I didn’t want to go against my father’s wishes, but I wanted to see Gabriel again. I convinced myself that if I knew more about my mother, I would know more about myself, so I eagerly accepted Lincoln’s offer.

“Sure, I’d love to meet your father for dinner,” I told him, but added a proviso. “Do you mind if we don’t tell him about us—for the time being?” I asked hesitantly, hoping he wouldn’t be offended.

“Of course not,” he said with a smile. “In fact, I was going to ask you the same thing about meeting your father.”

I was relieved. I wasn’t sure what kind of relationship Lincoln and I actually had. Were we rekindling our childhood love affair, or could we even have a serious relationship, given our differences? I wasn’t going to commit to anything until I was certain it had a chance of surviving. I had become tired of fleeting connections during my time at university and I wanted more permanency in my life.

CHAPTER 40

My father and Yvonne hadn't seen Lincoln since Gabriel had forcibly taken him away from us so they were ecstatic to see him again. My father was impressed with Lincoln's scholastic achievements and spent most of the time talking with him. He even invited us to stay for dinner, but I told him we couldn't stay. I explained we already had a dinner reservation, although I didn't reveal it was with Gabriel.

As Lincoln drove us to the restaurant, I grew increasingly anxious about meeting Gabriel. I pretended I was uncomfortable about going to a fine-dining restaurant in my current attire, but in reality I was apprehensive about being in Gabriel's presence again after many years apart. Our last encounter had been so fraught with anguish when he took Lincoln away that I wasn't sure how I would feel or react when we reunited. I was also uneasy about the effect his presence would have on me. I was fearful Gabriel could trigger not only traumatic childhood

emotions but also my mother's memories and her feelings for him. The closer we got to the restaurant, the more nervous I became, and I began to ramble.

"Are you sure I'll get in dressed like this?" I asked Lincoln for the second time.

"My father and I are regular diners here. They'll have to let us in."

"What would your father think?"

"I don't care what he thinks," he said abruptly.

"Can't we go to a normal restaurant?"

"If it'll make you feel any better, let's stop by my place and I can dig out some of my grungiest clothes so we'll both fit in."

I gaped at him.

"What, you don't believe me?" he asked.

"I can't believe you used the word *grungiest*."

"I can dress just as edgy as you."

"I've gotta see this," I said, trying not to laugh.

Picturing Lincoln trying to look "edgy" amused me and took my mind off Gabriel. We stopped at his luxurious inner-city apartment, where I waited in his lounge room as he changed clothes. When I saw him, I couldn't help but laugh. Lincoln's idea of going "grunge" was wearing designer torn jeans and a casual black shirt. However, I appreciated the effort he made to make me feel more comfortable. He was the same sweet child I had known when he lived with us.

My anxiety returned, however, when we entered the restaurant. A severe-looking maître d' threw a

disapproving look at our attire, especially mine. Although, the neatly folded hundred-dollar bill that Lincoln slipped into his palm assured us we would have no problem getting in. As we were being shown to our table, Lincoln's phone started ringing. He looked at it and seemed disappointed.

"He'd better not be calling to cancel." He took the call, and I secretly hoped Gabriel would cancel, as I didn't feel ready to see him.

"Hey, Dad. What's up?"

I could hear Gabriel's voice but couldn't decipher what he was saying.

"Okay, see you soon," Lincoln said before ending the call. "He told us to order the entrée. He'll be here soon."

I tried to hide my unease and forced a smile. Ready or not, I had no choice in the matter, and I braced myself for his arrival.

Ten minutes later, just as the entrée was being served, Gabriel arrived at our table, impeccably dressed in an evening suit. He looked unblinkingly into my eyes, and I averted my gaze as I stood up to greet him. I offered my hand, and he pulled me toward him to kiss my cheek. I had no time to react. My face blushed at his touch, which instantly prompted scattered and impenetrable memories to flash through my mind. In fact, they weren't memories but more an evocation of feelings and emotions from a distant past. I felt an overwhelming happiness in his presence and a desire for his touch.

Gabriel continued looking at me as we all exchanged pleasantries. I sensed he knew what I was thinking, and I averted my eyes before I could reveal anything further of myself. Gabriel turned toward Lincoln and gave him a cursory look of disapproval at his casual attire.

“Interesting choice of clothes,” Gabriel said before returning his attention to me. “You’re having a bad influence on my son.”

“She’s having a great influence on me,” Lincoln said.

“Of course,” Gabriel said as he continued looking at me. “I’m sure she is. Although it’s a shame to hide your beautiful face under all that makeup.”

“Not now, Dad,” Lincoln said. He had a friendly, if combative, relationship with his father, and wasn’t intimidated by him at all.

“All I meant to say was that you’re as beautiful as your mother, and it’s a shame to cover it up,” Gabriel added.

“Thank you.” I smiled awkwardly.

“You’ll have to excuse my father,” Lincoln said. “He time traveled from the eighteenth century just to be here tonight.”

“I’m merely being honest, Lincoln,” Gabriel said.

“Don’t you know you should never compare one woman with another, especially her mother?” Lincoln teased him. “You clearly know nothing about women, Dad.”

“Don’t pay attention to my son. He’s easily affronted. But I’m sure you already know that.”

“And you already know my father has no ethical filter and says whatever’s on his mind.”

“Stasya, you should visit my house to see the clothes your mother wore at your age,” Gabriel said to me. “You’ll see what a stylish woman she was.”

I didn’t know what to say to Gabriel’s proposal. I was also wary of hurting Lincoln’s feelings.

“That’s kind of you,” was all I could say. “Thank you, Mr. Antonov.”

“Please, call me Gabriel.”

“My father has the uncanny ability to offend people without even knowing it,” Lincoln said. “That explains why he has remained single for the past twenty years.”

“That’s because I like my own company. Anyway, Stasya, I’m extending you a welcome to visit our house, if Lincoln has forgotten to do so.”

“I’ve already asked her, Dad. But Stasya doesn’t wish to offend her father.”

“After all these years?” Gabriel asked with irritation.

“Let’s eat, Dad, before the entrée gets cold.”

My anxiety lessened as the evening wore on, and I began to relax in Gabriel’s presence. However, even when he was not looking directly at me, I could still sense his intense gaze on me. I tried to keep my mind blank so he couldn’t tell what I was thinking. I didn’t want him knowing the strong connection I felt for him, lest he misread my intentions. Just as I had feared, this connection with Gabriel amplified my mother’s presence within me. It was as though Gabriel were a divining rod, providing me

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with the clearest possible reception to my mother, whom I had repressed for many years. I sensed her yearning to break free. What worried me more, though, was that I no longer desired to suppress or contain her presence.

CHAPTER 41

My brief encounter with Gabriel intensified my feelings for my mother and his remark got me thinking about my appearance. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was about making a brand-new start. I had outgrown my old look and needed a fresh makeover—one that better suited my positive spirits after reuniting with Lincoln.

Once I'd made the decision to relinquish my old appearance, I was determined to eradicate any semblance of the old me. I removed my dark-red lipstick, thick mascara, and dark eye shadow and replaced them with more natural makeup. I cut my hair to shoulder length and dyed it to my natural color. I also changed my wardrobe, eliminating my dark, somber clothing and replacing them with bright, contrasting colors. Consciously or not, I physically transformed into my mother. At first, I was apprehensive about revealing my new look to others.

However, it made me more comfortable and self-assured, so I was determined to stay true to my transformation.

When my father and Yvonne first saw my new look, they both seemed astonished, either because it was in total contrast to my previous look or because of my striking resemblance to my mother. Either way, neither of them revealed their true thoughts to me. This was not the case with Lincoln.

I had hoped Lincoln would like my more natural and stylish look because it matched his own conservative look and we were no longer looked like an odd pair. However, he didn't look pleased when he opened his apartment door to me.

"Why did you change your look?" he asked suspiciously.

"I just felt like a change," I replied. "And didn't like standing out whenever we were together."

"I never asked you to change your appearance."

"I didn't change for you," I replied tersely.

"Did you change for my father?" he asked petulantly.

"No."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I can't believe we're having an argument over my fashion sense," I said, frustrated. "Why are you getting so upset?"

"I'm disappointed that he has more influence over you than I do."

"He doesn't. Look, I could understand if this was about another guy, but he's your father."

“That doesn’t stop him flirting with any woman I date.”

“Do you realize what you’re saying? I’m his niece. I’m not just any woman ... and I didn’t know we were dating. I don’t even know what we have.”

He realized how petulant he sounded. “I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “I’m not upset with you. I’m upset with him. I wish he would act more like my father and less like my rival.”

“To be honest, you’re the main reason why I changed my appearance. I never really felt comfortable with that look, anyway. I did it because I was miserable after breaking up with Harrison. But I was really happy being with you, and I didn’t feel the need to wallow in self-pity anymore. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I’ve been happy ever since we were reunited. You made me forget my sadness and pain. So, I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“I’m sorry for taking out my frustrations on you.”

“That’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. I don’t like myself when I get jealous. But I’ve had a lot of practice with my father making me look inferior in front of my friends and constantly comparing me with Harrison.”

“Harrison said the same thing about you.”

“That’s my father, using us against each other. He’s not as charming as he makes out to be.”

“I never said he was.”

He seemed placated, but I still sensed he harbored some resentment. However, I didn’t want our night to

start this way and kissed him—furtively at first and then more passionately. I was relieved when he responded, and I led him back inside his apartment and toward his bedroom, where I initiated sex. But images of Gabriel kept flashing in my mind, haunting me as we made love.

Whenever I was with Lincoln, it was hard not to think about Gabriel. Lincoln closely resembled his father, just as I resembled my mother. Yet I questioned whether I was drawn to Lincoln for the right reasons. I was also uncertain about Lincoln's desire for me. Perhaps he was using me to one-up Harrison for our illicit affair or, even worse, one-upping his father, who would never be able to attain me. I couldn't judge Lincoln too harshly, though, because I enjoyed being closer to Gabriel, the one person who knew my mother best. Being near Gabriel was the closest thing to being near my mother. I enjoyed the moments Lincoln and I were together with Gabriel because he shared stories about her.

That night, Lincoln insisted we meet his father for dinner. It was Lincoln's way of proving he wasn't jealous of his father or intimidated by how he dominated the conversation. However, at the restaurant, I became so engrossed in Gabriel's conversations about my mother, I inadvertently forgot Lincoln's presence. Throughout the night, Lincoln became frustrated with the growing camaraderie between his father and me but kept his resentment to himself. Instead, he retaliated by not calling me from that night onward. Not even once.

CHAPTER 42

After not hearing from Lincoln for several days, I was afraid our relationship had run its course. He did not answer his phone when I called and he did not reply to my messages. Either his jealousy had gotten the better of him, or he was losing interest in me—or both. I feared I would never see him again and was relieved when I finally saw his name on my phone's caller ID.

“Hi, Lincoln,” I said excitedly.

“No, this is his father,” Gabriel said.

I was startled and didn't know what to say.

“Stasya?” Gabriel said.

“Sorry, I wasn't expecting you.”

“I hope you don't mind my calling you, but Lincoln has left his phone at my house, and I saw your number in his contact list.”

Myriad thoughts were swirling through my head. Why was he scrolling through Lincoln's phone? My most troubling thought was Gabriel's motive for calling me.

"I'm calling to invite you and Lincoln for dinner this Saturday," he said. "I know you don't wish to upset your father, but I hope you can make it."

I still didn't know what to say. "So, Lincoln will be there?" I asked tentatively, hoping I was incorrect about Lincoln's disinterest in me.

"Well, I can't ask him because I have his phone, but I'll ask him as soon as he realizes he left it here, which won't be until Thursday or Friday."

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

"He went skiing with his friends for a few days. Never can get good reception where he is. Anyway, I'll tell him about dinner as soon as I speak to him. Unless you hear otherwise from Lincoln or me, come over around seven. Okay?"

I thought about declining his offer, but I really wanted to see Lincoln again. I wanted to apologize to him and earn back his trust, just as I did as a child. The love I had for him from those days was still there, yet I sensed our love had not progressed since those innocent times and that we were stuck in the past. If Lincoln and I were to take our relationship to the next stage, we had to confront each other about our true feelings for each other. I needed to know if we could ever have a mature relationship or whether we were using each other to appease our own desires.

“Sure,” I told Gabriel. “I’d love to come for dinner.”

I ended the call feeling better about seeing Lincoln again, but also more confused about my feelings for Gabriel. Did I truly love Lincoln, or did I love being with him to be near Gabriel and hence closer to my mother? I wished Lincoln hadn’t left his phone at his father’s house. I had wanted to speak to him to clear up any misunderstandings before we saw each other again.

When Saturday morning came, I still hadn’t heard from Lincoln. I hoped it was because he hadn’t come home from his skiing trip. But as the evening drew nearer, I was disappointed that he hadn’t bothered to call me. I assumed he was punishing me, and I contemplated not showing up for dinner. Yet I was eager to finally visit the house where my mother was born. I decided not to cancel.

* * *

As I drove into Gabriel’s driveway for the first time, random images of this house and the land surrounding it swirled through my mind like long-forgotten memories. They must have been memories from my mother’s youth and were accompanied by joy and excitement but also tinged with inexplicable guilt and sadness that I couldn’t comprehend.

Anxiety soon replaced these memories as I got out of my car and approached the house. I knocked on the door and hoped to find Lincoln standing there looking contrite. Instead, Gabriel opened the door with a puzzled expression.

“Stasya, I wasn’t expecting you,” he said.

“Isn’t dinner on tonight?”

“Dinner was cancelled,” he said with a furrowed brow. “Didn’t Lincoln call you?” He looked embarrassed for me, and I tried to conceal my devastation.

“No, he hasn’t been in touch with me,” I said casually.

“That’s inconsiderate of him. I apologize for his poor manners.”

“That’s okay. Is he out?”

“No,” he said, confused. “He flew back to Boston.”

“Boston?” I said incredulously.

“Yes, he told me was going to phone you. He decided to go back earlier than planned.”

“No, he never phoned me.”

“I’m so sorry, Stasya.”

I wanted to leave as quickly as possible to hide my embarrassment and resentment. “That’s fine,” I said. “Thank you for inviting me, anyway.”

He grasped my arm as I turned to leave. “Now that you’re here, you’re welcome to come inside.”

Time stood still for a moment. I wasn’t sure of anything anymore. I wondered if Gabriel had planned this all along. Had he spoken to Lincoln at all? I suddenly remembered that Lincoln was the one who had left the country without saying good-bye to me. All my resentment and suspicions were now aimed at Lincoln and not Gabriel.

“I know your father wouldn’t like you to be here, but there’s no harm in going for a quick tour of the house,” he said sincerely. “You can also see your mother’s room.

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Everything has been left exactly the way she left it before she married your father.”

Finally, I would be able to experience my mother as she'd been before she was hidden and imprisoned in my father's basement. I would be able to see the woman I hoped to become.

“Sure,” I said. “I'd love to see her room.”

CHAPTER 43

Gabriel gave me a brief tour of the small but elegant house. I was immediately struck by the vast number of photographs of my mother scattered on the walls throughout the house that chronicled her life from birth to adulthood. I hadn't seen most of them before. As I followed Gabriel, I became increasingly jittery, not because of anything he did but because of an intense connection between us, which I found unsettling. I felt such familiarity with him, as though I knew him intimately, that I wondered if he thought the same about me.

When I finally entered my mother's room, I was thrown back into a distant past, overcome by intimate familiarity and repressed emotions. I stood in a daze. A hand gently nudged the small of my back, and I heard Gabriel's voice, which instantly propelled me back into the present.

"Please, go inside," he said.

I entered the room, which was immaculately preserved, as though my mother had never left. I was excited to see her jewelry and fashion accessories lying on her chest of drawers and took delight in peeking through her wardrobe to see what clothes she'd worn. I also wanted to know more about her relationship with Gabriel. I sensed it had been loving and intimate but also fraught with troubled emotions. Yet I didn't know how to ask him without prying.

"You must have been close to my mother," I said.

"Yes, we could guess each other's thoughts and finish each other's sentences. That's not surprising, given we shared the same birthday."

I was surprised by the revelation, but it made perfect sense that I had a close affinity to both my mother and Gabriel. That probably explained my strong connection to both of them.

"I didn't know that."

"Yes. All three of us share the same birthday."

He moved closer to me and his warm breath caressed my face. "That's why I've always been comfortable in your presence. I feel like I've always known you."

"Me, too," I said uneasily.

"Sharing the same star sign made your mother and I closer, but it also drew us apart."

"How?"

"We were too alike in many ways, and that sometimes caused friction. While we knew how to make each other happy, we also knew how to hurt each other. But I'm sure

your father has told you how terrible I was to your mother—or how terrible I was, period.”

“Actually, my father rarely speaks of you.”

“I don’t know whether to be offended or relieved.”

“I think you and my father have more in common than you think.”

“Besides your mother?”

“Neither of you have remarried.”

“True.”

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

He seemed hesitant to answer but suddenly changed his mind. “The illusion of love can sometimes be more desirable than the reality.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Being alone allows me to keep a romantic view of love.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“It’s better to endure the ache of loneliness than to suffer the pain of unrequited love.”

“Sounds like you do want to be in love again.”

“I lost the opportunity to marry the person I truly loved and saw no reason for settling for someone.”

He was about to elaborate when he suddenly stopped himself. He looked at me with a wounded expression. “I’m not that terrible person I used to be, Stasya. At least, I try not to be that person.”

“Harrison thought you hated him.”

“I’m not proud of the way I’ve treated him, but I never hated him. His presence constantly reminded me of my

own troubled childhood and the harshness I endured from Harrison's father. You know that I moved in with my aunt and uncle after my mother died, right?"

"Yes, Harrison told me."

"I wasn't welcomed by my aunt or Harrison's father. I guess my poor treatment of Harrison was my way of getting back at his father."

"Why weren't you welcomed into the family?"

"Let's leave that for another time, perhaps when we've gotten to know each other better. But I do respect Harrison—more so than Lincoln—for his independence and integrity and ... I respect him for having the courage to carry on his affair with you."

I blushed at his candor but felt comfortable revealing my thoughts and feelings to him.

"He wasn't happy that we had to keep our relationship secret from everyone. That was part of the reason why we broke up."

"His loss. I wouldn't have left you."

I was astounded by his frankness, which sounded both sincere and sinister.

"Do you still keep in touch with him?" he asked.

"No." I glanced away from his penetrating stare and cast my eyes across my mother's room. When I saw my reflection in the full-length vanity mirror, I saw a jarring vision of Gabriel and myself that forced me to look away abruptly. We were half-naked and kissing each other passionately. I wasn't sure if they my mother's memories

or my own desires? I couldn't tell where my mother ended and where I began.

Gabriel then said something, but I wasn't paying attention; the vision of us in embrace kept lingering in my head. I needed to get out of that room as quickly as possible. I needed to get away from Gabriel, lest my mind be assaulted by more sexual images. I turned to him but cast my eyes down, afraid he could see inside my head.

"I'd better go now," I said curtly. "Thank you letting me see my mother's room."

"Please, stay for dinner. I would love the company."

I wanted to say yes but had to say no. Yet I didn't know how to decline his invitation. I was helpless in his presence, and it incensed me that he had this control over me.

"I can't," I said. "I don't feel comfortable being here."

He didn't reply and I looked up to see a wounded expression in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I make you feel uncomfortable," he said sadly.

"No, I meant that my father wouldn't like me being here, and I don't wish to hurt him."

"Even if it means hurting me?"

"I don't think we're close enough for me to hurt you."

"You're my niece. Why wouldn't I be hurt by your father's demand to keep you away from me and miss the opportunity to watch you grow up into a fine person like your mother?"

I didn't know how to respond. Should I feel gracious or unnerved by his comment? I couldn't even think clearly with all the confronting images in my head and the conflicting emotions in my heart. It was like I was losing control of myself, of my thoughts and my emotions. I needed to break free from the room, the house, and Gabriel. I couldn't look him in the face any longer.

"Thank you for the dinner invitation," I finally managed to say. "Perhaps another time."

"Hopefully, we'll see each other again soon," he said.

I desperately wanted to leave, but his intense stare paralyzed me. Likewise, he seemed mesmerized by my presence and was unable or unwilling to show me out of my mother's room. So I had to make the first move, prompting him to escort me out. He guided me silently through the house. Everything soon became a blur. The walls began to spin and I became queasy.

I don't know if he said anything to me as he escorted me out of the house, but I didn't say anything to him. I didn't want to say anything lest my words betray me. He followed me to my car and opened the door for me. I quickly got inside, where I finally felt safe from the outside world. I started the engine, hoping the noise would block out the visions in my head, and I waved good-bye without looking at him. I saw him in my rearview mirror, watching me leave until I could no longer see him. Only then could I relax. I realized I had been unconsciously holding my breath and finally inhaled deeply, filling my lungs and

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sending oxygen to my brain. I began to think clearly, but my thoughts for Gabriel still clouded my head.

CHAPTER 44

I was conflicted about my feelings for Gabriel. I needed to discuss them with someone who would listen patiently to me and not judge me harshly or think me perverse. The only person who could understand what I was going through was Yvonne. I was nervous about approaching her but equally uneasy about keeping my feelings locked inside me.

“Before you judge me, I need you to hear me out first,” I told Yvonne. “It’s about Gabriel.”

Yvonne visibly tensed.

“I felt something in his presence I haven’t felt for a while,” I said.

“You spoke to him?” she asked, barely disguising her unease.

“Yes. He invited me and Lincoln for dinner, but Lincoln wasn’t there, and I ended up leaving.”

“Good,” she said, visibly relaxing.

“However, before I left, he showed me around his house, and I got to see my mother’s room. When I was standing in the room with him, I felt like I’d been with him all my life.”

“Some people—especially close relatives—can often make us feel this way.”

“But that’s my point. He’s not a close relative, and I never grew up with him. So why do I feel like I’ve known him forever?”

Yvonne considered her words carefully. “Do you still believe you’re the reincarnation of your mother?”

“I’d stopped thinking about it ... until I was with him. What do you believe?”

“Whatever the case, your father and I want you to be yourself and not live in the shadow of your mother. We want you to be your own person.”

“I want that, too. But how do I know if my thoughts are my own or my mother’s? How do I know if I’m being me? How do I know if my mother isn’t influencing everything I say or do or think?”

“Just do what makes you happy.”

“Even if that means making other people unhappy?”

“Ultimately, we’re all descendants from a long line of ancestors. You may try hard not to be like the people that came before you, but you end up becoming like them despite everything you do. Inevitability is something no person is strong enough to fight against.”

“Sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

“Yes, I never wanted to be like my parents at all. Not because I didn’t like them or didn’t agree with them, but because I wanted to be independent and be my own person. And when you’re young and inexperienced, you think that means doing the exact opposite of what your parents say, think, or do. However, as I grew older, I began to appreciate them more and felt guilty about distancing myself from them. Try to think of that when you’re with your father, because he loves you very much.”

“Then he should tell me he does. He never tells me he loves me.”

“Your father finds it difficult to express his emotions, no matter how strong they are.”

“But I’m his only child. I’m the only family he has.”

“I wish he wasn’t like this, either, but I’m not sure he can change this late in life. Just know that he does love you, no matter what you think or what he doesn’t say or do.”

“Well, I need to be my own person, and right now that means being away from my father.”

“I can’t tell you to what to do. You have to make your own choices in life, even if they end up being mistakes. I can only tell you that I regretted some of the decisions I made at your age in order to be independent.”

“I know you mean well, but I’ve never truly felt comfortable with my father. In fact, I feel closer to Lincoln and his father than I do around my own father. It shouldn’t be that way.”

“Lincoln’s father is not the man he appears to be. He may appear kind and friendly, but that’s only because of who you are. He was fond of your mother, and he is equally fond of you.”

“Then tell me the truth. Why is my father upset with him?”

I wanted her to admit the truth about my mother’s relationship with Gabriel. I wanted someone to confirm what I had suspected for a long time. Yvonne seemed hesitant to answer, but she knew I would persist until she told me the truth. Yet I wasn’t sure what I would do with the truth. Would it fill the emptiness within me or even vanquish my disconnected feelings? I needed to know the truth, though, and prompted Yvonne for a straight answer.

“Was it something to do with Mama?” I asked her.

“It’s less about what he did and more about who he is as a person. I’m sure your cousins have told you how they feel about him.”

“Yes.”

“Then respect their opinions. Forget about Gabriel—if not for your father’s sake, then for your own. Please.”

Yvonne left me with no answers and even more questions. However, I could not forget Gabriel—not consciously. That night, I woke up in a sweat, horrified after having a sexual dream about him. Was it my dream or my mother’s dream? Either way, the more I thought about Gabriel and his effect on me, the more conflicted I became about my own identity. I no longer knew who I truly was. I didn’t trust my feelings or myself and feared I

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was losing my own identity. I tried to repress my thoughts and feelings for Gabriel, but the unbearable weight of inevitability was constantly pressing up against me and I feared it would one day burst unexpectedly with terrible consequences.

CHAPTER 45

After I finished my final-year exams, I was left with little to occupy my mind, which meant I was often preoccupied with Gabriel. I hated feeling out of control, and knew I needed to do something to free myself from his hold over me. I decided the only way to forget Gabriel was to stay away from him. Yet I couldn't trust myself not to see him again. I had to move as far away from him as possible. I decided to go on a yearlong working holiday around the world to get him out of my mind and get my mother out of my body. It was the only way I could bury my desire for him, regardless of whether those desires belonged to me or my mother.

I also hoped this overseas trip would help me forge my own identity beyond that of my mother. I desperately wanted to find a connection with someone or something or some place. I didn't know who I truly was; I needed to find my true center. I knew my decision would disappoint

my father, and I sensed his sadness when I told him my reason for going. I tried to reach out to him, even if he were unable or unwilling to reach out to me.

“I need to do something with my life, Dad. I want to make something out of my life so that Mama didn’t die in vain.”

“Your mother would never think that,” he insisted. “She would be very proud of you.”

“I wish I could have taken her place.”

“Don’t say that, Stasya.”

“I’m sorry for the life you’ve had to live without her. Your life would have been much happier if I hadn’t been born.”

“Don’t think like that.”

“But it’s true. You would have grown old together.”

“Listen to me, Stasya. I am grateful that you were born and came into my life, more grateful than anything that has ever happened to me. No matter what else has happened, I don’t regret having you as my child.”

I wanted to believe him. I hoped he was telling the truth. I only wished he had said those things more often when I was a child. Ironically, now that I was leaving, I had never felt this close to him. However, I could forgive him because I must have been a constant reminder of my dead mother—which would have made it difficult for him to move on with his life.

“I think it’s time we both moved on with our lives,” I told him.

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My father nodded knowingly, confirming to me that I was doing the right thing for us both.

* * *

As my departure date neared, I became increasingly apprehensive about leaving my world behind. Was I simply doubting my decision, or was my mother holding me back, drawing me closer toward home and Gabriel? I hoped I could forget them both and find someone else to fill my heart and mind. Apart from my two cousins, no one else had captured my desire. I often thought about Lincoln and Harrison and wondered how my life would have been different if I still had them in my life.

As I was finalizing my travel plans, the reason for my ambivalence suddenly became clear when I unexpectedly saw Harrison walking down a city street one day. This was no coincidence, I thought. The universe had conspired to reunite us after our long separation. Perhaps Harrison was the reason I was ambivalent about moving overseas. However, as we exchanged glances, he at first appeared aloof and unsmiling. I didn't know how to react and immediately regretted having seen him at all. I thought about walking on by without saying a word, but he approached me. He smiled and put me out of my misery. He also gave me an affectionate hug, which brought back memories of our time together.

"It's good to see you again," he said sincerely.

"Me, too. How are you?"

"Good. How's that impassioned life of yours?"

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Was he being sincere or sarcastic? I wasn't sure, so I played it neutral. "All right, I guess."

"So what are you doing with yourself?"

"I've just finished my degree, and I'm planning on traveling overseas for a year."

"First time?"

"Yeah."

"You're gonna love it."

"Where did you end up going?"

"I backpacked around Europe for a while and took a few odd jobs before I ran out of money and came back."

"What do you do now?"

"I'm a parachute instructor."

"That's great."

"You interested?"

"No, I'm afraid of heights."

"Lincoln spoke to me a few weeks back, saying you two had hooked up."

He stopped smiling, and I could sense pain in his eyes. My mouth went dry and I struggled to talk. "Really?" I muttered. "He, um, Lincoln told me he'd lost contact with you."

"Well, he must have made a special effort to find me just so he could tell me that."

"We only saw each a few times before he went back to Boston."

"You don't have to explain anything to me."

"I wasn't. I don't know what he told you, but I wanted you to know the truth."

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An awkward silence stretched between us. I was devastated our reunion had soured so quickly. Thankfully, he broke the silence.

“If you’re not busy, would you like to grab some lunch?”

I thought about declining his invitation because I didn’t want us arguing over Lincoln, but I really wanted to be with him.

“Do you need to go back to work?” I asked.

“No. Mondays and Tuesdays are my weekend. I work most weekends. I usually go to a Thai restaurant farther up, if you’d like to join me.”

CHAPTER 46

After a tense beginning, Harrison and I gradually warmed to each other and picked up where we had left off several years earlier. I was still attracted to him and was touched he still wore the ring I'd given him. He saw me staring at it and opened up to me. "I still think about you."

"Me, too."

"I always wonder where we'd be right now if you had agreed to go traveling with me."

"Well, you don't have to wonder anymore. How would you like to go traveling overseas with me?"

He shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, and I regretted asking him.

"I can't."

"Work?"

"Um, yeah. And I can't afford it at the moment."

"I can cover it. It's not a problem."

He appeared even more uncomfortable.

“I mean, you can pay me back later if you want.”

I had no intention of accepting his money. I just didn’t want him feeling beholden to me.

“No, it’s just that I’m taking my holiday a few months from now.”

“I can wait for you.”

He lowered his gaze, unable to look into my eyes. He looked up and was about to say something when I interrupted him.

“Look, I know I was naïve when we were together, and I didn’t treat you right, but I’ve changed. I’m a different person.”

I was grateful I was able to admit that, but he remained silent. I wondered if he didn’t believe me.

“It’s not that,” he explained awkwardly. “I’d love to go with you but ... I’m getting married in a few months’ time.”

My mouth suddenly went dry. All I could hear was my heart beating in my ears. I didn’t want to look at him, but I couldn’t take my eyes away from him. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “I should have mentioned that before.”

“Yeah, that’s a big thing to leave out.” I joked uneasily, trying to cover my embarrassment and resentment. I struggled to find the right words to say. I struggled to say anything.

“For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to say it,” he said. “I didn’t think I had the same feelings for you until I

saw you today. I thought I was past the pain of our breakup, but I guess I wasn't."

"What pain could you have had when you're the one who broke up with me?" I said spitefully.

"Because you wouldn't come with me," he said.

"And I told you why."

"Look, let's not rehash the past."

"Then why bring it up?"

"I didn't mention I was getting married because I assumed I would never see you again after today, so there was no point in sharing it with you."

"It's your wedding. How could you not think that was important or that I wouldn't want to know about it? You made me look like an idiot."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, I think you did. Part of you wanted to hurt me."

"To be honest, when I saw you in the street, I didn't have anything I wanted to say to you. I just thought we would spend a few minutes talking to each other and then move on."

"As though nothing had ever happened between us?"

"We had both moved on with our lives, and I assumed you felt the same way."

"How could I not move on when you refused to stay in touch with me? You never contacted me once. You never told me where you were or how you were doing. You never even bothered to find out how I was. Clearly, you never wanted to see me again. Why did you bother inviting me to lunch?"

“Because I wanted to spend time with you. I’m sorry, Stasya.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re making this more awkward than it should be.”

“Then what do you want me to say?”

“Just say good-bye and get out of my life.”

He was about to do that when he stopped himself. He couldn’t say good-bye to me, and I guess he needed to explain why.

“I often thought about how different our lives would have been if we had stayed together. Whether we would still be together.”

“There you go bringing up the past again.”

“Do you want me to just wish you a happy life?”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“I couldn’t say good-bye to you. I can’t even say good-bye to you now.”

“Well, you’re going to have to, because you’re getting married, remember? We both need to move on with our lives.”

We stared awkwardly at each other, neither of us saying anything. Neither of us wanted to be there, but neither of us could make the first move. I had a seething resentment within me that I couldn’t contain. It rose from the pit of my stomach and spewed out of my mouth like a snake’s venom.

“I’m sorry I’m not my mother,” I told him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You once said you fell in love with me because I reminded you of my mother.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was young and naïve, too.”

“No, it’s what everyone thinks. Everyone is always comparing me to my mother.”

“I wasn’t doing that. I never even knew your mother.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m sorry I turned out to be such a disappointment to everyone.”

Harrison didn’t agree with my accusation, but he didn’t disagree, either. He looked away, took out his wallet, and pulled out enough cash to cover the bill. He got up without saying anything, leaned over toward me, and kissed my cheek. He then walked out without turning back.

I watched him leave. Deep bitterness and self-pity stung me. I also resented the fact that I paled in comparison to my mother. I still yearned to be more like her, but how could I live up to someone as desirable as her? I wanted to be loved and admired the way she was, but I felt inadequate. Most of all, I resented the fact that others were constantly comparing me with her. At least, that’s how it seemed to me. Perhaps it wasn’t true that Harrison was comparing me with her, but I couldn’t think clearly at the moment. I was devastated that he’d left me reeling from pain for a second time.

I sat motionless at my table for several minutes, paralyzed by conflicting emotions. I felt lifeless, yet I also felt so alive. I had always yearned for these impassioned moments in life, but I wished they weren’t always at the

expense of my relationships with the people I loved, like Harrison and Lincoln.

In a strange way, I refused to believe this was how it would end between Harrison and me. I once believed we were soul mates in this life, and our reunion had only reaffirmed those feelings no matter how acrimoniously our meeting had ended. Something deep within me couldn't accept the idea we would never see each other again. Even in the midst of my agony, I sensed we were destined to meet again because it didn't feel like the end of our life story together. It was the end of one chapter, although I had no idea how the rest of our story would unfold.

At that moment, however, I was just angry with both Harrison and Lincoln for putting me through heartache, even though I knew I was partly responsible for my own unhappiness. I could have easily settled for some simpler, uncomplicated man, but I was determined to live an uncompromising life. I deeply desired intense love filled with both ecstasy and agony to make me feel more alive. In a sense, I had no one else to blame for my current pain. I don't know why I was drawn to these turbulent emotions and why I could never be happy with being content. I probably needed these tempestuous moments in my life to counteract the calm moments because I still believed great happiness could be experienced and appreciated only after suffering great loss and sadness.

At such times, I wished I were someone else—someone like my mother, who had always been happy and hopeful. I never realized I would have to endure

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unbearable pain to satisfy my desire for an impassioned life. And even those happy moments with Lincoln or Harrison were invariably sporadic and fleeting, anyway.

I wasn't sure how much more pain I would have to endure to achieve the bliss I desired.

CHAPTER 47

As soon as I fully committed to leaving Australia, I felt instantly reborn. I became more positive about my future and looked forward to starting my life anew, knowing absolutely no one. It was exhilarating and liberating. From then on, nothing and no one would ever hold me back again. I was determined to live my life to the full far from the world I knew.

* * *

On the day of my departure, however, I became apprehensive as I entered Melbourne Airport. It wasn't merely due to anxiety over my unknown future; I sensed my mother's presence so strongly that she could've been at the airport with me. I hoped the feeling would soon dissipate once I boarded the plane.

I hugged my father and Yvonne good-bye and walked through the security gates. As I approached the departure lounge, I couldn't help sensing that my mother was within

reach. Her presence was intense. I turned around several times, expecting to see her apparition.

As I sat in the boarding lounge, I was filled with guilt and sadness, as though I were abandoning my mother. Yet there was no turning back, as my plane would soon be departing. Then, as I was about to board my plane, I saw a familiar face. Gabriel was heading toward me. I realized it was his presence I had sensed and not my mother's. But how did he get through security? And why was he following me? Before I could figure out an explanation, he had already overwhelmed me with a disarming smile.

"Hello, Stasya. How are you?"

I was too stunned to respond. He answered for me. "Well, I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm catching a plane. Why else would I be here?"

"I'm sorry."

"I assume you're catching a plane, too," he said sarcastically.

"Yeah, I'm heading overseas on a working holiday for about year."

"So, you're finally doing it. You must be excited."

"Yes, I am," I said with no excitement in my voice whatsoever.

"Are you boarding this plane?" he asked.

"Yes," I said hesitantly.

"So am I," he said eagerly. "A connecting flight to Sydney?"

"Yes," I said apprehensively.

He smiled. "So am I."

My suspicions suddenly took over me again.

"What's your destination?" he asked.

"I'm getting off at London."

He beamed. "So am I."

I must have looked completely paranoid because he threw me a sardonic smile.

"Relax, Stasya. I'm flying to LA for business and then over to Boston."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"And I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable whenever I'm near you."

"I never said that. I just felt uncomfortable being at your house."

"I know how you feel about me. I know you don't wish to disrespect your father by talking to me, and I respect that. So, I'll let you go. It was nice running into you. I hope you have a good flight, and I'll leave you alone."

"We're on the same flight. It's not as though we can avoid each other in the boarding lounge."

"True."

"Are you going to Boston to catch up with Lincoln?"

"Partly. Harvard is planning to name some cubical or something after me for making a donation."

"I'm sure it must be more special than that."

"The Harvard Endowment is bigger than the GDP of some small nations. My donation is merely a small drop in the ocean for them."

"Well, congratulations, anyway."

“Thank you. Do you want me to pass on any message to Lincoln?”

I wanted him to pass on how disappointed I was with Lincoln for not saying good-bye to me. But I bit my tongue. “Just say hi for me.”

“I will. Are you planning to use London as your home base to travel to other countries?”

“How did you know?” I asked distrustfully.

“Just an assumption, since you’re planning to stay overseas for a year. Most people tend to find work and an apartment around London so they can travel to other countries on the weekends.”

“Well, I hope I can find a job fairly quickly.”

“I have contacts in London, so let me know if you need any help with that. Here, take my business card.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t glance at his card as I slipped it into my back pocket.

“Don’t be afraid to e-mail me.”

“Okay.”

“What’s your seat number?”

“Oh, um”—I glanced down at my ticket—“seat 49A.”

“You’re kidding,” he said with glee. “That’s right next to me.”

A look of alarm came over my face. He broke into a grin.

“You’re joking, right?” I asked with an apologetic smile.

“Of course. I never travel economy.”

We were interrupted by a boarding call for all business-class passengers.

“This is where I leave you,” he said. “What’s your e-mail address?”

I hesitated to give it to him but finally relented.

“Thanks, Stasya. Enjoy your time overseas.”

“Thank you.”

“And don’t forget to stay in touch.”

I didn’t respond and watched him disappear through the boarding gate. Minutes later, the boarding call was made for the economy passengers. Once inside the plane, I couldn’t relax, knowing that Gabriel was on the same plane with me. I kept thinking he would approach me during the short flight from Melbourne to Sydney. However, he never did. I failed to see him even when I changed planes for my connecting flight to London Heathrow. Only after my international flight had taken off could I fully relax. Yet he never left my thoughts during the long flight.

CHAPTER 48

When my plane touched down at Heathrow, a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I was liberated at being away from my father and Gabriel and was surprised I did not miss my mother's presence. Even though I was anxious at being alone in a city where I knew no one, I found I enjoyed being away from family and friends for the first time in my life.

During my first few months in London, I indulged in living the life I had always sought. I also got two tattoos on the inside of each wrist. One was of a black gothic heart pierced by a sword, and the other was of a red blotchy butterfly with thin lines of blood dripping from its wings.

I filled my time by experiencing new and exciting adventures and going on a constant stream of casual dates. I also struck up instant friendships with people my age from all over the world. I was able to find a series of ongoing administration positions, so I was never short of a

job or spending money. However, as many of the positions were temporary, I had to move constantly to different parts of inner and outer London to be closer to work and spend as little time as possible on public transport. This meant I sometimes shared apartments with tenants with whom I had little in common. On the plus side, since most of the tenants were on working visas, like me, people were constantly coming and going. I never had to put up with any disagreeable co-tenants for too long.

Eventually, my bohemian lifestyle left me physically tired and emotionally drained, and I soon craved for stability. After six months in London, I finally met someone—an American student my own age named Jake—whom I dated irregularly and was one of my traveling companions. I did not see him as a serious boyfriend but I enjoyed his company, as we shared a similar outlook on life. Because he would be going back to the States by the end of my first year abroad, I never entertained the thought of becoming serious with him. In fact, the notion that we would be returning to our respective countries in the near future was part of the reason we were drawn to each other. When we finally ended our relationship and he returned home to the States, I was disheartened for a few days, but I looked forward to finding someone new.

I did find another boyfriend, whom I dated for several months, followed by several others. However, I soon began to yearn for something more substantial than casual dalliances. I had left home precisely because I had been

unable to find a connection with anyone, so I seriously began to consider finding someone with whom I could connect.

After spending almost one year overseas working and traveling through many European countries, I still had not been able to find the connection I sought. I thought that a change in culture would open up my life to more opportunities, and I began an extensive trek through the Middle East and on to Eastern Europe. I moved from country to country, culture to culture, and lover to lover. After almost two years of leading a nomadic existence, though, I still hadn't found happiness with anyone. Although I had made lots of small connections with many wonderful people from many places, I had failed to find any overpowering connection with anyone.

I wondered if I were asking too much from the people I met. Perhaps I was asking too much from life altogether. Perhaps my unrealistic and overly romantic notion of love was causing me to find minor faults with every person I met, as no one ever managed to live up to my expectations. Nonetheless, I was not willing to give up and go home without achieving my goal. I told my father I would be staying another twelve months abroad. He was disappointed, but I was determined to find purpose and meaning in my life, which is why I began joining many environmental and social causes, such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Red Cross.

In my search for a more substantial relationship, I experimented sexually and also explored relationships with

other women, thinking this would resolve my feelings of disconnectedness. But nothing helped, not even the drugs that were supposed to expand my mind or open my heart. Wherever I was or whomever I was with, I always yearned for something new, someone new, or somewhere new. I couldn't settle down with anyone and constantly felt rootless. The more I learned about myself, the more uncomfortable I was in my own skin.

I eventually realized my itinerant existence had become a crutch for me, and I was using it to escape myself and become someone new in each place or with each lover. Yet I could never escape myself. I was constantly dragging my personal baggage with me from place to place and from person to person. I was never truly comfortable with who I was and managed to sabotage each relationship because I didn't think I deserved to be happy. I even began to think I didn't deserve to be alive, knowing my mother had been cheated out of a long life because of me and that I had achieved very little with my own life. I still hadn't found satisfaction in love or life.

My third year abroad ended up being my most grueling. I became increasingly homesick; I missed Australia and wondered if my mother's spirit were drawing me back. I became inexplicably depressed and developed an irrational fear I was going to die on my twenty-fifth birthday, like my mother, even though that was almost two years away. I also began seeing and hearing the number twenty-five wherever I went.

At twenty-five, my mother had been self-assured, confident, and connected to life; at twenty-three I still felt like a child who didn't know what I wanted. My mother didn't deserve to die so young, whereas I was wasting my life, unable to find any meaningful connection with anyone or anything, let alone with myself. I even believed I was in a worse position in almost every way since I had left Australia three years before.

To make matters worse, I was becoming more confused and guilt ridden about my feelings for Gabriel. He had sent me many long e-mails over the past three years, but I had replied with only a few short, perfunctory responses so as not to encourage him. However, it would not be that easy to escape him once I returned home to Australia. I dreaded being near him, even though I longed to see him again.

CHAPTER 49

One evening, in a tenuous state of mind and under the influence of too many sleeping pills and too much wine, I found myself inside a lavish bathroom with only vague notions of which city I was in or what I was doing. All I knew was that I was in my underwear sitting on the cold bathroom floor under the warm overhead heater lights. My left arm was dangling over the edge of a freestanding bathtub filled with hot water, and in my right hand was a large kitchen knife.

Blood streamed down from three small incisions on my left forearm, producing instant and soothing release. I watched the blood drip all the way down my hand and into the hot water, where the drops created magnificent underwater plumes. The swirling blood mesmerized me; it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I gently waved the reddish water with my hand, and the water quickly took on a pinkish hue.

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I curled up my body against the bathtub and swayed the water in rhythmic fashion with my hand. I wondered if I had cut too deeply this time, as more blood than usual had spilled from my forearm. But it was only a fleeting thought. I soon became tired and propped my head against the top edge of the bathtub. I dropped the knife to the floor and flopped both arms into the hot water. The overhead heat lamps were comforting and soothing. I closed my eyes and wondered whether I could remain awake. But that was also a fleeting thought.

Suddenly, I heard my mother's voice and slowly tilted my head. I opened my eyes, but everything was out of focus. I saw a blurry apparition of an object that looked like the outline of a person. It was my mother. I hadn't experienced her presence for years and she brought me comfort. I smiled as she moved toward me. She knelt next to me and moved in closer to whisper something in my ear. As I listened intently to what she had to say, I lost consciousness.

* * *

I had been unconscious for almost half an hour before Alain entered the apartment. He was dressed in an expensively tailored business suit that I would soon manage to ruin. He was more than twice my age but carried his fifty years well. He was fit and tanned and could be mistaken for someone much younger.

When he entered his apartment after finishing work, he saw the bright light of the heat lamps from the slightly ajar bathroom door. That's when he saw me slumped on the

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bathroom floor. He saw a small pool of blood on the floor, and thought the worst. He was relieved, if a little annoyed, to find I was still breathing. He picked me up and bandaged my wounds.

* * *

Later, I woke up in a daze. I heard a car engine revving and the loud honking of a car horn. I opened my eyes and realized I was in the front passenger seat of a car. I looked down and saw a thick makeshift bandage around my left forearm. I looked to my right outside the rain-streaked window and saw bright city lights. It was dark and wet outside. I had no idea which city I was in.

I heard Alain utter something in an anxious tone, and I managed to moan a reply. I looked ahead of me and gradually began to recognize the streets, apartments, and buildings. I was in Paris. In my confused state, I couldn't remember how long I had lived here. It seemed like a lifetime and a passing moment at the same time, but I had lived there for less than six months. It soon hurt too much to think, so I stopped. I was drowsy and closed my eyes. I slumped my head forward and fell asleep

CHAPTER 50

I heard a muffled voice as I slowly woke up. I was confused as I opened my eyes and I couldn't focus on anything except for the white sheets on my bed. I looked up to see Alain's blurry outline pacing the floor and talking quietly on the phone in French. He ended the call when he saw I was awake. His eyes greeted me with a mixture of pity and exasperation.

"How do you feel, Stasya?"

I struggled to think and talk at the same time, and it took me a while to respond.

"Is this a normal hospital?" was all I could say.,

"Yes, but you should be in a psychiatric hospital," he said harshly.

"I'm a melancholic girl," I said with a weary smile.
"You know me. I like feeling sad."

"You're depressed, and you need help."

"When can I leave?"

“When the doctor says you can leave.”

“Please don’t be angry with me, Alain.”

“I’m not angry. I just don’t understand you.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Why do you do this to yourself?”

“I told you.”

“How can it make you feel good to cause yourself pain?”

“Funny, isn’t it?” I said. But clearly he didn’t find it funny.

“What was so stressful this time that drove you to this?”

“My father had a stroke.”

“And this is how you react?”

“I didn’t know how to react. I didn’t want to feel numb inside anymore.”

“You make things difficult for me.”

I didn’t know what to say to make things better. He deserved better than me—better than this.

“It’s okay if you want to break up,” I told him.

He smiled with more exasperation.

“How can I break up with someone I don’t even know? You never share your thoughts or feelings with me.”

“Because they’re not worth sharing.”

“I want to know what’s inside here,” he said, touching my temple. “And here.” He touched my chest.

“I don’t want you inside my head any more that I want to be inside it.”

“I think you prefer to be alone. To live alone with your confused thoughts and your mixed emotions.”

“Maybe. But I also like being with you.”

“Why? We haven’t been intimate for over a month.”

I averted my eyes.

“I’ll pack my things as soon as I get out,” I said.

“Please don’t leave. Not until you’re better.”

“I have to go home. I have to be with my father.”

“Do you want me to come to Australia with you? I can take some time off work.”

“No, that’s fine. You’re right. I don’t know what I want, and I don’t want to lead you astray. I don’t want to disappoint you any longer, Alain.”

I hated disappointing him because he had been kind and supportive over the previous six months. We had met in Paris as I neared the end of my third year abroad, and I thought I’d finally found stability and happiness in a relationship. We had both found each other at the right time in our lives—or perhaps the worst time in our lives, given how badly things turned out. I was tired of looking for purpose and meaning in my life, and Alain’s wife had recently divorced him and had taken custody of their two young children. He was a good man. He was honest, faithful, and supportive. And he loved me. Yet even he was unable to save me from myself.

The news of my father’s stroke had caused me to have an anxiety attack, and I dealt with it the only way I knew how—by surrendering to my self-destructiveness. Only this time I had cut too deeply. However, my anxieties

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remained captive within me, and no amount of bloodletting could ever purge them. Alain was right. I was suffering from depression or anxiety, or both. But I didn't want to be helped. Some aspect of me wanted to endure pain and suffering, perhaps because I thought it would make me stronger. Or perhaps I deserved to be punished. Even if I did live beyond my twenty-fifth birthday, I still felt guilty knowing I would live longer than my mother. No wonder men found it exasperating being with me. The longer they spent time with me, the more elusive I became.

CHAPTER 51

As my plane descended into Melbourne Airport, my heart descended, too. I wasn't ready to return home, but I didn't know where I needed to go to find happiness. I had left Australia full of hope and excitement but had not found the life I had sought, nor had I come back the person I had hoped to become. I hadn't created my own identity outside my mother or anyone else. I was still disconnected from my father, still beholden to my mother, and still beguiled by Gabriel.

I arranged for my luggage to be forwarded to my father's house while I clutched my carry-on bag and took a taxi directly to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. As I entered the hospital, I became nauseous. I went straight to the toilet and threw up. After I cleaned my face, I tidied my hair and fixed my clothes. I had worn a long-sleeve shirt to cover my bandaged left forearm but realized I could still see the two small tattoos on the inside of my wrists. My

father was sure to notice them. I unbuttoned both cuffs and used the inner buttons so that the cuffs fit snugly around my wrists and hid the tattoos. As I looked in the mirror, I saw only the child I was and would probably always be. I didn't see the person who had experienced a tumultuous three-year journey of self-discovery. Right before my eyes, I reverted to my father's daughter.

I reached my father's private room and stood anxiously by the door. I prayed that Yvonne would be there so that I would not be alone with my father. She had stayed on after my departure to oversee the running of the house and was now looking after him the way she had looked after both my mother and me. I hoped she had the same calming effect on him as she had on me. I took a deep breath, forced a smile, and entered the room.

At first, I thought I was in the wrong room when I saw a young, slim nurse helping a frail, old man into a wheelchair. I soon realized the old man was my father, and the nurse was Yvonne dressed in a white tunic dress. I wasn't surprised to see her looking smart and tidy but was unprepared to see my imposing father looking tired and helpless. Even though he was ten years younger than Yvonne, he looked ten years older than her. His hair had gone gray, and he had lost weight. He was the only patient in the large room, and I saw a makeshift bed next to his bed. They suddenly noticed my presence and looked embarrassed. I smiled awkwardly. Once my father was settled into his wheelchair, Yvonne rushed to me and gave me a firm hug, which I desperately needed.

“It’s good to see you again,” she said, gushing.

“It’s good to see you, too, Yvonne.”

She took my hand and drew me closer to my father. I bent down and gave him a hug that was more formal than affectionate.

“I’m sorry you had to come back just for me,” he said.

“No, I’m happy to be back.” I lied.

He looked at my neck and pointed to it.

“Your collar ...” he said.

As I adjusted my collar, I inadvertently exposed the inside of my wrists. He caught a quick glimpse of my tattoos before I dropped my arms. He was about to comment when Yvonne rescued me.

“Are you back permanently?” she asked.

I didn’t know what to say because I hadn’t made up my mind.

“Don’t stay on my account,” my father said. “Besides, the doctor said it was only a minor stroke, so I’ll be in hospital only a week or two.”

“That’s only if you obey the nurses’ instructions and try walking by yourself,” Yvonne said. “I can’t keep wheeling you around all the time. You’re not going to get any better that way.”

“I’ll try later,” my father said dismissively.

“I’ll be staying for a while,” I said. “I’m not sure how long.”

“Anyway, it’s good to have you back,” Yvonne said.

She rested her hand gently on my father’s shoulder in a way I had never seen her do before.

“Is that other bed for guests?” I asked.

“Yes. Yvonne has been staying with me for the past few nights.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?” I asked.

There was an awkward silence as if neither of them knew what to say.

“No, you’ve had a long trip and need to rest,” my father said. “Yvonne can stay with me ... if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Yvonne said happily.

“Do you still have keys to the house?” my father asked me.

“Yes.”

“Make yourself at home, and stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“I hope you can stay a long while,” Yvonne said sweetly.

“It’s good to have you home,” my father said with surprising warmth.

I was surprised at how affectionate my father and Yvonne were—not only with me but also with each other. They looked and sounded like an old married couple. They had certainly lived under the same house longer than most couples had. While it felt strange to see my father and Yvonne together, I soon warmed to the idea that they had grown closer during my absence, especially now that he was wheelchair-bound and had to rely on her for many of his daily tasks. In a selfish way, I was grateful she was there to look after him. But I was also relieved to know he may have finally found someone to replace my mother. As for

Yvonne, I had never known her to be in any serious relationship in all the years I had known her. She didn't have any close relatives or a family of her own and had spent most of her life looking after my mother, me, and now my father. I was happy for both of them.

"Okay," Yvonne said to my father tersely. "Stand up and use the walker. We're going for a stroll down the corridor."

"Now?" He whined like a child.

"Yes, now," Yvonne said. "Come on. I'll help you get up."

I helped Yvonne lift my father to his feet and positioned the walker in front of him. As I watched him struggling with the walker, I saw him in a new light. He looked like any other ailing and elderly person, and I was less intimidated by him. It was sad to see someone once so independent and self-reliant like this. Yet he also appeared happier and more relaxed than I had ever seen him, probably due to Yvonne's influence. Although I now felt closer to him than ever, I wasn't sure whether I would be able to express my full affection for him and doubted I ever would.

CHAPTER 52

The taxi ride home from the hospital took almost an hour. As I stood outside my father's house, I noticed the subtle pull of the eternity ring around my neck. Once again, the ring was drawing me closer toward someone or something. This time, however, my father would not be able to stop me.

I entered the house and slowly made my way through the large, empty rooms, taking in the old and familiar household scents. I began reminiscing about the time I had spent in this house, but nothing seemed clear anymore. Everything was a blur. I vaguely recalled my first kiss with Lincoln and the first time I made love to Harrison. I also thought about Gabriel, no matter how much I tried not to. However, I put all these memories to the back of my mind; I wasn't ready to confront them yet, not on my first day back home.

I made my way into the kitchen and approached the basement door my father had always kept locked. I stood in front of it, still entranced by it after many years. I grasped the doorknob and twisted it, thinking my father would have left it unlocked while I was away overseas. I was wrong. The doorknob refused to yield. I then spent a fruitless ten minutes going through all the kitchen cupboards and drawers in the hope of finding the key, but I never found it. The door taunted me by refusing to divulge its secrets.

That night, I slept well for the first time in many years. When I awoke the next morning, I didn't know where I was at first. I had woken up in so many cities during the past three years that it took a while for me to realize I was back home. And it made me depressed.

It was almost lunchtime before I finally got out of bed, but I couldn't stomach lunch and had a late breakfast of toast. As I finished breakfast, a strange but familiar feeling suddenly took hold of me, and I saw movement outside the kitchen window. I rushed to it and managed to see the tail end of someone's shoes disappearing toward the front of the house. I quickly ran through the rooms, following the figure's trail.

I ran to the front sitting room and looked out the window into the front garden. As I waited for someone, or something, to round the corner, I heard a loud knock on the front door. I jumped in fright and froze on the spot, not sure what to do. I crept toward the entry and saw the outline of a figure through the side glass of the front door.

I looked at the driveway and saw an exotic sports car. It could be only one person: Lincoln. But how did he know I was back? Perhaps my father had told him.

I recalled the awkward aftermath of our breakup and considered pretending I wasn't home to avoid speaking to him. Yet I knew I would eventually have to confront him one day. I took a deep breath and marched to the front door. When I opened it, he was astonished to see me and almost dropped the large cardboard box he was holding with both hands.

“Stasya,” he said with a self-conscious smile. “Hi.”

“Hi, Lincoln,” I said with an equally self-conscious smile.

He leaned toward me and awkwardly kissed my cheek. I responded with an awkward side-body hug.

“I didn't know you were back,” he said.

“Yeah, I got home yesterday because my father's in hospital.”

“What's wrong with him?”

“He had a stroke.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“He's fine. He'll be out of hospital in a week or two.”

The conversation stalled to a halt, and neither of us knew how to restart it. He thrust the cardboard box in front of me.

“I only came by to give your father some letters that I thought he might be interested in. Actually, you may also be interested in them.”

“Me? Why?”

“They’re letters and postcards from your mother to my mother.”

My eyes widened with delight, and I forgot all about my discomfort as I glanced inside the cardboard box. “How did you get them?”

“It’s a long story. I hope I’m not interrupting you.”

“No, no,” I said, now completely relaxed. “Come inside.”

I led him into the sitting room, and we sat down on the sofa.

“The executor of my mother’s will kept many of my mother’s items in storage under trust, which I couldn’t access until I turned twenty-one,” he said. “The solicitors of my mother’s trust have been trying to contact me for years, but they didn’t know my exact whereabouts.”

“Didn’t they know your father’s address?”

“They may have sent a letter to his address, and he may have forwarded it to me in the States, but I probably ignored it.”

I quickly nosed through some of the postcards and opened envelopes.

“Why did my mother write to your mother?”

“From what I could tell, your mother felt really bad about the way your father had treated her and wanted to offer her support. There is mention of money, so your mother must have sent her funds on a regular basis.”

“Did my father know about this?”

“I doubt it. Your mother’s return address was a post office box – probably to keep the correspondence a secret from him.”

“Now that I think about it, I once saw a box of letters from your mother that were addressed to my mother. They were stored in my father’s basement.”

“I had no idea your mother had been kind to my mother.”

“Neither did I.”

“I’ve got more items in storage and with the executor, if you’re interested.”

“Yes, please give me everything you have.”

“I will. We’ll catch up later.”

We both stood up, and he looked apologetically at me.

“Stasya, I want to apologize for the way I acted toward you the last time.”

“That’s okay,” I said dismissively.

“No, it’s not okay,” he said. “I was being childish.”

“And ...” I said, teasing him.

“And stupid.”

“We’ve all done things in the past we regret.”

“You would never hurt me the way I hurt you.”

“Maybe not intentionally, but I’ve hurt other people—especially during my time overseas. I’ve done things I’m not really proud of.”

“How about we forget the past and start all over again?”

“I’d love that.”

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“When would you like me to come over with the rest of the items?”

“Actually, is it okay if I come over to your place? I don’t want my father or Yvonne to know about this.”

“Sure. I’ll let you know after I’ve contacted the executor of my mother’s will.”

“Thanks. I appreciate this.”

He kissed me on the cheek—less awkwardly this time—and I escorted him to his car. I was relieved he still wanted to be a part of my life. If only I could say the same for Harrison.

CHAPTER 53

I hid my mother's letters and postcards in my empty luggage cases, where I hoped no one would look. Over the next few days, I read through all her letters, poring over her thoughts with excitement. It was as if I were inside her head, and I now felt closer to her than I ever had. As I had suspected, she'd been troubled by my father's poor treatment of Sophia and had offered to try to change his mind about estranging his younger sister. I also learned that my mother had set up a bank account for Sophia and regularly deposited funds for her, which Sophia had greatly appreciated.

As I read more, two items caught my interest. In one letter, my mother referred to a terrible secret that she wanted to share with Sophia. In another letter, my mother revealed her unhappiness in her marriage, which surprised me, for I thought my parents loved each other very much.

I thought of my father and wondered if he ever knew of my mother's unhappiness.

Lincoln phoned me several days later. I couldn't wait to tell him about my discovery of these two letters. However, he had a surprise for me, too.

"Stasya, I've got some news for you that's going to blow your mind," he said excitedly.

"And I've just read something in my mother's letters that sounds really intriguing," I said.

"Okay, you go first," he said.

"One of my mother's letters reveals that she sometimes felt depressed during her marriage to my father. I never knew that. And in another letter, she refers to a terrible secret that she wanted to share with Sophia."

"I think I know what that terrible secret was."

"What?" I asked excitedly.

"Well, I had lunch with one of the personal assistants who works for my mother's executor to try to get more information about my mother."

"I'm sure that's all you were trying to get out of her," I said, teasing him.

"It's true. Anyway, she let slip that my father and your mother may not be cousins."

"What do you mean?" I asked in disbelief.

"You know that our grandfathers were brothers who married twin sisters."

"Yeah."

"Well, there's been a longstanding rumor that my maternal grandmother had an affair with your paternal

grandfather, and that's how my father was born. My father's real father is actually his uncle."

"Say that again."

"My father and your mother had the same father from two different mothers. They may actually be half-brother and sister, not cousins."

"Are you serious?" I asked incredulously.

"That's what I've heard."

"How can we confirm this?"

"Only one person I know can confirm the truth, but I'm not about to ask my father. Even if he knew and the rumor were true, he wouldn't tell me."

"Likewise. Neither would my father or Yvonne."

"Let me know when you're free to come over and pick up the remaining letters."

"How about this afternoon?"

"No problem. I'll text you my new address."

"Thanks, Lincoln."

I ended the call, unsettled about the news that my mother and Gabriel were probably half-siblings. If Lincoln were correct, then this was most likely the terrible secret my mother mentioned in her letters. That meant they had committed incest if they had had a sexual relationship. But it was all innuendo at this stage until I could confirm the truth. Yet I didn't know what to think of my mother now. Her life was becoming more intriguing but also more scandalous.

CHAPTER 54

Lincoln ushered me into his luxurious penthouse apartment, which was filled with expensive and premium furnishings and had vantage views of Melbourne. It was a little too austere and ostentatious for my liking, but it suited Lincoln's extravagant tastes. After a short tour of the three-bedroom apartment, we moved to the lounge room and sat on his oversized sofa, where he had placed a large cardboard box on his coffee table. He had scattered some of the letters and postcards on the table like pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. We sat down, digging through the correspondence for any further mention of my mother's "terrible secret" that would confirm the rumor that my mother and Lincoln's father were not first cousins.

"Is that all of them?" I asked.

"Yeah. She sent the last letter to my mother a few weeks before she passed away."

"None of them mention the terrible secret."

“That rumor has to be the terrible secret your mother was referring to,” he insisted.

“If only there was a way of confirming it without directly asking our parents.”

“I think the answer may be in your father’s basement.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Have you looked everywhere for the key?”

“Even if I found it, I wouldn’t want to go behind my father’s back.”

“Some of my mother’s jewelry and personal items are still held in a large safety deposit box at the bank. I could check to see if there are any letters in there somewhere.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate your doing this for me.”

“It’s my way of making things up to you.”

“I still can’t believe my parents’ marriage may have been in trouble. They seemed very much in love with each other in their photos and videos.”

“Happy marriages are no different from bad marriages. People are basically selfish when it comes to love.”

I threw him a bemused look at his strange logic. “How are happily married couples selfish?”

“Most people don’t want to be alone, so they use each other for love and companionship,” he said without any irony. “It’s their selfishness that contributes to a long-lasting marriage.”

“No wonder you’re not married,” I said, taunting him.

He looked at me with pensive eyes, and I dreaded what else he was thinking.

“I always thought you and Harrison would end up together,” he said.

I didn’t know where that had come from, and I didn’t want to go where he was taking me.

“Really?” I said dismissively.

“I thought you’d be married with kids by now.”

“Clearly, you don’t know me that well.”

“Well, I know Harrison, and I know how much he really loved you,” he said sincerely. “I’m sure he still does love you, even though he’s married.”

I was touched by his kindness but not sure of his intentions.

“I wonder if he has any kids,” I said, trying to deflect his attention away from me.

“Do you want me to find out?”

“No, I was just curious.”

“I’m not sure I want to have kids, myself.”

“Why not?”

“Kids inherit things from their parents they have no control over—some good, some bad. We have no choice in the matter when we’re thrust into this world. I’m not sure I want my children to take after me. I don’t want them inheriting my issues.”

“Do you think you’re such a bad person?”

“No. But I think I would have been a better person if my mother were still alive. I was full of so much anger and hatred when I lost her. I’m not sure I’ve changed that much.”

“It’s not your fault. Your father didn’t give you the love you needed, or what any child needs.”

“Yes, but Harrison lost both parents, and he turned out better than I did.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I inherited all my father’s qualities—most of them bad.”

“I’m sure you inherited good things from your father, too.”

“The only good thing I inherited from my father was his looks.”

“There you go.”

“Although, that really hasn’t helped me with you.”

I didn’t know how to react, and avoided his comment altogether.

“I’m sure you have lots of beautiful women in your life.”

“None that affect me the way you do.”

This was becoming more awkward, and I tried to make light of the situation.

“Listen, don’t put me on a pedestal unless you want to see me come crashing down in front of you. I’m more fragile and damaged than I appear.”

“That’s what makes me desire you even more.”

That wasn’t the effect I was going for, yet I didn’t know how to deflect the conversation from where he was taking me.

“That’s why I feel so close to you,” he said. “We have a lot in common.”

“Really?” I asked with disappointment. “What do we have in common?”

“Our fathers expect so much from us that we can’t be ourselves. They want us to be something we’re not.”

“That’s why we have to look after each other,” I told him sympathetically.

I put a comforting arm around his shoulder, which he misinterpreted as a romantic gesture. He moved in to kiss me, but I turned my face away. I wasn’t ready to deal with this yet.

“I guess I must be the wrong cousin,” he said with wounded pride.

I was hurt, but I didn’t want to get into an argument with him. I enjoyed being with him again, and I didn’t want it to end. But I didn’t want our relationship to become complicated again. I wasn’t as enthusiastic as I used to be for an impassioned love.

In the end, it was easier to keep the peace by kissing him back, which I did. To my surprise, I enjoyed it. He still had the power to arouse me. Nothing had changed between us, and I immediately clicked with him. Or perhaps it was because I hadn’t experienced pleasure—certainly not sexual pleasure—for a long time and wanted to feel aroused. At least, I think I was aroused by him and not his father. I kept my mind off Gabriel by kissing Lincoln passionately as we rolled over the strewn letters on his large sofa. We ended up having sex merely for the pleasure of it and because it took our minds off our unsatisfactory personal lives.

CHAPTER 55

The following day, Lincoln returned from the bank, where he had emptied his mother's valuables from the safety deposit box. He carefully scattered the jewelry and personal items on his coffee table and rummaged through everything, although there weren't any letters.

A large necklace gift box caught his eye. He opened the box but found it empty. Yet it weighed heavier than it should. He studied it more closely and noticed that the inner lining was slightly padded, as though something had been inserted within it. He carefully pulled back part of the lining and saw some sheets of paper. He grasped the paper and slowly pulled out several envelopes, which were all sent from Anastasya. He wondered why his mother had hidden these letters in the inner lining of the necklace box and assumed they must be either deeply personal or very important—or both.

Lincoln pulled out one letter and began reading it. He quickly realized this was the letter he and Stasya had been searching for. When he had reached halfway down the first page, he gasped and dropped the letter on the floor. He stared at it, horrified. He knelt next to it, unwilling to touch it, as he reread the same lines, hoping he had misread or misunderstood it. He hadn't, and he shut his eyes in disbelief, devastated by Anastasya's terrible secret. It took several hours for him to compose himself enough to speak to Stasya. His calm and measured voice belied his inner torment.

* * *

Lincoln looked on guardedly as I stared in awe at my mother's presents to Sophia—jewelry and mementos—all of which were scattered on the coffee table. I was overwhelmed at touching them, knowing my mother had once held them in her own hands.

“Take anything you want,” Lincoln told me.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “They belong to your mother.”

“They're mostly female jewelry, so I have no use for them.”

“Thank you, Lincoln.”

I hugged him excitedly and kissed his cheek but saw that he looked troubled.

“What's wrong?” I asked him.

“I want to say something, but I don't know how to begin,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked, puzzled by the sudden seriousness in his voice.

“Something I want you to know, but I don’t know if I can say it.”

“Just come out and say it,” I told him.

“I ... I wish I didn’t love you so much.”

That was not what I expected to hear.

“You sound like you *don’t* want to love me.”

“I shouldn’t,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Forget it.”

I wanted to reassure him. “You know I love you, don’t you?” I asked sincerely.

He seemed saddened by my declaration of love.

“But ... you’re not *in* love with me,” he said, sensing the distinction.

“That’s all I can give right now,” I replied. “That’s all I can give anybody.”

He nodded but still looked troubled, so I gave him a long kiss, hoping he could see how much I loved him. But he didn’t return my kiss with equal ardor, so I reached down and unzipped his pants. I began fondling him and smiled playfully. He gazed at me with a fraught look. Perhaps he was still anxious or just not in the mood for sex.

“Do you mind if we don’t tell anybody about our relationship?” he asked me.

“Is that what’s been bothering you?”

“Yeah. Just until we work out what we have.”

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“Of course. Do you feel better now?”

He didn't reply but kissed me softly on the lips. It was a tentative kiss at first, but he soon kissed me with the passion I had been hoping for, and we eventually had sex. It wasn't loving sex, but I needed it nonetheless. I wanted to feel his skin close to mine to feel alive again. I needed to feel impassioned again.

CHAPTER 56

I woke up in the middle of the night, disoriented. I looked down and saw I was wearing an oversized T-shirt, which I couldn't remember putting on. I realized I was still in Lincoln's apartment, but he wasn't in bed with me. I looked toward the window. Outside was still dark; the alarm clock said three thirty in the morning. I scanned the room for Lincoln, but he wasn't there. I got out of bed to try to find him.

I headed toward the kitchen, where the light was on. I saw him sitting at the kitchen table with his head slumped down as though asleep. A tourniquet was loosely hanging from his left bicep. Spread out on the kitchen table in front of him were a drinking glass, two needles, and a small, white cardboard pillbox containing several ampoules.

As I edged closer to the table he raised his head. He was awake. I kept eying the two small ampoules that

contained a white salt. Two other ampoules were empty. The cardboard pillbox was marked "Diamorphine hydrochloride." I gave him a sad look, but he seemed surprisingly calm.

"It's for medicinal purposes," he said.

"It's also heroin," I said with disappointment.

"Heroin for medicinal purposes. They were prescribed to me by a doctor for pain."

"And for heroin addicts who can't quit using methadone treatment."

"Firsthand experience?" he said.

"Are you in pain?" I demanded to know.

"Only when I'm with you."

"*Lincoln!*"

"Okay, I used to be an addict several years ago, and these were prescribed to help me go clean. If I recall correctly, I started using after we stopped seeing each other several years ago."

"Are you blaming me for your addiction?"

"I prefer to lay the blame on love ... or lost love, in my case."

I was losing patience with him. "Are you still an addict?"

"No. These were lying around from years ago."

"So why did you take them?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I just needed them."

“I can’t be with anyone who is addicted—yes, firsthand experience.”

“I would never hurt you this way.”

“Are there any more in this apartment?”

“Maybe.”

I extended my palm. He slowly got up and walked over to the kitchen cupboard, opened it, and reached behind several cereal boxes. He produced two more pillboxes and handed them to me.

“These are the last.”

I threw him a skeptical look.

“I’m not lying.”

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

“Yes. No.”

“Is there?”

“Not now. Another time.”

“If we’re going to be together, you have to deal with your issues.”

“Who are we kidding? We were never going to last, anyway.”

I was angered by his insinuation. “Are you accusing me of using this as an excuse to break up with you?”

“I wasn’t talking about you. I was talking about me.”

“You don’t even know what you’re saying. You’re deluded.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I can see the world clearly. I can see the way we all play the relationship game. I’m an expert at it because I’ve been playing it for most of my life. It’s the love game that keeps us all addicted. We all play it,

and we wait to see who gets bored with the other person first.”

“Link, please go back to bed. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

“Not before I say something.”

“What?”

“If it’s true that what we hate in others is really what we hate in ourselves, then it’s also true that what we love in others is what we love in ourselves. Right?”

“Where are you going with this?”

“That we all use each other not only to be loved but also to love ourselves.”

I wasn’t in the mood for his unusual treatise on love, and let him finish to avoid arguing with him.

“When we’ve had our fill or when the other person doesn’t live up to our impossible expectations, we move on to the next person to try to connect with another aspect of our disconnected self to love and make whole. We go from relationship to relationship, searching for completion by being with someone who complements our shortcomings. So just go ahead and admit it.”

“Admit what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Just tell me truth. Tell me how you really feel about me. Don’t stay with me purely to make me feel better or to make you feel better.”

“I don’t want to keep having the same conversation with you, Link.”

“Now who’s deluded?”

I was incensed, and I wasn't going to hold back. I didn't care that he was high on drugs. He was right; he needed to hear the truth from me.

"You really want the truth?" I asked.

"I want to know what you secretly think about me but are afraid to say."

"Okay, here's the truth. We have a really strong emotional connection. At times it's unhealthy, and at other times it's very loving. But sometimes I feel as though that's all we have; that our relationship hasn't progressed from when we were children. I act more like a child when I'm with you, and I know you do, too. We're happy only when we're giddy like children. But when we argue, we become petulant and immature. I don't like myself when I'm like that. I don't want to be like that. Sometimes I think we're still children in adult bodies. I really want us to have a loving and mature relationship, but I don't know if we can—or ever will."

He stared silently at me, as though stunned by my revelation. Then he blinked and smiled.

"Thank you, Stasya," he said sincerely. "Thank you for being honest with me. Now I know you really do love me."

"Couldn't you have believed me instead of putting me through this?" I said, upset.

"What can I say? I'm a complicated man."

"You need to stop overthinking everything. Sometimes you have to accept that people are being nice to you

because they want to be nice you and not because they want something from you.”

“I haven’t had much practice with that. But you know who my father is.”

I moved closer to him and gave him a hug.

“I needed that,” he said with a boyish smile.

“You need to get clean.”

“I know.”

“Until then, I can’t be with you. Understand?”

He nodded. But he already knew that. I kissed his cheek. “Call me when you’re ready to have a mature relationship with me, because I would love to have one with you.”

He smiled, but I could see pain in his eyes. Yet if we were going to develop our relationship beyond what we already had, I needed to take a tough stand. It was best for him, best for me, and best for the both of us.

CHAPTER 57

I used the time away from Lincoln to help my father move back home. I wanted to give him and Yvonne time alone together, so I said I needed my own space and would move into an apartment closer to the city. I hadn't saved a lot of money from my three years overseas, so I wasn't expecting to find anything decent. Fortunately, my father offered me a student apartment in one of his properties not too far from the city. It wasn't anything special, but at least I didn't have to pay rent, and I was no longer close to Gabriel. I also still wanted to be closer to Lincoln, whom I hadn't heard from for over a week. I hoped he was dealing with his personal issues. When I eventually saw his phone number on my caller ID, I was excited but also hesitant to take the call.

“Hi, Lincoln,” I answered in a measured tone.

“I need to see you,” he said in an emotionally charged one.

“Why?”

“I really miss you.”

I paused before replying. “So everything is fine?”

This time, he paused. “No.”

“Then we can’t be together.”

“I can’t do this without you.”

“And I can’t be with you like this. I can’t be with anyone like this.”

He remained almost silent. I could still hear him breathing.

“Tell me, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d lose you.”

“You’re losing me now.”

“Maybe that’s what you really want.”

“Don’t start, Lincoln.”

“You’re afraid of us being together, and maybe you’re right. We’re both self-destructive. I use drugs, and you cut yourself.”

I was hurt by his comments, but I didn’t reply. I didn’t want to get into a fight over the phone.

He continued. “We’re more alike than you think, and maybe that’s what scares you.”

I remained silent, afraid I would say something I would regret.

“Stasya?”

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I didn't want to talk to him when he was like this, but I didn't want us to end like this, either. He appeared to read my mind.

"Stasya, if this is the end, can we please say good-bye in person? I don't want it to end the way I did last time. Let's end as friends. Please. If you really love me, please do this for me."

He sounded confused and stressed, and his mental state alarmed me. He needed help, and I loved him too much to ignore his pleas.

"I'll come over tonight," I said.

"Thanks, Stasya," he said with relief in his voice.

CHAPTER 58

I stood outside Lincoln's apartment door deliberating on whether I should go in. My heart told me I wanted to be there for him, but my head told me this would end in pain. I listened to my heart and knocked on the door. He opened it, but I didn't step inside. I wanted to test him first.

"Hi, Stasya."

"Hi, Link."

"Would you like to come inside?"

"Will I regret it?"

"Do you really want to know the reason why I started using again?"

"Will you tell me the truth?"

"Only if you come inside."

"This isn't starting well."

"Please. Come inside."

His forlorn eyes reminded me of the day Gabriel took him away from me. I couldn't say no to that face and reluctantly stepped inside his apartment. I followed him into the lounge room, where we sat on his sofa. I waited for him to talk, but he stared silently ahead of him as though in a daze. He turned toward me, took a deep breath, and revealed his torment.

"I finally realized I'm in love with you, but I know I can never have you."

"Not until you deal with your issues."

"No, I mean we should never be together. But I just can't say good-bye to you."

I waited for him to clarify his answer, but all he did was hand me a flyer.

"What's this?"

"It's where Harrison works as a skydiving instructor. His phone number is on it."

I didn't look at the flyer but glared at him. I was furious and hurt.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded to know.

"Harrison never ended up marrying his fiancé," he said, ignoring my question. "He's currently single with no kids."

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"He's much better for you," he said, ignoring another question.

"I never said that."

"No, I did. I'm not good for you, and he needs you."

"And you don't?"

"I need you, too—more than you need me."

“I want to help you,” I said, frustrated. “But you won’t let me in.”

“No one can help me. Not even me.”

My hard stance wasn’t getting me anywhere, and I softened my tone. “Look, I was wrong to abandon you when you needed my help. I want to be with you to help you get through this.”

“You should go with Harrison. Really. You have my blessing.”

“I don’t need your blessing,” I said angrily. “I will choose who to be with.”

“If only that were true,” he said cryptically. “Fate has already chosen your destiny, but you can’t see it. You should never have stopped seeing Harrison.”

“Harrison was the one who left *me*.”

“So you *do* know what it feels like to love someone more than they love you.”

“Please stop talking. I don’t want to hear any more of this.”

“You’re drawn to my father, and you’re helpless to stop it.”

I had finally lost patience with him and wasn’t prepared to go down this path. I stood up to leave, but he gripped my hand and blocked my path.

“I’m not being jealous,” he said. “You and my father are drawn to each other, but you need to stay away from him. Don’t be seduced by him.”

I slapped his face as hard as I could, but he didn’t flinch. He seemed impervious to pain.

“It’s true,” he said. “You’re ashamed to admit it, even to yourself. That’s why you can’t talk about it. That’s why you can’t look me in the face sometimes, because I remind you too much of my father.”

I was offended and decided to leave.

“Inheritance is a double-edged sword, sweetheart,” he said. “I may have inherited my father’s wickedness but you inherited your mother’s weakness.”

I stood at the front door, about to open it, when I turned around to confront him.

“Intrigued?” he said, teasing me.

“What weakness?” I said.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“You found the letter, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and I know all about your mother’s terrible secret.”

“Give me the letter.”

“No, I want to spare you my pain.”

“You’re already causing me pain.”

“Not like this.”

“Lincoln, please tell me what was in the letter.”

“I’m tired of competing with my father. I’m tired of competing with him for my job, my life, and my girlfriends, even you! He wins. I don’t care anymore. I won’t play his games anymore with you.”

“What do you mean ‘play his games?’”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Just tell me.”

“I was lying when I said I didn’t know you were back from overseas. I knew you had returned because my father told me. He wanted us to be together, probably so he could be closer to you, but he never admitted it. I used your mother’s letters to get back in with you.”

“You used me?” I asked incredulously.

“Only at first. I was still angry with you from the last time we were together. I was still jealous that you loved Harrison more than you loved me and that you liked my father more than you liked me. But now I don’t want to help him anymore because I’m in love with you. I’ve always been in love with you. Yet it was all for nothing because we can never be together, just like your mother and my father could never be together.”

“You never truly loved me,” I said spitefully. I didn’t hold back. “You didn’t want a girlfriend. You wanted a mother figure to give you the unconditional love you missed out on when you were a child. Well, I’m not your mother.”

“And you used me because I reminded you of my father, so now we’re even. Right?”

I didn’t know the truth myself, but I didn’t want to face it. I didn’t want to believe it.

“I don’t ever want to see you again,” I told him.

“And I don’t ever want you to see my father again.”

His remark cut me deeply, but I lost the strength to fight him anymore. I walked out of his apartment and slammed the door behind me.

CHAPTER 59

I felt betrayed by Lincoln's duplicity and sickened by Gabriel's underhandedness in using his son to get closer to me. I was also angry with Lincoln for not divulging the contents of my mother's letter. Yet I still had strong feelings for both of them, which made me only more conflicted. I was tempted to speak to Lincoln again to resolve my turmoil, but I was afraid it would cause me more distress, so I decided to ride out the emotional roller coaster and see where I landed.

To take my mind off my pain, I seized the flyer Lincoln had given me. I saw Harrison's mobile number and was tempted to dial it. But because our last meeting had ended badly, I didn't have the courage to call him. I decided to clear my head by getting away from everyone. I rented a car and drove along the Great Ocean Road, which I hadn't visited for several years. I drove past the same white house that had caught my attention on my last visit and slowed

down to get a better look at it. I wanted to drive up the hill to inspect it in great detail. However, the only access to it was through a private road, which was gated and locked, so I moved on.

When I reached the Otway Rainforest several hours later, I stopped and joined the other tourists on a walking tour. The fresh air and beautiful scenery made me forget everything for a while. As I followed the groups of tourists, a man in the distance caught my eye and prompted *déjà vu*. From afar, he resembled Gabriel. However, he had his back to me, so I couldn't be certain. Although I wanted to avoid him, I couldn't help but be drawn to him. The man started walking away from me, so I navigated my way past several groups of tourists to get closer to him.

The man turned around and looked in my direction. I panicked and turned away to evade him. However, I was certain he had seen me. I sensed him walking up toward me, and I braced myself. I glanced to my side, waiting anxiously for to him appear. Yet he never did. I turned to look for him, but he was gone. I was relieved but also disappointed that I wasn't able to confront Gabriel about Lincoln's accusations. There was no sign of him, and I wondered if I had mistaken someone else for him. I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of many things anymore. I wasn't sure how to feel about Lincoln or Gabriel. All I knew was that I wanted to reconnect with Harrison, even though I could never sever the connection I had with Lincoln. I was so frustrated with myself. Even at this point in my life, I still

felt as though I was constantly bouncing from person to person, unable to decide who I truly loved. The fine line between my mother and I was constantly moving and blurring, making it difficult for me to truly know myself, and to know who was right for me.

I left the tour group and headed back to my car. I took out Harrison's flyer from my pocket and stared at it for a while. I wanted to call him to hear his voice again, but I was afraid he wouldn't want to talk to me. I swallowed my pride and decided to call him. I nervously dialed his mobile number, hoping it would divert to voicemail so I could leave a message. Unfortunately, he answered.

"Hello, Harrison speaking."

I blurted out a muddled response. "Harrison. Hi. This is Stasya. How are you?"

Silence came from the other end of the phone. I thought he was going to hang up on me, but he finally put me out of my misery.

"Hi, Stasya. Been a long time."

"Yeah, I hope you don't mind my calling you."

"Um. No."

"Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"No, I can talk for a few minutes."

"I hear you're running a skydiving center."

"Yeah, I'm moving up in the world."

It was a bad pun, but I laughed loudly. It sounded forced.

"So what do you do?" he asked.

“Um, nothing at the moment. I’ve just come back from overseas.”

“That must have been about three years, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You must have had a good time.”

“It was okay,” I said dismissively. “I actually came back because of my father. He suffered a stroke.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He’s okay. He’s back home now.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The conversation was going nowhere, and I was becoming more nervous. I shut my eyes and asked him the question on the tip of my tongue.

“Um, would you like to meet for coffee or lunch some day?”

He went silent again and I assumed he was formulating an excuse to turn down my offer.

“Sure,” he said, to my relief. “It’ll be great to catch up.”

“When?” I asked eagerly.

“My weekend starts tomorrow. Can you catch up for lunch tomorrow?”

“Sure. Where and what time?”

“How about twelve at the same Thai restaurant we went to last time?” he suggested.

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea?” I joked. “Considering what happened last time.”

“That’s what makes it the perfect place. The odds of something bad happening again are impossible. Lightning doesn’t strike the same place twice.”

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“Lightning *can* strike the same place twice,” I told him.

“Well, it’s a clear-blue sky, so what could go wrong? Can you meet me there?”

“Sure,” I replied. “I’ll give you my number.”

“Is it the same phone you’re on now?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I have your number,” he told me.

“Yeah. Right.”

“Anyway, I have to run. I’ll see you tomorrow at twelve.”

“Okay. ’Bye.”

I ended the call before he could. My palms were sweaty, and I was breathless. I was also annoyed he still had this effect on me.

CHAPTER 60

As I waited anxiously outside the Thai restaurant, I saw Harrison approaching me. My stomach was in knots. I gave him a warm smile, and we greeted each other with an awkward embrace, unsure whether to hug or kiss – or both. I noticed he wasn't wearing my eternity ring, but I didn't make a big deal out of it. After we battled through all the usual pleasantries and small talk, we went inside to eat. We spent most of the time comparing our respective experiences overseas before I finally worked up the courage to discuss what I really wanted to know.

“So, you didn't get married?”

“Who told you?”

“Um ...”

“Let me guess: Lincoln?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Is he still spying on me? Hasn't he got anything better to do with his life?”

“He did it for me. He meant no harm.”

Harrison quickly forgot his anger and smiled. “How is Lincoln?”

“We had a falling out.”

“Again?”

“Yeah, but I’m not ready to discuss it yet.”

“Consider that topic closed.”

“What happened with your fiancé?”

“I called it off a few months before the wedding.”

“Second thoughts?”

“No, it just wasn’t meant to be. I think I loved the idea of spending my life with someone more than I loved her.”

“Well, you can’t be too unhappy with the way your life turned out. You followed your own destiny.”

“But I couldn’t change my fate,” he said somberly.

“What do you mean?”

“I guess I’m fated to die young, like my mother.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been diagnosed with the same disease as my mother.”

I was stunned. “When was this?”

“A few years ago.”

My mouth was dry. “What does that mean?”

“It means I could have three or four years left, or I could have ten or more years left. Nobody knows. I’m just hoping for the best.”

He delivered his life sentence nonchalantly, leaving me at a loss to know what to say. What can you say when someone you love tells you they know they may not have

long to live? Yet he was calm and positive. He seemed resigned to his fate, even though there was a hint of fear and anger in his voice.

“This wasn’t part of the plan,” he said. “That’s the main reason why I ended the wedding. I didn’t want to burden her if it ever came to this. And now it has.”

“I’m sure she didn’t see it that way.”

“I also didn’t want to burden my children with the same disease. That’s why I’ve decided never to get married or have children.”

I was disappointed by his declaration. Although neither marriage nor children had entered my mind, I was surprised at how disappointed I felt at knowing that neither would be a possibility between us in the future.

“I guess we all inherit things from our parents we don’t want,” I said. “Things that hurt or imprison us.”

“That even make you wish you had never been born.”

“Do you think your mother was wrong having you, knowing she could pass her illness on to you?”

He reflected on my question for a moment, unsure how to answer. “I don’t know. But I often wonder what it would be like if I hadn’t been born, which is stupid because how could I even think that in the first place if I hadn’t been born?”

“I used to think like that, too. I’m sure many people have questioned their existence at some point in their life.”

He remained lost in his thoughts.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you were born,” I told him.

CHAPTER 61

In the days that followed I thought constantly of Harrison and the gracious and courageous way he had faced his fate. I wished I could do the same with my life. He had made it clear to me that he could not offer me a long-term relationship. But I felt I deserved a say in the matter.

I still wanted him in my life, so. I decided to call him.

“Hi, Harrison, it’s me,” I said.

“Hey, Stasya.”

“I really enjoyed catching up with you the other day.”

“Me, too.”

It sounded promising.

“I was wondering whether you’d like to catch up again.”

“No, I can’t.”

He hadn’t even paused. I was devastated but covered up well.

“Okay. I understand.”

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“I can go out with you only if you agree to go skydiving with me.”

He made me smile. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. It’s a prerequisite.”

“I can’t do this.”

“You won’t need to do anything. You’ll be tandem jumping with me. I’ll guide all the way.”

“What if something goes wrong? What if the chute doesn’t open?”

“Someone I knew once told me that you never feel more fully alive than when you’re so close to death.”

“Sure, throw that in my face now.”

“You’re the one that wanted to live an impassioned life.”

“I want to stay alive, too.”

“Just fly up in the plane. If you feel like you can’t do it, then you don’t have to jump. But I really want you to try the experience once in your life. You never know, you may end up loving it and become addicted like me.”

“Okay, but I’d better not die.”

“I’ve lost only one customer ever.”

“What?”

“I have to go,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll call you later.”

“Okay. Bye.”

I ended the call on a high note. It felt good to have a kindred spirit. But I did not let myself hope that we could simply reignite our love affair.

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As for Lincoln, I wasn't sure we could ever repair what we had. My emotional affinity with him meant that our relationship was always going to straddle the opposite extremes of love and hate, happiness and sorrow. Yet the more time I spent away from Lincoln, the more I missed him. What I really wanted was to have both cousins in my life, and even though Harrison and Lincoln had never gotten along, I didn't want to choose between them—or be forced to do so.

CHAPTER 62

As the plane reached fifteen thousand feet, I couldn't even make eye contact with any of the other tandem skydivers. The other first-timers appeared just as nervous as I was, which made me more apprehensive.

Harrison was strapped behind me, giving me final instructions. However, with the deafening propellers and my pounding heart, I couldn't hear what he was saying. Suddenly, the door slid open, and air rushed inside. All I could see was blue sky and wispy clouds. Everyone stood up and prepared to file out. Harrison and I were at the head of the queue and were scheduled to jump first. But I froze, and my legs couldn't move. The noise was too loud for me to explain why I couldn't go ahead with the jump.

My eyes said everything, though, and Harrison signaled the other instructors to go ahead of us while we moved to the end of the queue. I was relieved and happy I didn't have to jump. One by one, I saw everybody disappear out

the open door until only Harrison and I remained. I turned around and gave him an apologetic look. He craned his head forward and gave me a reassuring smile that conveyed it was all right. I smiled and relaxed for the first time.

He moved his head to kiss me, and I met his mouth. He kissed me with such ardor that I was caught off guard and forgot where I was. The world around me disappeared. I couldn't hear the air rushing past the open door or the roar of the propellers. All I could hear was my pounding heart. We kissed for so long I had to stop to catch my breath. My face flushed as I looked into his eyes.

Suddenly, I found myself being thrown out of the plane. The sun momentarily blinded me and a heavy gust of air rushed up against my face. The shock delayed my response to what had just happened. Harrison had so thoroughly disarmed me with his kiss that my body had offered no resistance when we jumped through the open door of the plane.

As soon as I caught my breath, I started screaming. At first, I was screaming from shock and fear, but then I began screaming with joy. The adrenaline rushed through my body as we fell toward the ground at high speed. I soon stopped screaming, and all I could hear was the air rushing past my ears. I felt lightness within me, the type of lightness I imagined life would be like if I were free of all my burdens—my guilt and my sadness. It was liberating to experience this weightlessness. Even though I knew I was

hurtling toward the ground, it felt as though I were fluttering through the air like a butterfly.

However, the moment was fleeting. My body jolted in a violent deceleration as Harrison pulled the rip cord, unfurling a huge parachute above us. After our bodies stabilized, I floated slowly back to earth—that is, slowly compared with how fast I'd been free falling. Everything was silent as we wafted down to the ground, where Harrison gently guided us to a soft landing. He unhooked me from his tandem harness, and I turned around to see him grinning.

“That’s not fair,” I told him. “You distracted me.”

“It’s nice to know I still have that effect on you.”

“Well, it was a lovely distraction.”

I then surprised him by kissing him passionately before pulling away with a grin.

“Was that as distracting for you?” I said, teasing.

“I felt nothing.”

“Liar.”

“Do you want to do that again?”

“Jump or kiss?”

“Jump, of course.”

“No, once is enough. Besides, I know all your tricks now.”

At the end of the day, we went back to Harrison’s apartment, which looked more like a student’s studio, a far cry from Lincoln’s sleek apartment. It was fairly nondescript and lacked any cozy touches. It contained very little furniture and was filled with lots of sporting and

camping equipment. I could see scuba gear, snowboards, and rappelling equipment. It was the type of apartment that served only one purpose: somewhere to sleep at night before the next big adventure. It was not a cozy place to curl up in on a rainy afternoon. The bed was suitable for only one person. But we managed to make do. It was only after I lay next to him on the narrow bed that I was finally able to get a closer look at his studio.

“You don’t invite many women over here, do you?”

He gave a cursory glance to the cluttered room.

“I wouldn’t know where to put them.”

“Lucky I have poor taste in men; otherwise, I wouldn’t be caught dead in an apartment like this.”

“What happened to your desire for an impassioned love?”

“What makes you think I haven’t already found my impassioned love?”

“So, I’m only a pit stop in life for you?”

“Maybe.”

“Actually, I always thought you had more in common with Lincoln.”

“Funny. That’s what he said about you.”

“You can spend all your life looking for love, but love inevitably finds you, sometimes when you least expect it.”

“Is that right, Mr. Romance? So why hasn’t love visited you?”

“Maybe it has,” he said with a wink. “I always say, you can’t go looking for adventure; you have to make your

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own adventure wherever you are. Same with love. You have to make your own love whoever you're with."

"Do you always use adventure metaphors whenever you talk about love?"

"Now you know why women don't come over here."

He took my hand and gingerly placed it on his bare chest. Even at rest, his heart was racing wildly. "Only you can do this to me," he said, almost with disbelief.

CHAPTER 63

As I drove home from Harrison's apartment the following morning, I couldn't stop my mind from drifting toward Lincoln. My new feelings for Harrison were now clouded by the strong emotional pull that existed between me and Lincoln. To my exasperation, I missed being with Lincoln whenever I was with Harrison, and whenever I was with Lincoln I thought I needed to be with Harrison. I hated feeling conflicted. I hated not being in control of my thoughts and emotions, which is how I had always felt my whole life. I was still so erratic and indecisive when it came to love.

The more I thought about Lincoln, the more I realized I needed to hear his voice again. I wanted to reconnect with him after our last anguished conversation. It was almost ten in the morning so I decided to make a hands-free call to his mobile. As his phone rang, I deliberated on what I would say and whether I should even tell him about

Harrison. Even though he was the one who had encouraged me to see Harrison I still felt uncomfortable about the situation.

His mobile phone went to voicemail so I ended the call and rang his land line, hoping he was at home. After a few rings, it went straight to his answering machine and I listened to his recorded message. His upbeat voice sounded so incongruous to the agonized face I saw in my mind.

“Hey, Lincoln. It’s me,” I uttered nervously. “Please call me when you get this message. Let’s catch up soon. Bye.”

I ended the call and continued driving with a multitude of thoughts drifting in and out of my head. Moments later, my mobile phone rang. The phone number didn’t show on caller ID, but I knew it had to be Lincoln. I used the hands-free function to answer the call.

“Lincoln?” I asked eagerly.

“No, Stasya. It’s me, Gabriel.”

He caught me off guard. I didn’t know what to think of him after learning he had used Lincoln to get closer to me. I didn’t know what he was thinking about me. I wanted to make an excuse to end the call but didn’t know what to say.

“Stasya?”

“Sorry, I’m here. I’m on the road.”

“Can you talk?”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“I hope you don’t mind my calling you, but I’m concerned about Lincoln.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“He sounded strange when I spoke to him a few nights ago, and he hasn’t returned any of my calls. Have you spoken to him recently?”

“Um, yes. We ... we spoke a while ago.”

“Do you know if there is anything wrong?”

“Um, we had a ... we had a bit of a falling out.”

“I see. That explains everything.”

I felt guilty and wanted to make it up to him. “I just left a message on his home answering machine. Would you like me to try his mobile again?”

“Yes. I’d appreciate that. I’m sure he’ll answer your call. Let me know if he needs anything.”

“I will.”

I ended the call with Gabriel, and made a hands-free call to Lincoln’s mobile number. I blamed myself for Gabriel’s anxiety and for Lincoln’s desire to shut himself away from everyone. I took a deep breath, bit my lower lip and waited for him to answer. It rang several times before eventually diverting to voicemail again. In a way, I was relieved he didn’t answer but I also wanted to hear his voice again. I left a message for him.

“Lincoln, this is Stasya again. I hope you’re okay. Your father has been trying to get in touch with you, so could you please call him? I’m also sorry for the way it ended between us and I really need to talk to you. Hope to hear from you soon. ’Bye.”

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* * *

I felt obligated to speak with Gabriel, even though I was still uncomfortable being near him, and I needed to do it in person. I hated disobeying my father and going against Lincoln's wishes, but I needed to confront Gabriel and decided to drive to his house.

I held my breath when I saw the front door opening as I drew up in my car. Gabriel stepped outside and seemed disappointed to see only me. He loomed over me as I stepped out of my car.

"Sorry, I thought it was Lincoln," he said.

"I didn't get through to him, but I left messages for him to call me."

"The last time he shut me out like this was over a girl."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Is he in love with you?" he asked me directly.

I hesitated for a moment and thought about lying to him, but I couldn't manage it.

"Yes, I think so."

"Are you in love with him?"

I didn't know what Lincoln meant to me now. I paused to gather my thoughts, but Gabriel spared me any further discomfort.

"Sorry, I shouldn't ask. When was the last time you heard from him?"

"Several days ago."

"Has he started using drugs again?"

I wanted to lie for his sake, but I couldn't do it. I sensed he could read my mind so any thoughts of deceiving him were pointless. "Yes."

"Don't blame yourself for any of this," he said. "This is his way of taking out his resentment toward me."

I didn't disagree with him, but I sensed he wanted something more from me.

"I don't believe Lincoln resents you as much as you think."

"Stasya, I make it easy for people to hate me."

"That's not the person I see."

"What do you see?"

"Someone who is capable of deep love but unwilling to offer it."

"That's not what most people would say."

"Most people don't know you still have mementos of my mother and that you visit her mausoleum often. You must have love in your heart to do that."

"I wish I could see that person, too."

He instantly appeared less threatening to me. In fact, I was surprisingly relaxed in his company. Maybe it was because I thought I had the upper hand in the conversation, given his genuine concern for Lincoln. I was relaxed so I decided to ask him something I'd wanted to ask him all my life.

"Why do you wear the same eternity ring as my parents?"

He looked dumbfounded for a moment but quickly regained his composure and looked me directly in the eyes.

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“I’m not ready to tell you just yet, Stasya. Perhaps one day. Anyway, thank you for your help with Lincoln.”

“I’ll call you if I hear from him.”

“Thank you.”

As I left Gabriel, I found him even more perplexing. The more I knew about him, the less I understood him. But I really wanted to understand him. I found him mystifying, secretive, and contradictory. His concern for Lincoln was genuine, and his reticence to take advantage of me was unexpected.

CHAPTER 64

The next morning, I called Lincoln's mobile and home numbers again. He didn't answer and I left another message. I was guilt-ridden over my decision to pull away from him when he was struggling with so many things. I also felt guilty about visiting Gabriel, knowing that others would be hurt or would not understand my actions. I discussed it with Yvonne, who offered her guarded opinion about Gabriel.

"I wouldn't say you're doing anything wrong," she said. "Besides, you're looking after the interests of your cousin. I'm sure your father would agree if he knew, but there's no need to involve him in this."

"Thanks, Vonnie. And thank you for keeping this between us."

"Thank you for trusting me. But I must be honest with you, too," she said, averting her eyes. "While you were away, your father and I—"

“I know,” I said with a reassuring smile. “Tell him I’m happy for you both.”

“I will,” she said with relief.

“Thank you for being there for him and taking his mind off my mother.”

But Yvonne didn’t see it that way. “Nothing will ever take his mind off Anastasya. His heart will always belong to her, but I’ve accepted that. Even I think of her often. She had that effect on people.”

Now, more than ever, I wished I had known my mother, who still had this overwhelming effect over people so many years after her death.

* * *

Harrison kept his hands glued to the steering wheel, even though the car was parked on the side of the road. He turned to me, eyes wide.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” I asked him.

“Yeah.” He sounded apprehensive.

“Lincoln’s an important part of my life,” I said. “If you and I are going to be together, you’re going to have to accept him, too.”

“I know.”

“I’m not going to be bounced between you two.”

“Well, as long he accepts me, I’m okay with it.”

“Good. I’ll call you later.”

I kissed him good-bye and watched him drive away, certain he was looking in his rearview mirror as I entered Lincoln’s apartment building. He’d said he was going home, but I was sure he was going to drive aimlessly

through the city streets, trying to reassure himself that I was in love with him and not Lincoln. Harrison had always been envious of Lincoln's good looks and wealth and also of his past relationship with me.

I had been standing outside Lincoln's apartment for over a minute, waiting for him to open the door, but he refused to answer and continued playing loud music. I was certain this was his way of ignoring me or dealing with his insecurity over Harrison. I tried his mobile and landline again, both of which still went to his voice message. I was becoming frustrated and tempted to leave when a mature-aged, elegant woman—a tenant, I presumed—saw me standing there. She cast me a sullen look, as though I were responsible for the loud music. She walked by and made a passing remark behind my back.

"He's been playing the same music for the last two days," she said irately. "People need to sleep."

My heart sank as dread crept in. I sensed something was wrong and called Harrison. As soon as he answered, I didn't even wait for him to talk.

"Harrison, can you drive back here?"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Lincoln isn't responding."

"What do you mean?"

"I can hear music coming from inside his apartment, but he won't answer or pick up the phone."

"Maybe he's still upset."

“Someone said he’s been playing the same music nonstop for the past two days. I know something’s wrong.”

“I’ll be there soon. In the meantime, can you call emergency?”

“Yes.”

By the time Harrison arrived at the apartment building, a police car was on the scene. Harrison rushed down the corridor and joined me. I was shaking uncontrollably. He tried his best to calm me down.

The two police officers used a small battering ram to smash open the door. It budged only a few inches, exposing a badly damaged lock. One of the officers then kicked the lock, causing the door to fling inward. Loud music was blaring out of the apartment. The police officers told us to remain behind in the corridor as they entered Lincoln’s apartment. Moments later, the music abruptly stopped.

Harrison and I moved forward to peek through the damaged door. I wished I hadn’t. Lincoln was sitting motionlessly on the sofa, with his head lying back on the headrest. His eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. His face was gray, and his lips were blue. Resting on the coffee table in front of him were two cardboard pillboxes and several glasses.

I looked away and began shaking even more. Harrison held me tightly as one of the police officers checked Lincoln’s neck for a pulse. The other officer called for an ambulance and approached us.

“Are you his relatives?” he asked.

I was still in shock and hadn't heard the question. Harrison answered for me.

“He's our cousin.”

“Does he have any parents?”

“Yes, his father. Do you want us to contact him?”

“Yes, please.”

The officer then turned to his colleague, who was standing next to Lincoln, and shook his head. Lincoln was dead. I shrieked and began sobbing. I dropped helplessly to the floor. Harrison picked me up and led me away.

* * *

I sat trembling inside Harrison's car, watching him pace the footpath as he spoke on his mobile phone. Moments later, he ended the call and returned to the car.

“Gabriel will be here soon.”

I wasn't paying attention, lost in my own grief.

“Do you need anything?” he asked.

“I pushed him away when he needed me,” I said.

“Don't do this to yourself.”

“He started using again because of me.”

“The police think it was an accidental overdose. It could have happened any time.”

“I feel dead inside, like my childhood has been ripped away from me.”

He held my hand, but I could not feel his touch.

“I did this,” I said. “Just like I caused my mother's death.”

“You're not responsible for either death, okay?”

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I didn't believe him. I couldn't pay attention to what he was saying. All I could hear was my head throbbing, and all I could feel was a heavy weight in my heart.

"He told me he was using me to get revenge on his father," I said, babbling. "He accused me of using him to be closer to Gabriel."

Harrison didn't understand what I was saying, but I knew the truth. I felt remorseful over my longing for Gabriel and was determined never to speak to him again.

"I don't want to be here when Gabriel arrives," I said.

"I'm not keen about seeing him, either. But someone has to be here for him. His son has just died."

"I can't deal with him now."

"Do you want to take a taxi to my place, and I'll join you later?"

"No, I need to tell my father and Yvonne about Lincoln."

"Okay. I'll pass by your father's house when I'm done."

He kissed me good-bye, but I couldn't feel his lips. My whole face was numb.

CHAPTER 65

I chose to attend Lincoln's funeral, even though I knew it meant seeing Gabriel again. I wanted to pay my respects to Lincoln and was grateful that Harrison had agreed to accompany me. He never left my side. Gabriel graciously offered his deep gratitude to Harrison for his presence at the funeral and for notifying him of his son's death. Gabriel was also touched that my father and Yvonne attended the funeral and thanked them personally, each setting aside decades of acrimony. My father was still not well, but he insisted on attending Lincoln's funeral in his wheelchair. Our mutual fondness for Lincoln had united us on that day.

After the church service, we all stood in line to pay our respects to Gabriel. The closer I moved toward him, the queasier I became. I began shaking and couldn't breathe properly. As I stood in front of him, I almost lost my balance and would have fallen to my knees if Harrison

hadn't held me up. I couldn't meet Gabriel's eyes as I passed on my condolences. I kissed him on the cheek and was overcome with contradictory thoughts and emotions. When he took my hand, an incomprehensible series of sounds and visions of Gabriel rebounded inside my head, as though I had unleashed a torrent of my mother's repressed memories. Yet I couldn't make any sense of them. All I felt was overwhelming guilt and despair, which seemed at odds with my mother's happy and hopeful disposition.

Perhaps I was simply experiencing my own guilt and despair for causing Lincoln's death. Whatever the true reason, the sensations suddenly ceased when I let go of Gabriel's hand. All that was left was a ghostly residue, but nothing I could latch on to or that made any sense.

* * *

After Lincoln's funeral, I stayed with Harrison in his apartment for over a week. I didn't mind the lack of space; it safely cocooned me from the outside world. I would lie in his bed all day after he left for work and reminisce about my childhood with Lincoln. Harrison eventually became concerned about me and was determined to get me out of my funk.

"You really need to spend more time away from here," he said.

"I like being here."

"Yeah, that's what's scaring me. I live here, and I don't even like it. You need to get out. Tomorrow's my weekend. Let's do something together."

I already had something in mind. "Let's get married."

It had come out of nowhere. I hadn't planned to say it. It was spontaneous, and Harrison reacted as casually as I expected.

"I was thinking more like a movie."

"I want to marry you."

"Why?"

"Is that how you respond to a woman's proposal?"

"I've never had any practice before. No one has ever proposed to me."

"Well, I am. I want to be with you."

"You are with me."

"I want us to be more than that. I want us to be husband and wife."

"Which part do you want to play?"

"I'm serious."

"No, you're just depressed by Lincoln's death. You're afraid that life is moving past you so fast you want to slow down time and settle down. I know how that feels, believe me. This is no time for making reckless decisions."

"I think you *have* practiced for this before."

"A little."

"So why won't you marry me?"

"Give me one good reason why we should get married."

"Because I love you."

He frowned, as though I had said the most horrible thing to him. "Never tell a guy you love him."

That wasn't the response I'd been looking for. It was my turn to frown. "Most guys usually say 'I love you' back."

"The moment you tell a guy you love him, he starts to become complacent and takes you for granted."

"How?"

"Because men begin to believe you won't leave them and that you'll always stand by them no matter what. You need to keep the guy on his toes. Trust me, I know these things."

"Is this some secret men's business that you pass down from generation to generation?"

"You need to give men the impression you could leave them at any time."

"What if a guy says he loves me first? What am I supposed to say back?"

"Look at him with a mysterious smile and say 'I know' and nothing else."

"Okay. I take back my declaration of love for you."

"Good," he said and smiled. "In any case, you don't need to get married to prove your love to someone."

"Marriage is like making a permanent commitment, one that can't be broken," I argued.

"Someone must've forgotten to tell all those divorcees out there."

"I've found the person I want to grow old and spend my life with. You *are* my life. How's that for a reason?"

He was overwhelmed. "How long have you practiced for this?"

“Ever since I was fifteen. I always knew you were the one for me, even if it took me all this time to finally realize that.”

I reached under my T-shirt, pulled out my gold chain, and showed him my eternity ring hanging from it, alongside my mother’s eternity ring.

“Do you remember the ring I gave you just before we broke up? I had two of them made, but I didn’t want to freak you out. They’re eternity rings. I’ve always believed we were meant to spend the rest of our lives together, so you have to say yes.”

He was moved but soon became morose. “I can’t grow old with you. I don’t know how long I have, but it definitely won’t be as long as you.”

“I don’t care. I want to be with you till the day you die.”

“I don’t want to make you a widow.”

“Nobody knows how long we have. I could die in an accident tomorrow, but that doesn’t mean we should stop living or loving.”

“I don’t want to have any children. I don’t want them to inherit my disease.”

“Then we can adopt. Or there may be some cure years from now. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t stop me wanting to be with you.”

“I don’t want to burden you.”

“It’s a greater burden being without you.”

“And what’s going to happen after I die?”

“I will weep for you and I will smile, knowing I had the good fortune to be with you.”

“It won’t be a long marriage.”

“Then we have to pack as much life in the time we have together.”

Harrison meditated on my proposal, filling me with anxiety the longer he remained silent. He then walked over to a large backpack lying in the corner of the room and located a small side pocket. He unzipped it and pulled out a small jewelry box. He presented it to me and then opened the box, revealing the eternity ring I had given to him years earlier. He had kept it all this time. I was elated, tears coming to my eyes.

“Will this do for an engagement ring?” he asked me with a boyish smile.

“Yes,” I said, beaming. “Will you marry me?”

“How can I say no?”

He slid his eternity ring on his ring finger, and I unthreaded the eternity ring from my gold chain and slid it on my own ring finger. I looked into his eyes and was filled with love for him, even if I was not allowed to say the words.

“I ask only one thing from you,” I said.

“What?”

“I can’t live in your apartment. We’re renting something bigger and closer to the city.”

“Thank God for that. You were beginning to cramp my style.”

“I didn’t know you had one.”

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“I love you,” he said sincerely.

“I know,” I said with a mysterious smile.

CHAPTER 66

My father and Yvonne were surprised by my decision to marry Harrison. They were unaware of our romantic history, although they had suspected we might have dated as teenagers. However, my father seemed uneasy about the situation. While it was not illegal to marry your first cousin under Australian law, he was still concerned about the stigma attached to it. Yet, he eventually came around as he knew Harrison would be a good husband to his daughter.

Several months later, Harrison and I had a simple civil wedding at the Victorian Marriage Registry, attended only by my father, Yvonne, and several of Harrison's good friends. The reception was held in a restaurant within a new high-rise apartment building, which conveniently included the luxurious hotel where we were staying. However, when we entered our hotel suite, the lack of furniture surprised Harrison. The spacious sub-penthouse

suite, which had beautiful city views, was completely unfurnished.

“A little bare for a bridal suite, don’t you think?” he said.

“That’s because it’s not our bridal suite,” I said. “That’s a few floors down. This is a sub-penthouse apartment—a spacious three-bedroom apartment.”

“This building has apartments?”

“Yes, but this isn’t just any apartment,” I said excitedly. “This is our brand-new home. Our furniture will be arriving in a few days.”

He didn’t react the way I had hoped. In fact, he didn’t react at all. He simply stood in one spot, completely bewildered. I thought he didn’t like it, but I tried my best to sell it to him.

“Look,” I said enthusiastically, waving my arms. “Space ... and over there, even more space. You could fit your whole studio apartment into one of these rooms.”

“I’m not sure about this,” he said in a moan. “Do we really need an apartment this big?”

“You don’t like it?” I asked, dejected.

“No, I do, I do like it. But ... I spend most of my time outside whether it’s for work or play. And if you’re serious about doing that creative writing course, then this apartment is too far from your university. What if we found a smaller apartment in the suburbs, somewhere closer for the both of us?”

“But I’ve always wanted to live in a high-rise apartment.”

“Me, too. But ... can we afford this?”

“Hell no. It’s a wedding present from my father.”

This made him feel even worse. “It’s too much. I can’t accept this.”

“Don’t worry. He didn’t pay for it.”

He didn’t believe me. “What? He got it for nothing?”

“Exactly.”

“Someone *gave* him a three-bedroom sub-penthouse apartment?”

“Did you suddenly forget my father was a property developer?”

“Your father’s company developed this building?”

“Yes. He received this apartment as part of the contract, so don’t feel too bad. It may not be the penthouse, but it’ll do.”

He finally smiled, and I was relieved.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I think your father should’ve pushed for the penthouse.”

* * *

We spent a week honeymooning on the Whitsunday Islands, off the coast of Queensland and in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef. It was the perfect holiday for Harrison; it allowed him to participate in all the water sports and activities he loved and allowed me to lay on the white beaches and relax. He even managed to coax me to go scuba diving near the Great Barrier Reef. I loved losing myself underwater among the brilliantly colored fish and coral.

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We also traveled through the hillside national park trails by mountain bike, and he duped me into going for a helicopter ride. I still hadn't lost my fear of heights, and I dug my nails into his arm for most of the ride, although I had to admit the scenery was stunning. However, my favorite part of the holiday was staying several nights on a sailing boat and waking up to a beautiful sunrise every morning.

The last day of our honeymoon was filled with mixed emotions. I wished it didn't have to end, but I was also excited about spending my life with Harrison, no matter how little time we had left.

CHAPTER 67

Harrison and I spent the next few weeks furnishing and decorating our new apartment. We had more than enough space for all his sporting gear, and I tried to make the apartment as homey as possible without being too feminine for his tastes. We spent the first few months of our marriage trying to get accustomed to sharing our lives with one another. We were both solitary people who valued our independence, yet we enjoyed each other's company, and it didn't take long for us to settle into married life.

However, six months into our marriage, I began revisiting the same thoughts of dying on my twenty-fifth birthday. I would be turning twenty-five in a few months' time, and I kept recalling my mother's dying thoughts. I hadn't experienced her memories for some time and was puzzled why I was overcome with thoughts of dying young. Even more troubling, I began having nightmares of

dying a painful death. One night, I woke up hyperventilating because I thought I was having a heart attack.

“I’m suffocating,” I shrieked.

“You’re all right,” Harrison said. “Just take slow, deep breaths.”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Stasya! You’re awake. You’re okay.”

I thought Harrison was part of my nightmare, and it took a while for me to realize I was awake.

“Same as last time,” I said dejectedly. “I dreamt I was drowning.”

“No, last time you dreamt you were being buried alive.”

“Why does this keep happening to me?”

“Well, if Freud were here, he’d say our marriage was suffocating you,” he said.

I appreciated his levity.

“Yeah, that sounds right,” I said, bantering back but still agitated. “I keep seeing the number twenty-five everywhere, like I’m going to die on my twenty-fifth birthday.”

“That’s only because your mother died on her twenty-fifth birthday. You have to let it go.”

“Let go of what?”

“Your guilt. You have to forgive yourself. Otherwise, this is going to keep happening.”

“I’ve never been frightened of dying. Now that’s all I ever think about.”

“And I’m the one who’s actually dying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If skydiving has taught me one thing, it’s that once you can accept your own death, it totally frees you up, and you’re able to feel truly alive. You stop seeing life as a spectator sport and begin living life in the moment.”

“Is that your way of trying to make me go skydiving with you?”

“Did it work?”

“No!”

“Well, you can’t keep going on like this. You have to confront what’s really bothering you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to face your troubled feelings for Gabriel.”

I turned away, unable to meet his eyes. “This is about me and my mother.”

“No, it’s about you and Gabriel,” he said. “You can deny it as much as you want, but your soul has other plans for you. You’ve cut him completely out of your life, but the truth is you need him in your life.”

“I don’t even want to be near him, knowing he hurt Lincoln and used him to get closer to me.”

“It’s not about that you want, it’s about what you need. If it’s true what you said, he could be your uncle: your mother’s half-brother. Part of you needs to be close to him so you can feel closer to your mother—and closer to Lincoln. Life is telling you to go there, but you’re afraid to listen.”

“That’s because I don’t want to contemplate the thought.”

“Yes, you do. You want to know whether it’s possible to have any kind of relationship with him.”

“That’s a dark area I don’t want to cross. He’s disappointed me before.”

“I know, believe me. But maybe that’s what you need. Maybe your soul needs to crawl through the darkness before you can appreciate the light.”

“Is this what you really want?”

“What I really want is to know that your mind is fully with me without part of you wondering if it’s still possible to have Gabriel in your life. Right now, I feel as though you don’t even know the answer yourself.”

“I’m sorry I’ve made you feel like that.”

“Don’t be sorry. It keeps me on my toes.”

“I’m afraid of losing you.”

“Maybe you’re just afraid of the truth.”

“No, I’m afraid of what you’ll think of me, knowing how much you dislike him.”

“To be honest, I’ve seen him in a new light since Lincoln died. He even apologized to me for how he once treated me.”

I looked into his eyes and could see how great his love for me was. I could also see uncertainty and sadness. I loved him, too, and wanted him to know it. We made love, yet it felt as though it were the last time. I was sad, as if I were somehow saying good-bye to the person I knew was my soul mate. It was Harrison whom I truly loved, but it was Gabriel whom I couldn’t forget.

CHAPTER 68

I walked through the cemetery and approached my mother's mausoleum, where I saw Gabriel with his back to me as he looked through the doors of wrought iron and glass. With both of us standing so close to each other, I felt as though my mother had been drawing me toward him my whole life so they could be reunited. Was this my purpose in life? Had my whole life been leading up to this moment? Was I the conduit that would tie the loose ends between them? I wasn't sure, but I needed to know the truth, just as Harrison had said.

Gabriel sensed my presence and turned around. He seemed unsure how to react and smiled awkwardly. He looked as nervous as I felt. I smiled back warmly, in the hope of alleviating his anxiety.

"Thank you for inviting me here today," he said softly.

"You're welcome," I said.

“Why does she still have this effect on us so long after her death?”

“Perhaps to heal old wounds ... or to draw us closer.”

“Your mother was good at uniting people, especially for my sake. She fought for me all the time.”

“I know you were treated poorly as a child.”

“What makes you think I was the victim?”

“Well, I don’t see you as the villain.”

“That’s something your mother would say.”

“I think you like to keep your distance from people to prevent them from hurting you.”

Gabriel mulled over my words longer than I had hoped, then he looked away. “It’s not easy being with you—or without you.”

“Why?”

“The timing isn’t right,” he said cryptically. “Perhaps one day in the future it will be. And I really look forward to that day.”

I didn’t understand what he meant, and didn’t truly want to. Not knowing felt oddly alluring.

“Would you like to go inside?” I asked him.

“Yes, I’d love that.”

I approached the door and glanced at the statues of the weeping angels, recalling how they came to life on my first visit to the mausoleum, and prayed for divine guidance in dealing with Gabriel. I inserted the key and unlocked the heavy doors. He helped me pry them open. Our hands met for a moment, but he quickly pulled away. We stepped inside, and it was as if I were stepping back in time. The

interior appeared smaller and more cramped than I remembered. Gabriel followed behind me, slowly taking in every part of it. We stood side by side as we stared at my mother's photograph.

"This is where I first sensed my mother's presence," I said. "I can still feel her now."

"I wish I could say the same," Gabriel said sadly. "I haven't sensed her presence for many years."

"It's hard to believe how someone can be fully alive one moment and then suddenly cease to exist the next," I said.

"I've always wondered where the human spirit goes after death. Does it cease to exist?"

"I believe it does," I said.

"That photograph really captures your mother's true essence."

He looked at me, enveloping me with his presence in the small, confined space. Suddenly, lurid thoughts assaulted me. I imagined Gabriel caressing my lips with his finger. I was unsettled by my desire for him, and had to look away. But the thoughts persisted. I imagined him kissing my neck and wrapping his arms around my breasts and hips. I was shocked by my craving for him, and I inadvertently cried out.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

"All of a sudden, I'm not feeling well," I said, trying to cover the truth.

He moved closer and took my hand. His touch made my desire more intense.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“Do you want to sit down somewhere?”

“No, I just need to get out of here. I’m sorry, I have to go.”

“Don’t apologize.”

He helped me out of the mausoleum, and I closed my eyes to shut out my thoughts. I handed him the key to the doors, which he closed for me.

“Let’s sit down somewhere,” he said.

“No, I have to go home.”

“I can drive you there.”

“No, I came in my own car.”

“Should you be driving in this state?”

“I’ll be fine. I just need a moment alone.”

“My presence has upset you again, hasn’t it?”

“No, it’s not you. My head feels light and feverish. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry our day had to end this way.”

“I’ll keep in touch so we can meet again,” I promised him.

“You don’t have to do this for my sake.”

“It’s for my sake, too,” I explained. “You grew up with my mother. I’m sure she would have wanted us to be closer.”

“I hope so. Anyway, thank you for letting me inside the mausoleum.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry I couldn’t stay any longer.”

I left him standing there and made my way haphazardly through the cemetery, reeling from the thoughts running through my head. The intensity of my desire for him

dissipated only when I got into my car and drove far enough to get some distance between us.

I wasn't sure if these thoughts were mine or my mother's. Either way, I had no control over my desire for Gabriel. I had never before experienced such intense longing for someone—including Lincoln and Harrison. This craving took me by complete surprise, and I was helpless in its presence. My senses had taken my mind prisoner.

CHAPTER 69

I returned to my apartment filled with guilt over my erotic thoughts for Gabriel, especially since I loved Harrison so much. I had always been physically connected to Gabriel, even as child. It was as though my body's molecules were simultaneously repelled by, and attracted to, him, resulting in alchemy whenever I was near him. However, what really terrified me now was the realization that, as I neared my twenty-fifth birthday, this physical connection with Gabriel was becoming sexually charged.

To expel these thoughts, I began to dwell on my marriage to Harrison, but that just increased my guilt. I also thought of Lincoln and was soon flooded with a stream of sad and painful memories of my time with him.

I knew now that Lincoln's growing coldness in the last days of his life was his way of protecting me and keeping me away from his father. I knew that Lincoln wanted to be closer to me, but he pushed me away for my own sake,

ashamed of his father's intentions. I blamed myself for not trying harder to sense his pain and decided to visit his grave the following day.

I placed a wreath of flowers by his headstone and offered my apologies to him, but that didn't reduce my burden of guilt. As I turned to leave, my phone rang. It was Gabriel. I was tempted not to take the call but decided against it. Yet my intense sexual thoughts for him were still seared in my brain, and I could barely speak.

"Stasya?" he asked in a raised voice. "Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"I'm just calling to see how you are."

"I'm fine, thank you. I'm fine."

"The reason I'm calling is because I was going through all of Lincoln's possessions, and there was a box with your name on it." He now had my full attention. "It's full of items and gifts from your mother to ... Sophia."

"Yes, Lincoln and I spoke about them."

"Would you like to have them?"

"Yes. Yes, I would."

"Would you like to come to my house to pick them up?"

I was afraid his mere presence would trigger more explicit thoughts about him. I thought about asking him to drop them off somewhere, but I realized I needed to know where we stood with each other.

"I can pass by your house on Saturday morning," I said. "Is eleven in the morning okay with you?"

"Yes, it is. I'll see you then."

“Good-bye.”

As I ended the call, I began to mentally rehearse the exact words I would use to confront Gabriel about his true feelings for me. However, I was worried he would deny the suggestion in deference to his dead son. Perhaps he would not wish to speak to me again, which troubled me more.

CHAPTER 70

It was closer to noon before I reached Gabriel's house, for I was still undecided about seeing him. I should have heeded my intuition because as soon as I drove down his long driveway I was accosted by a painful memory. Only it wasn't my own memory; it belonged to my mother, and it left a sickening feeling in my stomach.

As her memory revealed itself to me, all I could see was my mother's distressed face reflected in a full-length vanity mirror. She appeared to be in her mid to late teens, and her reflection revealed she was in great pain. She was standing right up against the mirror, and all I could see was her face. Yet she wasn't alone. I also saw Gabriel's face in the mirror's reflection. He was standing directly behind her and was glaring at my mother's reflection. He appeared to be holding her arms behind her back to prevent her from escaping. He squeezed her arms together more tightly,

which caused her to scream in pain. Her memory abruptly ended.

The image was so unsettling I immediately braked. My car came to a screeching halt several feet away from Gabriel's house. I was shocked to see my young mother's face in great pain. I wondered what had caused Gabriel to be so angry that he would inflict such pain on her. Perhaps this was the "terrible secret" my mother had mentioned in her letters to Sophia. He must have been violent and abusive toward my mother, who probably felt more comfortable relating this story to Sophia once she and Gabriel had formally separated. That would also explain why my father refused to let me go down into the basement. Now I understood why my father referred to Gabriel as a dangerous man. I began to question Gabriel's love and affection for my mother and suspected he was probably trying to alleviate his guilty conscience by befriending me. I had just seen another side to Gabriel—perhaps his true side—and I wasn't sure how to confront him about this.

As my mother's memory kept playing in my head on repeat, a loud knock on my driver's side window startled me. I jumped in my seat and saw Gabriel's smiling face pressed up against the glass.

"Sorry," he said amused. "Did I scare you?"

I nodded uneasily as I struggled to open the door. I didn't know what to say to him after what I had just experienced. Before I had a chance to compose myself, he had already opened the car door for me. I was unnerved by

my mother's memory and wasn't aware the engine was still running. He turned the car keys and killed the engine. He seized my keys and helped me out.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a chuckle. "You don't look well."

"I'm fine." I lied.

"You should've parked closer to the house"—he joked—"so you could make a quick escape."

I wasn't in a joking mood. I then noticed he was wearing sports gear—tracksuit pants and matching top. I had never seen him in anything but formal clothes, and it caught me off guard. Even his casual clothes were smart casual.

"I wasn't sure you were coming," he explained. "I was about to go for a jog."

"Sorry I'm late," I said. "I can come back another time."

"No, don't be silly. This won't take long. Come inside."

He handed me the car keys and led me inside. His casual clothes and warm demeanor momentarily disarmed me, and I felt less brave about confronting him about my mother's memory. I didn't know how to broach the subject.

"You look different," was all I could say.

"*Different* is always such a difficult word to interpret," he said sardonically. "One doesn't know whether it's being used as a compliment or an insult."

"Just different," I said succinctly, unwilling to engage in any banter with him. He led me into the lounge room,

which looked so immaculate it didn't seem as though anyone had ever entered this room, let alone sat on the artisan-style sofa.

"Please take a seat," he said, attempting to make me comfortable. "Can I get you anything? A drink?"

"No, I'm fine," I said brusquely.

He sensed my reticence and got straight to the point.

"I'll get the box for you, then."

"Thank you," I said, relieved.

I urged myself to remain strong, as I might not get another opportunity to accost him with his defenses down. Moments later, he returned with a larger box than I had expected. I waited for the right moment to confront him, but time was quickly slipping away from me.

"Are you sure you don't want to keep any of Sophia's things?" I asked.

"Somehow, it doesn't seem right to leave these with the man everyone blames for her death."

He looked silently at me, as though expecting me to disagree with him or offer him sympathy. But I was too preoccupied with my own concerns to worry about his. Now seemed like the perfect opportunity to discuss my mother's memory with him. However, he spoke before I could say anything.

"I'll carry this to your car," he said, ushering me toward the front door.

As we approached my car, I began to doubt my mother's memory. What if I were wrong? What if he didn't believe in my ability to recall her memories? My heart

started pounding faster as I tried to confront him before we reached my car.

Without warning, he clutched my hand, and the same memory assaulted me. But this time I could see much more. I could still see my mother's distressed face and Gabriel's incensed gaze, but they were standing slightly farther from the vanity mirror, and I could see their torsos. They were partially dressed, and it appeared as though he were raping my mother from behind. She screamed in pain as he violently thrust himself against her, grunting as he did so.

Gabriel let go of my hand and the memory abruptly stopped. He took the car keys from me and noticed my bewildered state.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked as he pressed the remote to open the trunk.

I was too unnerved to say anything. I didn't know what to say. I nodded blankly. His penetrating stare pierced right through me and I tried not to betray my true thoughts. However, he knew something was wrong. I couldn't remain here anymore. I couldn't be next to him, knowing what I had just seen.

He glanced at me as he placed the box in my trunk. He closed it with a loud thud, and I opened my driver's side door to get into the safety of my car. He made his way toward me, and I sensed the opportunity to confront him about my mother was quickly slipping away. By the time I seated myself, I knew I had to say something or I would

lose my nerve altogether. As he was about to close the car door for me, I challenged him.

“Why does my father dislike you?” I said with a steely gaze.

He held the car door open, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable. He dropped his casual and amiable demeanor and returned my gaze, smiling ironically at my question.

“Don’t you think you should ask your father that?”

“I want to hear it from you. Why do you think he dislikes you?”

“I suppose he thinks I’m a terrible person.”

“Was it because of something you did?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask him.”

“Did you hurt my mother?”

He closed my car door with more force than was necessary. He was clearly agitated and thought he had gotten rid of me, but I lowered my window and continued my offensive.

“Did my mother think you were a bad person?”

“I can’t speak for someone who can’t defend herself.”

“If you think my father is not telling the truth about you or my mother, then say it.”

“The only person who knows the real truth is no longer with us.”

“What do you think my mother would say?”

“She’d say we were close—closer than most cousins.”

“Did you and my mother ever have a falling out or a huge disagreement?”

He suddenly lost his patience and confronted me with equal resolve.

“Clearly, you want to ask me something but are afraid to make the move. Here’s your chance. Go ahead and ask me anything you want.”

I desperately wanted to ask him whether he had raped my mother. I didn’t know how to say it, though. I didn’t want to accuse him of sexual assault when the only proof I had were images in my head. I lacked the courage for a direct attack, and tried something else.

“Why do you wear the same eternity ring as my mother?”

“Because we were very close.”

“How did my mother’s family come to take you in?”

“When my mother died, my uncle took pity on me and adopted me.”

His answers were too pat and emotionless, as though he had rehearsed them many times. I pushed him further until I was ready to confront him with my mother’s rape.

“Why did your father leave you and your mother?”

“I don’t know. My mother never told me.”

“And your mother had no other relatives who were willing to take you?”

“Sad, isn’t it?”

I was certain he was hiding more than he was revealing. I was about to question him about my mother’s memory when he suddenly dismissed me.

“Thanks for dropping by,” he said bluntly. “I have to go for my run now.”

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He turned his back on me. I had lost the opportunity to learn the truth about his relationship with my mother, yet I wasn't in any hurry to speak with him again after reliving my mother's memory. I tried not to think about him—but that proved impossible.

CHAPTER 71

After learning that Gabriel had hurt—and possibly raped—my mother, my desire for him shamed me. I didn't want to see him again. In fact, the only person I wanted to see now was Harrison. However, when he arrived back from work, his expression was grim, which immediately made me uneasy. He gave me a quick smile but looked distant and aloof.

“How was your day?” I asked anxiously.

“It was okay,” he said blankly. “How was Gabriel?”

He said it without any emotion, as though he didn't care. I sensed a huge gulf of doubt and anxiety between us, and I wanted to clear the air.

“You were right about him. Everyone was right about him. He's not the man he appears to be. I know he hurt my mother, and I can't be with someone like that.”

“Okay,” he said indifferently. “It's your decision.”

He still looked unmoved. I feared the worst for us but wanted to know where we stood.

“What’s on your mind, Harrison? Please tell me the truth, no matter whether it’s good or bad. I just need to know what you’re thinking right now.”

He livened up, as though he realized how dispirited he must have seemed.

“Sorry, it’s not you. It’s me. It’s good to see you.”

I didn’t believe him and took his hand. “Please open up to me.”

He looked at me with determination. “Take a seat, Stasya.”

We sat down on the sofa. I feared he was about to break my heart. I may have looked calm on the outside, but I was falling apart on the inside.

“I had an appointment with my doctor yesterday,” he said.

My guilt suddenly turned to confusion. “Why?”

“I’ve been feeling weakness in my arm and legs recently, and I’ve been tripping and stumbling at work, so I made an appointment to see the doctor. I didn’t tell you earlier because I didn’t want to worry you.”

My confusion now turned to despair. “And?”

“The prognosis is not good.”

“How bad?”

I dreaded the answer. But the words wouldn’t come out of his mouth. He stared blankly in front of him, not moving, not saying anything.

“Harrison, what did the doctor say?”

“At best, I have one or two years. At worst ... they didn’t tell me the worst, so it can’t be good.”

I was devastated but needed to remain strong for him. I had never seen him looking this vulnerable and frightened before, and I wanted to make things right for him.

“We can work through this,” I said. “Take the rest of the week off so we can spend time together.”

“No, I want to keep my mind occupied so I don’t have to think about it.”

“Then let’s go away together on your days off.”

He didn’t answer and seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts—grim thoughts that false hope or my frivolous words couldn’t wish away.

“I’m not going to die the way my mother did,” he declared with a determined look. “I’m not going out that way.”

“Please don’t think like that,” I begged him. However, he was lost in his own world.

“Soon, my muscles will cramp up and become stiff, and I won’t be able to do anything by myself. I’ll have trouble swallowing, then breathing, and even talking. I’m not going to let you watch me die like that.”

“I told you I would take care of you till the end,” I said, my eyes welling. “Please stop talking like this.”

“I will end it before it ever ends me.”

“Stop!” I shouted, desperately trying to get through to him. “Stop.”

He had tears, too. I held him in my arms.

“Whatever happens, whatever you decide to do, please discuss it with me first,” I said. “Please don’t do anything without me. Promise me.” I pulled away and looked directly into his eyes, but he refused to make any promises.

“Don’t shut me out,” I said. “Please promise me you’ll talk to me first.”

He nodded. We held each other tightly and cried together. It was then—in the midst of much pain and turmoil—that I regretted ever wishing for an impassioned life. This was not the life I had envisioned as a child. It was one thing to experience life deeply and fully in all its joy and sadness, but it was another thing altogether to watch someone I loved crumbling before me.

CHAPTER 72

Harrison chose to go back to work the following day. When I suggested suspending my creative writing course, he insisted I continue with it to prevent me from wallowing in sadness. He was right. Yet every story I worked on was mired in sadness and desolation.

He asked me not to tell anyone about his prognosis because he didn't want anyone's pity. He wanted normality in his life, even though nothing was normal about the situation.

After living this fake normality for several weeks, I told Harrison I couldn't go on that way—I couldn't pretend life was normal when it was not. He eventually told his coworkers and agreed to take extended leave. I suspended my writing course and broke the sad news to my father and Yvonne. Harrison and I also agreed to spend as much

time together as possible before he eventually lost the use of his body.

We decided to spend several days at Daylesford, a small town over seventy miles northwest of Melbourne that's renowned for its natural mineral spring spas. We stayed at the tranquil lakeside hotel, and our room included a scenic waterfront setting. We were pampered with a variety of spas and health treatments, yet it was impossible for me to relax completely.

Strangely, Harrison appeared calm and untroubled, as though he had made peace with the fact that he would soon be unable to participate in the sports he loved.

"I'm going to check out earlier than planned," he said casually on the last day our stay.

I thought he was referring to checking out of our hotel. However, when I saw the determined look in his eyes, I realized he was talking about ending his life. My body went numb, and my mouth became dry.

"No, no, no," I said. "Please, don't do this to me."

Tears started streaming down my face, but he remained resolute.

"We both knew this day was going to come eventually," he said.

"Wait a little longer. Please. Wait until you can't wait anymore."

"I can't wait anymore now."

"Why?"

"I don't want to wait till I need to be fed and dressed and bathed like a newborn. *I* want to decide the hour of

my death. I want to die doing something I love and being with the person I love most.”

“Then I won’t be there with you,” I said petulantly, hoping to change his mind.

“I’ll go alone,” he said softly.

“Please. I can’t go on without you.”

“Yes, you can. You’re stronger than you think.”

“No, I’m not. Why do you keep saying that?”

“I’ve scheduled it for this Saturday. It’s going to be a beautiful day—clear-blue skies and no wind.”

“I’m going to tell the others to cancel the jump.”

“Then I’ll BASE jump off a bridge or a transmitter tower.”

“You’ve never BASE jumped before.”

“I’ve never died before, either, so it’ll be a first either way.”

I was struggling to get through to him, and my frustration was making me bitter.

“If you really loved me, you wouldn’t be doing this to me—or us.”

“I’m doing this for the both of us. I want you to remember me as I am, and I want to die as I am.”

“People have lived a long time with this disease,” I said. “Nobody really knows how long you have left.”

“Hawking is one in a million. Besides, I don’t have a beautiful mind to set my soul free.”

I fell to my knees in defeat. He wasn’t going to change his mind no matter what I said, and I became lost in my own world of pain.

“Everyone I’ve ever loved dies on me,” I said to myself. “It’s all my fault.”

“You didn’t kill Lincoln.”

But I wasn’t listening to him.

“Everyone I love eventually ends up hurting me,” I said with self-pity. “That’s the story of my life.”

He sensed my guilt and knelt next to me.

“I’ve only lived this long because of you,” he said. “I know my decision is painful for you, but it will hurt me more to die on my knees. I want to go out on my feet. This is who I am, and I can’t change that.”

“Anyone can change,” I said blankly. “We can all be clean slates if we wish.”

“I don’t see life the way you do,” he replied.

However, I wasn’t listening to him. I wasn’t even talking to him anymore. I was urging myself.

“I could’ve stopped Lincoln, but I didn’t try hard enough,” I said. “Well, I’m not going to make the same mistake with you. I’m going to keep you alive.”

I looked into his eyes with fierce determination.

“That’s my goal,” I said. “I’m going to keep you alive for as long as possible.”

“You’re afraid of being left alone with your thoughts, Stasya. You have to let go.”

“I can’t let go of you yet.”

“I’m not talking about me. I’m talking about you.”

“I’m always letting go of the people I love. That’s all I seem to do.”

“You need to let go of your demons.”

“I will do anything for you. Please don’t do this.”

“Leaving you will be the most painful thing I’ve ever done, after it took me so long to get you back. But dying a long, slow death would be more painful. I just can’t do it.”

“Delay it by a few months. A few weeks, even. Until I have time to adjust.”

“I know you, Stasya. You’ll never adjust to this because you blame yourself for everything bad that happens in life.”

“I can fix this.”

“Let it go, Stasya. Please.”

He took my hand, but I snatched it away and stood up in anger.

“I wish I’d never met you so I didn’t have to go through this pain.”

He stood up to hold me, but I turned away from him.

“Stasya, you once told me you wanted to live an impassioned life filled with pain and pleasure, sadness and joy. Now I understand what you meant. I agree. Life feels lived only after you’ve suffered through great sadness and pain and you come through the other side feeling stronger and happier. You were right.”

I turned to him and held his face in my hands to make him see my point.

“No, I was wrong. I don’t want to live an impassioned life anymore. I just want you.”

“Sometimes you have to take the good with the bad,” he replied.

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I walked out of our hotel room in despair, knowing I would never be able to change his mind.

CHAPTER 73

I was numb for the remainder of the week as I helped Harrison tie up all loose ends before his departure. I couldn't sleep at night and couldn't stay awake during the day. My body shut down, and my mind became murky, as if I had died and become a ghostly figure, just like my mother's apparition. I was unable to connect to anyone or anything, and nothing in my life seemed tangible anymore. I secluded myself from family and friends, and all I wanted to do was to disappear from this world.

I felt a distance between Harrison and me, even when he was lying in bed next to me. I became so distressed at my emptiness that I needed to make love to him again as though it were our first time and not our last. I began to recall the first time he touched me and the first time he was inside me. We made love and I cried when it was over. I was going to miss making love to him. I didn't believe I would ever find anyone who could replace him because I

believed Harrison was my true soul mate, just as Gabriel was my mother's soul mate.

Yet soul mates were meant to be together and not separated, even in death. Harrison was taking my soul with him to the other side, and I would never be whole again. I would never be able to connect with anyone like this again. I felt so disconnected; happiness seemed elusive. I couldn't grab hold of what I wanted in life.

As Saturday drew nearer, my being became heavy. My constant companions of guilt and shame made way for overwhelming grief, and weighed me down. Life and its constant cruelty also weighed me down. My legs were heavy, and I needed Harrison's help to walk to the awaiting plane that would carry him to his final jump. We were about to board the plane when I pulled him toward me.

"Take me with you," I pleaded with him. "I can't go on without you."

"Yes, you can."

"I don't *want* to go on without you."

"Now's not your time, Stasya. I've lived more lives during my short time on earth than most people live in one lifetime. I've lived a full life and I've made peace with the world. You haven't."

"I'm not going to watch you die."

"I understand," he said with finality.

He gave me a kiss and wrapped his arms around me. I held on to him, unwilling to let him leave me. I naïvely thought I could stop Harrison from entering the awaiting

plane. But I didn't have the strength to take him with me. His body was too strong and his will too indomitable. I thought about parting with him then to avoid watching him fall to his death. Yet I didn't want to feel numb anymore, even if that meant experiencing heartbreaking sadness. I decided to be there for him for his final moments on earth. I wanted to make him happy.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

He eyed me with wariness, afraid I would try to stop him or change his mind. But I was lifeless. As I neared the plane, my body went into shock, and Harrison had to help me inside. Once inside, all I could see were happy and excited skydivers and instructors whose bodies were pumping with adrenaline. All of them were blind to my pain. They thought I was afraid of flying. One of the female instructors tried to console me.

"He's going to be all right," she said with smile, unaware of Harrison's true intentions.

Harrison gave me a reassuring smile. He appeared to be in good spirits. He looked happy knowing this was to be his last day on earth. He seemed ready to die. I felt utterly alone in the crowded plane because no one could sense my pain and desolation. As the plane took off, I desperately wanted to tell the other parachutists about Harrison's intentions, but I knew it would only delay the inevitable, and he would jump without me by his side.

Once the plane reached the prescribed altitude, one of the instructors opened the door. The sound of the propellers and rushing air filled the plane. But I couldn't

hear anything except for the dull thumping of my heart. I wasn't paying attention to anyone else except Harrison, who gave me another reassuring smile. Yet I could be reassured only if he stayed in the plane with me when it landed.

Gradually, the other instructors and skydivers jumped out of the plane until only Harrison and I remained. Harrison steadily unbuckled his parachute until he was completely unburdened of anything. I looked at him in a daze, hoping he would end my pain and change his mind. He hugged me and kissed me passionately, but my mouth was numb. I couldn't even taste his lips because of the tears streaming down my face. He pulled me away from him and looked into my eyes.

"I love you," he mouthed to me.

"I know," I mouthed back, with more tears.

He then turned around and jumped. I looked away from the open door, unwilling to linger on the unthinkable. I slumped to the floor of the plane and remained in an impassive state. Time stood still. I found myself looking back at Harrison's life and trying to make sense of it. I wanted his life to be meaningful because I didn't want it to be for nothing, which is what it seemed my life had finally become. I realized that Harrison had found his identity by running away. He ran away from his uncle at a young age. Then he ran away from me. And now he had run away from life itself. This was his character, and it pained me to think I could not change him—that I wasn't special enough, not love worthy enough, or even

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strong enough to change his life. Yet I could hardly change someone else's life when I could barely change my own. It pained me to look at his eternity ring on my finger, so I took it off and wore it on my necklace alongside my mother's eternity ring.

I had now lost the two men I loved most, and I really feared for myself. I was afraid I would be easy prey for someone like Gabriel, that without Lincoln and Harrison I would not be able to withstand his hold over me.

CHAPTER 74

Guilt and sadness weighed so heavily on me at Harrison's funeral that I struggled to remain upright and had to lean on Yvonne for support. I blamed myself for Harrison's death, just as I blamed myself for the deaths of Lincoln and my mother. I saw myself as a death merchant. Any person who came into contact with me seemed fated to die young. I began to think that life was punishing me for something I had done in a previous life. I questioned my own existence and what worth or value I had brought to the world when I had extinguished so many lives from it.

The priest read Psalm 23 from the Bible, "The Lord Is My Shepherd," which was a cruel reminder of my own life when he spoke the words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." But I received neither comfort nor strength, and I feared life itself for what it had in store for me. The world

had given me the impassioned life and love I had always sought but little to counterbalance the darkness and desolation. I had finally grown weary of this tumultuous life. I yearned for tranquility and contentment. I didn't want to endure any further pain and hoped the universe would conspire to bring my wish to life.

After Harrison's coffin was lowered into the ground, my family and his close friends gathered to commiserate with me. I tried to remain strong as the mourners stood in a line and offered their condolences. However, my legs almost failed me when Gabriel approached. He was the last in line. As he approached me, I glanced down, unable to meet his eyes. He gripped my hand firmly and gently kissed my cheek. Once again, the same memory of him hurting my mother assaulted me. My mother's face was pressed hard up against the full-length mirror as Gabriel pushed his body right up against her back.

I was shaken by my mother's memory and pulled my hand away from his grasp. I glanced away from his penetrating gaze to avoid betraying my thoughts about my mother's memory—although, I sensed he suspected the truth.

Mercifully, Gabriel was absent from the wake, which was held at my apartment. I tried not to think about my mother's rape, but her memories kept playing on repeat in my head. The only way I could stop them was to lose myself in conversation with the guests. I managed to suppress her memories until all the guests finally left my apartment.

Yvonne offered to sleep over with me, but I insisted she stay with my father, who'd looked particularly frail at Harrison's funeral. He wanted me to sleep over at his house to avoid being alone, but I preferred to stay in my apartment, where I had experienced my happiest memories with Harrison. Besides, I wanted to be near all his personal items so I could sense his presence. Even though I had known Harrison for over ten years, our total time together had merely amounted to little more than a year. Yet such was the intensity of our love that I believed I'd known him a lifetime.

I retreated into myself in the ensuing weeks, afraid of interacting with a world that thwarted my happiness at every turn. I remained within the comforting cocoon of my apartment, leaving it only to visit my father and Yvonne. I disconnected myself from everyone and yearned for a calm life without any turbulent thoughts or emotions. But I could not escape the hand of fate. This time, it was my father.

CHAPTER 75

The ambulance was already at my father's house by the time I arrived. I ran to the rear garden, where I saw him lying motionless on the grass while two paramedics attempted to restart his heart with a defibrillator.

I ran over to comfort Yvonne, who was shaking and in tears. I could see how much my father meant to her. I gave her a reassuring hug, but the situation looked bleak, given he had already suffered a stroke.

With the electrodes placed on my father's chest, one of the paramedics administered the first electrical charge. However, this failed to restart the rhythm of his heart. The paramedic then applied a second shock. This one worked, but my father was not out of danger.

We followed the ambulance to the hospital, where my father was placed into intensive care. We weren't allowed to visit him until his condition stabilized. When I finally got to see him, I was astonished by the number of tubes

and lines running in and out of his body. Drains removed fluids while lines provided him with beneficial fluids and medication. As we approached him, he sensed our presence and slowly opened his eyes. He used all his strength to smile. He opened his mouth to say something but couldn't manage to utter anything. He looked exhausted and closed his eyes as we held his hand.

Later, the doctor approached us in the waiting room to provide us with more details about my father. I could tell by his expression that my father's condition was serious.

"I'm Dr. Tran. I specialize in heart and lung surgery."

"How is he?" Yvonne asked.

"His heart is responding as well as we can expect, but we're actually more concerned about his pancreas."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Our oncologist has discovered what appears to be a cancerous tumor in his pancreas."

"How bad is it?"

"That depends on many factors, such as the stage and type of the cancer and the health of the person. Pancreatic adenocarcinoma is the most common cause of cancer. At this stage, the oncologist believes this is what your father has, although we need to wait for the results of the biopsy."

"Can you treat it?" Yvonne asked.

"If it turns out to be pancreatic adenocarcinoma, it has a poor prognosis."

"How poor?" I asked.

“There is only a twenty-five percent chance of survival within one year and only a five percent chance of survival within five years.”

Yvonne and I needed a moment to process this.

“Is it operable?” Yvonne asked.

“Curative surgery is possible in around twenty percent of cases. Even then, his health needs to be adequate for a major operation like this. In his weakened condition, this may cause him to undergo sudden cardiac arrest during surgery.”

“What about chemotherapy or radiotherapy?” I asked.

“Chemotherapy is recommended only after curative surgery and then only if he is sufficiently fit. As for radiotherapy, this hasn’t proven to be effective in many similar cancers, which is why we don’t normally recommend it.”

“What if you can’t operate?” I asked. “Is there anything else you can do for him?”

“Let’s just wait for the results of the biopsy,” Dr. Tran said reticently.

“Please, Dr. Tran. We need to know the worst-possible scenario,” Yvonne said.

“We may be able to offer only chemotherapy to extend his life or improve the quality of life,” Dr. Tran said.

That meant non-curative therapy.

“Palliative care?” I asked.

Dr. Tran nodded. All they could do was offer relief from his pain and suffering until he passed away.

“Do you have any other questions?” Dr. Tran asked us.

We shook our heads, too stunned to say anything. Dr. Tran nodded sympathetically and departed, leaving me in daze and with a huge weight in my chest.

“I can’t take any more bad news,” I said, falling back into my chair. Yvonne put her arm around me, but I found no comfort.

“I’ll stay with your father in hospital,” Yvonne said. “There is no point in both of us staying here.”

“I want to stay here too,” I replied. “I can’t sleep anyway.”

“I can’t look after both you and your father. Please go and try to get some sleep.”

However, I knew no amount of sleep would help me. With my father close to death, I needed to know the truth once and for all.

“Vonnie, I need you to be honest with me about Gabriel. Did he hurt Mama?”

“What do you mean?”

“Was Gabriel ever violent to her?”

“Your mother never mentioned anything to me. Why?”

“Nothing,” I said dismissively. “I just have a feeling he’s hiding something. Whatever he did, I think he still feels guilty about it after all these years. I think that’s why he visits her mausoleum—to alleviate his guilt.”

“That’s why you should stay away from him.”

“I don’t know what to think of him anymore.”

“It’s best not to think of him at all.”

CHAPTER 76

On the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday, I felt totally defeated by life. I was dying on the inside, which only confirmed my premonitions of dying on my twenty-fifth birthday. The specter of death haunted me. I had lost Lincoln to an accidental death, Harrison had charged directly into death, my father was close to dying, and my mother's painful memory had killed any hope of my having any type of relationship with Gabriel.

I had lost my emotional center and was disconnected from the world around me. Without anyone or anything to anchor me, my mother's presence grew stronger within me. I had tried to suppress her for many years, but I was losing control of my ability to contain her. I didn't know who I was anymore because I was losing my identity and my place in the world. I truly believed my life had no meaning or purpose.

To stop my mind from wandering into darker territory, I decided to stay with my father in hospital and give Yvonne some time to herself. Even though his condition had stabilized, little life remained in him. He slept most of the time and didn't say much. Unless his health improved significantly, the surgeons could not attempt curative surgery on his pancreas to remove the tumor.

I had slept very little in the past week, and delirium suddenly set in when I saw an apparition of my mother standing over my father's bed. She turned in my direction, smiled, and approached me as my eyelids were beginning to close. She knelt beside me to whisper something in my ear, but I could not make out what she was saying.

I heard a female voice calling my name and realized I had fallen asleep. Someone grasped my arm, as though trying to rouse me from my sleep. I opened my eyes and saw Yvonne standing beside me.

"Are you back already?" I asked her.

"I've been gone for most of the night," she replied.

"What time is it?"

"It's eight in the morning."

"Really?"

"Yes. Go home and get some rest. I'll call you if there's any change in his condition."

"I doubt I'll get much sleep at home, either," I replied.
"I have too much on my mind."

Yvonne must have thought I was referring to Gabriel but left the conversation unfinished. I left the hospital but couldn't return to my apartment. I couldn't sleep there

with Harrison's presence lingering in each room. I returned to my father's empty house, hoping to reconnect with my childhood, yet all I sensed was Gabriel's inescapable pull. Like a moth to flame, I was impelled to go to him, even at my own peril. I needed to return to him. I needed to confront him once and for all.

That evening, while still very drowsy, I chose to walk to Gabriel's house in the hope that it would revive me. It started to rain as I entered the rainforest, but that didn't deter me. In fact, the rain was enlivening. Electricity filled the air as storm clouds brewed overhead. The wind began to billow, feeding the tempest in my soul. Conflicting emotions of repulsion and desire for Gabriel filled me, which only fueled my torment.

I marched through the forest in a manic daze until I eventually reached Gabriel's house. Dark clouds descended all around me as the rain intensified. I was now in the midst of the storm. When I knocked on the front door, it instantly opened, as though he had been expecting me. He stood silently at the doorway, waiting for me to speak, waiting for me to utter the words that had paralyzed me on our previous encounter. This time, my nerves didn't fail me.

"I need to know the truth about you and my mother," I said.

"You wouldn't have the courage to hear the truth," he replied.

"My mother was your half-sister."

He didn't flinch or break his gaze. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I know you raped her."

"Who told you this?"

"Everyone says you hurt my mother."

"Never in that way."

"I know you raped my mother. I saw it."

"What do you mean you saw it?"

"I saw her memories. I've been able to recall her memories since I was a child. I saw you raping my mother."

"So what do you want from me?" he asked coldly.

"I need answers," I told him.

"You know exactly where to find them."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. You just need to shine a light on the darkness, and all will be revealed."

He left me with these enigmatic words and promptly closed the door on me. I was frustrated and angry and began banging loudly on the door with my fists. When I realized he wasn't going to open the door, I surrendered and retreated into the rainforest, where I plodded despondently back home.

Sadly, the rain did not cleanse me and only weighed me down. My strained mind struggled to decipher the meaning of Gabriel's parting words. Suddenly, an alarm went off in my head, and I understood exactly what he meant by switching on the light. I rushed back to my father's house

with fierce determination, cutting a clean path through all my murky thoughts and paralyzing emotions.

When I finally reached home, I went directly to the toolshed and seized a hammer and crowbar. I threw open the back door, marched through the kitchen, and confronted the red basement door. I stared at it, like an old adversary, demanding it to yield to me. I took a deep breath, raised the hammer over my head, and attacked the door locks with all my might, producing a cathartic effect with each stroke.

I stopped to assess the damage. The locks were smashed, and the door was ajar. I picked up the crowbar and inserted the grappling, wedge-shaped beak into the space between the door and the doorframe. I pushed and pulled the crowbar with all my might until the door finally gave in. It flung open freely, and I dropped everything to the floor.

I stood at the entrance to the basement stairs, entranced by the darkness below, as I prepared to confront the truth. I desperately wanted to see what lay below, but I also dreaded what I would find. I slowly descended the stairs, each step heavy with anticipation, until I reached the bottom. I switched on the light. The same photograph that had haunted me as a child confronted me. My mother and Gabriel were staring directly at me like wild predators, daring me to go further. I dived into the basement and went hunting for the truth.

* * *

I scoured through the boxes of paraphernalia, mementos, and photographs but saw nothing that yielded answers or revealed the hidden truth about Gabriel and my mother. However, I soon pounced on several boxes that were all sealed with thick tape. I instinctively knew they held all the answers to my questions.

I ripped open the boxes and looked inside. I braced myself, afraid of what I would find. I saw many photographs of Gabriel and my mother, which they had taken of themselves in romantic embraces; in some they were half-naked. As I scoured through them, I viewed my mother's recent memory in a new light. I replayed the memory of my mother being raped by Gabriel and realized something much more shocking: my mother wasn't screaming in pain but shrieking in ecstasy. He wasn't hurting her or raping her. My mother was filled with pleasure and urging him on with heavy moans and shouts of yes.

I shut my eyes, shaken. I couldn't believe what I saw. I never would have believed it otherwise. When I visualized the same memory again, I saw my mother's face gazing sensually into the mirror at Gabriel, whose piercing eyes looked directly at me. The basement began spinning around, and I began hyperventilating.

My mother's presence grew stronger and wilder within me. She overwhelmed and overshadowed me, as though she were trying to escape her confinement within my body and soul. She was stepping out of the photographs and

into the real world. That's when I realized I wasn't alone in the basement.

I turned around and gasped when I saw a shadowy figure standing at the top of the staircase. The figure sauntered down the stairs—my only source of escape—and made its way toward me and into the light. It was Gabriel. He glared at me with a caustic smile.

“Are you shocked?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said tentatively. “No ... I don't know ...”

“Now you know the truth.”

As he moved toward me, my body began to tingle with nervous anticipation. My mother had been guiding me to Gabriel my whole life, and I was powerless to fight it. But the truth was that I no longer wanted to fight it. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to experience the same wildness my mother exuded in her photograph. I finally knew what I was meant to do with my life. I knew what I was meant to be. I had to be with Gabriel.

I poured out my heart to him. “With Lincoln and Harrison I never knew who was right for me. And now I know why I was so indecisive. It's because neither of them were right for me. You're the only one who's right for me,” I told him.

He didn't respond and waited for me to continue.

“I come alive only whenever I'm near you,” I explained. “When I'm away from you, I only want to be with you. And I know you feel the same way about me. All this time, my mother has been drawing me toward you,

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and I don't want to fight it anymore. I want to surrender to her. She's returned to you through me."

I sensed he knew exactly what I meant. However, I was unprepared for his stinging response.

"You'll never be your mother," he said coldly.

I was stunned into silence. I didn't know what to say or do. The longer he glared at me, the weaker and more helpless I became. I wanted to retaliate. I wanted to hurt him the way he had just wounded me. But I was frozen.

Without saying anything else, he turned his back on me and ascended the stairs, leaving me alone in the darkness to wallow in my anger and self-pity.

CHAPTER 77

I returned to my apartment, devastated by Gabriel's admonishment. I hated him. But I hated myself more for wanting him so much. He had discharged me, but I would be willing to charge back into his life if he summoned me. Instead, I preferred to simmer in exile, despising him as much as I desired him.

Yet I realized nothing good would ever come from our union. I said a permanent good-bye to him in my heart and hoped he could sense my relinquishment. While I couldn't have him in my life, I still needed human contact. I needed to touch someone to make me feel human again. I needed to feel alive again.

That night, I lay awake in bed, unable to sleep. Despair from my loneliness and guilt from my erotic thoughts for Gabriel filled me. I hated that he made me feel this way. I needed to get him out of my mind and body; otherwise, I would continue to be subjected to these conflicting

emotions. I needed to purge him from my system and rid myself of my pent-up anxiety. This time, however, cutting myself would not be enough to unleash my frustrations and anxiety. This time, I needed to do more.

My heart began beating faster, and my whole body seemed on fire as I continued stroking and rubbing my clitoris with my middle fingers. I inserted my fingers into my vagina and simultaneously palmed my clitoris with increasing speed to help me come faster. I pictured Gabriel's intense eyes looking directly at me, his face becoming increasingly aroused as he watched me pleasuring myself. Relief finally came amid waves of pleasure that surged through my whole body. After I was spent, I cast aside his face. He had served his purpose in releasing my anxiety and frustrations, and I no longer had any further use for him—for now.

* * *

The following day, I visited the hospital to confront Yvonne about my discovery in my father's basement. My father was asleep when I entered his room, so I quietly asked Yvonne to step into the corridor with me. She seemed oblivious to what I had in store for her and surprised me by reminding me what day it was.

"Happy twenty-fifth birthday, Stasya." She smiled as she kissed my cheek.

My birthday had totally escaped me. But I wasn't in a celebratory mood.

"I went down into my father's basement," I told her frankly.

Yvonne glanced away uncomfortably.

“I saw everything,” I said. “I know what happened between my mother and Gabriel.”

“I couldn’t tell you before,” she said anxiously. “I just couldn’t—”

“There’s something that bothers me about Gabriel being taken in by his uncle’s family. Why did it upset them so much?”

Yvonne was still unable to meet my eyes. “I don’t know,” she said.

“You were my mother’s governess before you came to live with us. I think you know more than you’re willing to say, and my father knows the truth, too.”

Yvonne looked visibly distressed. “I really can’t talk about it.”

“Who was Gabriel’s real father?” I asked.

“I promised your father I would never talk about this to anyone, especially you.”

“Everyone knows the truth except me.”

“Stasya, please wait for your father to get better. I will talk to him and insist that he tell you everything.”

“Nobody knows if he’s even going to make it, let alone get better. Why can’t you tell me now?”

“Please wait, Stasya. I’m not ready to talk about this now.”

“I thought we were close, but clearly that’s not true.”

Yvonne was hurt by my accusation but remained silent.

“What is everyone hiding?” I asked. “Why won’t anybody tell me the truth?”

“I never break a promise, whether it is with you or your father.”

“He’s not your keeper anymore,” I said coldly.

“Stasya, please don’t make this difficult for me. Look at it from my point of view.”

“How about looking at it from my point of view? No one treats me like an adult or tells me the truth, and I’m tired of it. If no one is willing to be honest with me, then I’ll find out the truth myself.”

I turned to leave. Yvonne clutched my arm and gave me a wounded look.

“Stasya, please don’t go.”

“When you’re ready to tell me everything, then we can talk.”

I pulled my arm away and stormed out, leaving Yvonne uncertain about my allegiances.

CHAPTER 78

I was mentally and emotionally drained when I left the hospital in a taxi. I sat in the backseat desperately trying to remain awake. I recalled feeling the same way when my father took me to see my mother's mausoleum on my fifth birthday. Today was not only my twenty-fifth birthday, it was also the twenty-fifth anniversary of my mother's death. I suddenly yearned to be near her and asked the driver to take me to the Melbourne General Cemetery.

I bought a bunch of blue and purple roses and slowly walked through the cemetery, where the morning air quickly roused my drowsiness. I saw a few mourners placing and replacing flowers on the graves, but the cemetery was largely empty. When I reached my mother's mausoleum, I was shocked to see a figure standing there. It was Gabriel. He had his back to me and was placing several long-stemmed red roses next to one of the grieving

angels in honor of Anastasya's birthday. We both happened to be thinking the same thing at the same time.

I didn't know what to do after our last agonizing encounter. I was about to walk away when he turned around, as though he had sensed my presence. I had no choice but to keep going and decided to ignore him. To my disappointment, he approached me and offered a conciliatory smile. I was growing weary of his fiery unpredictability.

"Happy birthday, Stasya," he said with muted but genuine affection.

I stood there glaring silently at him.

"I guess we both had the same idea," he said, indicating the flowers in my hand. "How's your father?"

I wasn't going to make things easy for him.

"Do you even care?" I asked spitefully.

"Stasya, I want to apologize for my behavior the other day and clarify what I said."

"No, you were quite clear about what you said."

"What I was trying to say was that I don't want you to become your mother."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you the way I hurt your mother."

"You're hurting me now by not telling me the truth."

"I *am* telling the truth."

"Okay, so how exactly would you be hurting me?"

"By repeating my past mistakes."

"What mistakes?"

“Stasya, everything I do or don’t do is for your benefit. Believe me.”

“Maybe it’s for your benefit. Maybe it’s because you want to keep your conscience clear.”

“You’re right,” he said too easily. “It was all for my benefit. I will stay away from you from now on. I’m sorry.”

He surrendered and retreated, but I felt far from victorious. As I watched him walk away, I still yearned to know more about him and his relationship with my mother, but no one was willing to go there. I would have to find the answers myself, and there was only one place to look.

CHAPTER 79

I rummaged through my father's basement, unsure exactly what I was looking for but hopeful of finding something that would resolve my unanswered questions. I found several gifts and letters between my mother and Gabriel that helped shine a light on their close relationship but nothing that would connect everything together. To do that, I needed to speak to the one person who knew the full truth.

With the sun setting behind me, I raced my car down Gabriel's driveway and brought it to a screeching halt. I got out, slammed the car door, and marched to his front door. I ignored the doorbell and started banging loudly with my fist. That would get his attention. Moments later, he appeared with a sardonic expression.

"How can I keep away from you if you keep showing up like this?"

“I want a simple answer: was my mother your half-sister?”

“That’s very direct.”

“I’m tired of people lying to me.”

“I’ve never lied to you. I just didn’t disclose the full truth.”

“Then tell me now. Was my mother your half-sister?”

He remained silent and unblinking. I glared back at him, daring him to lie to me.

“Was she your half-sister?” I asked again.

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Please don’t do this to me. I can’t handle people constantly lying to me.”

“I’m telling you the truth. Your mother wasn’t my half-sister—”

I rolled my eyes in frustration. But he wasn’t finished.

“—because she was my *twin* sister.”

I screwed up my face in confusion. I thought I had misheard him.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Why do you think your mother and I share the same birthday?”

My mouth dropped. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Not what you were expecting to hear, was it?” he asked with a harsh smile.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

I was too stunned to speak. I could barely move and couldn't feel my face.

“Are you sure you’re ready to hear the truth?” he asked, daring me.

I nodded unconvincingly.

“I need to know that you’re ready for this. Once I tell you everything, there’s no turning back.”

I nodded again, this time with more conviction.

“Okay. Come inside.”

I followed him into his house, still in a daze. I had demanded to know the truth, and now I was beginning to regret it.

CHAPTER 80

I sat nervously on the sofa facing Gabriel, still reeling from his revelation. Yet he appeared calm—relieved, even—as he slowly divulged the sordid details of his life.

“Your mother and I were fraternal twins who were separated at birth,” he said. “I’m sure you know the basic details of your mother’s parents and my parents.”

“Yes, two brothers who married twin sisters.”

“When it came time to start a family, both couples had problems conceiving. My father had a low sperm count, and couldn’t conceive with my mother. And my aunt – your grandmother – had polycystic ovarian syndrome, which meant she had difficulty ovulating successfully. Therefore, she and her husband couldn’t conceive. Ironically, the only two people who were able to conceive were my mother and my uncle—her brother-in-law and your grandfather. In fact, they were a perfect match.”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“It gets more bizarre, believe me. Both couples agreed that my uncle and my mother would help conceive children for both couples. This was long before IVF treatments were available so it meant that my mother and my uncle would need to have sex with each other until she conceived.”

“And nobody thought this was a bad idea?” I asked incredulously.

“We’re talking about two brothers who married two twin sisters on the same day. Who knows what was going through their minds? My mother and aunt didn’t have an issue with this, as they even shared boyfriends when they were younger. Both couples agreed that the first child would go to my mother, as she was the one who would be conceiving for both children, and the second child would go to my aunt.”

“How did your father feel about this?”

“Not good at first. He was uncomfortable with the idea of his brother sleeping with his wife, even if it was merely to conceive a child. At first, my uncle refused to go ahead with it. However, my mother and aunt sat down with my father and uncle and explained to them that it had nothing to do with sex or lust, as they were actually helping to conceive children. My father eventually got onboard and gave my uncle—his brother—approval to have sex with my mother. They slept together several times until my mother eventually conceived. When it was discovered she was having twins, everyone was elated. But that’s when the problems really started.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my aunt was envious that my mother was having twins, especially given that it was her husband’s sperm that had been used to conceive them. And my father was becoming more uneasy about his wife and his brother engaging in more sex to help conceive future children for my aunt. So, to keep the peace, they all agreed to end the experiment and the twin children would be separated at birth. I would live with my mother and Anastasya would live with my aunt. However, we would be brought up as cousins, and we were not to be told the truth that we were actually twins. The outside world knew nothing of our family secret.”

“Wait, I don’t understand something. If my grandparents couldn’t conceive with each other was Harrison’s father adopted?”

“No, he was conceived naturally. My aunt still wanted to conceive her own children and tried many alternative therapies and fertility treatments until she was finally able to conceive naturally. That’s when Harrison’s father—my half-brother—was born.”

“What happened after you and my mother were separated?”

“My father was never comfortable with the idea that I was not his natural son and instead the offspring of his wife and his brother. My parents began drifting apart and my mother gradually sought solace with my aunt and uncle. That’s when the affairs started. My mother eventually started sleeping with my uncle behind her

sister's back. When my aunt found out, she sought solace with my father and they had a brief affair too."

"You're right, it does get more bizarre."

"But the affairs didn't last long, and my father eventually left both my mother and aunt, and no one has seen or heard from him since. We think he moved overseas and started his own family."

"What about your aunt and uncle?"

"They remained together, but it wasn't a happy marriage. It wasn't a happy household. I felt unwanted from the very beginning, and Anastasya couldn't wait to leave home. That's why your mother married so young."

I dreaded asking him the question that had been on my mind since he first started talking, but I needed to know the truth.

"When did you and my mother discover you were twins?" I asked tentatively.

"Not until we were in our mid-teens," he replied. "Although we both sensed it early on. Growing up, I always felt empty—as though some part of me had been left behind somewhere. Your mother later told me she felt the same way before I came to live with her family. Although we were only fraternal twins, we were physically, mentally, and emotionally compatible. When I finally came to live with my uncle, your mother and I felt complete for the first time in our lives. It seemed natural for us to be together. We were so close spiritually we found it impossible to live without the other. We were happy only when we were together."

“Did anyone know about your ... romantic relationship with my mother?”

“Not at first. Your mother and I believed we just happened to be inseparable. We kept our relationship a secret at first, but her parents eventually sensed her growing affection for me. That’s when they told us we were twin siblings.”

“That must have been a huge shock,” I asked.

He glanced down. “It was devastating,” he said with wounded eyes.

“Did you stop seeing each other afterward?”

“We tried to at first, but it was difficult, especially for me. We couldn’t be together, but we couldn’t be apart, either. I wanted to marry your mother, but we both knew that was impossible. I was willing to move far away from everyone we knew so we could be together, but your mother foresaw the problems that lay ahead for us. I saw only our past and how happy we were together. She saw only the future and how difficult our lives would be. This caused a lot of friction between us. Years later, I realized how horribly I had treated her. I thought she didn’t love me as much as I loved her. Yet in reality, she knew our secret would always haunt us wherever we went. The only option was to make a clean break with each other. That’s when your mother met your father.”

“Do you have any photos of your mother?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said with a smile. “Would you like to see them?”

CHAPTER 81

Gabriel returned with two photo albums titled “Mum” and “Dad.” The former was bulging with many Polaroid photographs, whereas the latter album was virtually empty.

“I received a Polaroid camera for my fifth birthday, and started taking photos of my parents. This was just before my father left us.”

As I flipped through his mother’s photo album, I saw words under each photograph.

“I wanted to catalogue my mother’s emotions, and wrote captions under each photograph that best matched her mood at the time.”

I noted that his mother did not smile in any of her photographs, and I quickly realized that all the captions were negative emotions: “sad,” “confused,” “angry,” “lonely,” and “pain.” There were no happy emotions in her entire photo album.

“I found out years later she suffered from bi-polar disorder,” he admitted sadly.

“Did she really die in a car accident?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment.

“She died in a car—but it was no accident. I found her in the garage in the front seat of the car with the engine running. She had run a hose from the exhaust pipe to the driver’s side car window and sealed the opening with duct tape. When she realized my uncle would never leave his wife for her, she decided to take her own life.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He nodded in gratitude, the pain still evident in his eyes after many years.

“After the police and ambulance arrived, I wanted to take one last photo of my mother before they took her away. She seemed serene and at peace. It was the first time I had seen her smile in a long time.”

He had titled his mother’s last photograph “happy.”

“The police accompanied my uncle to our house to identify her body,” he continued.

“Did he treat you well?”

“My uncle? He loved me like a son. I *was* his son, even though I grew up thinking of him as my uncle.”

“But your aunt resented your presence?”

“I never understood why at first until I finally learned the truth. I had always disliked her for treating me so coldly, but everything eventually made sense. It must have been painful for her to look at my face every day, knowing I was the offspring of her husband and her sister, and that

they had engaged in an affair behind her back. I had done nothing wrong, but my aunt and half-brother treated me poorly. I suppose I got my revenge on my half-brother by treating Harrison poorly later on. But I'm not proud of that."

"What about my mother? How was she treated?"

"She was well loved as a young child, but her relationship with her mother became strained after I joined her family. We both felt like outcasts. We shared each other's pain, sadness, and rejection. We clung to each other for love and support."

"Is that why you think you were drawn to each other?"

"No, it was more than that, something that most people can't understand or don't wish to understand. I'm not sure you will understand."

"Tell me anyway."

"Your mother and I sensed we were soul mates who had met and loved each other over many lifetimes. We underwent past-life regression together in our late teens, which confirmed what we already knew. Our souls were constantly being reborn, and our love was constantly being renewed. We had an eternal love pact that seemed to have no beginning and no end. Your mother said our lives were in a constant state of renascence. It was her favorite word to describe what we had."

"That explains why I loved that word as a child," I said.

"We made a pact not long before she died for our souls to find each other in our next incarnation," he explained.

"That's beautiful," I replied with a smile.

“I wanted to spend the rest of my life with your mother and foolishly thought we could live together as a couple. I was reckless and naïve and believed anything was possible. I couldn’t care less what society thought of us. It was my life, and I was going to live it as I pleased.”

“But it’s not as easy as that,” I told him.

“Nothing ever is when it comes to love. While your mother believed we were eternal soul mates, she also believed your father was her soul mate in this life.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She loved your father very much. Reincarnated lovers don’t always end up together in each lifetime. Sometimes, things prevent them from meeting each other or staying together. Your mother and I couldn’t be together in this life, but I knew—we both knew—we would be together again in another life.”

“So your relationship ended badly when my mother met my father.”

“We were having issues before she met your father because of our different opinions on how to maintain our relationship, which had become very volatile. I was becoming more jealous, and your mother was becoming more agitated. She eventually grew tired of our constant disagreements and wanted something more loving, something more ... stable, even if it wasn’t as exciting as our relationship. The passion that had brought us together was slowly driving us apart. Your mother would say love was not enough to maintain a relationship. People had to be as compatible as possible in every way.”

“I know what she means,” I said.

“We were compatible physically and emotionally but not mentally because of our different beliefs. I only wanted to be with her, but she wanted children, which I could never give her, but your father could.”

“That must have been painful,” I said in sympathy.

“Yes, it was. Yet I sensed your father was her soul mate in this life and would take good care of her. They suited each other well, which made me even more jealous and resentful.”

“Did you stop seeing my mother after she met my father?”

He glanced away, unwilling to meet my eyes.

“No, we still saw each other at first. That is, I persisted in maintaining our liaison in secret. But your mother always felt guilty afterward whenever we ... were intimate. She eventually ended our relationship and promised me we would be together one day, only not in this lifetime. I didn't want to believe we would never be together. All I knew was that your mother and I were eternal lovers and she was meant to be with me, not your father. I was cruel toward your mother. I felt betrayed when she married your father, and for a time I cut her out of my life, which I know hurt her. Yet I still loved her, and tried to accept their marriage for her sake. I did at first, but I eventually grew resentful that I could never be with her the way we had been before. Your mother tried to appease both of us, but neither of us was happy with the arrangement. We both told her to make a choice and choose only one

person. Yet she couldn't choose between us because she wanted both of us in her life."

"And you both lost her when I was born," I said sadly.

"She was looking forward to your birth and couldn't wait to be with you," he said, smiling.

"Really?"

"Yes, she loved you so much."

"Did you marry Aunt Sophia to be closer to my mother?"

"Partly. But also to hurt your mother and father."

"Did you love Aunt Sophia?"

"I did in the beginning. We both thought we loved each other, but I realized it was more about lust and being rebellious. We were both excited and aroused by what we had but we couldn't sustain it. At least, I couldn't. We married each other for the wrong reasons. Sophia wanted to escape her strict family, and I guess I wanted to recapture the forbidden and illicit nature of my relationship with your mother. Some part of me also wanted to punish your mother and to rebel against the world just as Sophia had rebelled against her family by marrying me. After Sophia's family disowned her, our marriage quickly crumbled, and she moved overseas to London. I didn't keep in touch with her, so I knew about Lincoln only when your father wanted to adopt him and needed my agreement. I wanted to punish your father for taking Anastasya away from me. That's the only reason I agreed to adopt Harrison."

"Tell me about the eternity rings," I asked him.

“I was jealous your parents had created their own eternity rings when they started dating, and made a third ring for myself by going to the same jeweler. I knew it was wrong for me to taunt your father that way, but I wanted him to understand the pain I was going through. When your mother died, she took a huge part of me with her, and I have not experienced love since that day. I was angry at the world. I was angry that your mother and I were born twins because it ruined my chance at happiness with her. I hated everyone who was happily in love because I could never have what they had.”

“Did you hate me, too?” I asked tentatively.

“I did at first,” he admitted. “You reminded me so much of your mother. You reminded me of what I could never have. As you grew older, you made me feel emotions I tried to bury. You brought out all my repressed and conflicted feelings—anger, rejection, abandonment. It was as though I were reliving my painful childhood all over again. My mother rejected me when she committed suicide, and your mother rejected me when she married your father. I know I took out my hate and anger on you, and I’m truly sorry for that.”

“At least I understand why you did it.”

“These feelings have been buried deep within me for many years. I have no control over them, and it takes only the slightest spark—your face, your voice, your touch—to reignite them. I hate myself when I’m this person, and it takes a while for my violent emotions to subside. That’s why I can’t be with you, even as your uncle. Not now.”

“When?”

“Not until I have resolved my feelings for your mother.”

“How long will that take?”

“I don’t know.”

I was disappointed with his response, but I understood why. “Anyway, thank you for telling me the truth.”

“You must think unkindly of me for what I did to your mother.”

“No, I don’t. I’m sad that neither of you were able to find happiness together or apart.”

“I don’t want to repeat the past and hurt you. I hope you understand.”

I nodded. I did understand, but I also felt much closer to him after he revealed his thoughts and emotions, which were still raw. I empathized with him for what he had to endure, yet I also wished I hadn’t insisted on knowing the truth, as it meant we would now have to remain apart.

I also empathized with my father, who had to endure similar heartache over my mother, and I now understood him much better, too. I left Gabriel alone to ponder his conflicted emotions for my mother. After so many years since her death, she was still able to evoke powerful emotions from the two men who loved her most.

CHAPTER 82

True to his word, Gabriel kept away from me and refused to have any sort of contact with me. Yet this made me deeply unhappy. After the death of my cousins, Gabriel was the only other person left I had a strong connection with, and now that, too, had been severed. And because I fully experienced a connection with my mother only in his presence, that was also severed.

However, my connection with Gabriel was different from the one I had had with my cousins. It was more visceral and palpable, unlike my emotional connection with Lincoln and my mental connection with Harrison. My connection with Gabriel was physical, perhaps even spiritual. I was physically drawn to him, as though my body craved him, just as I craved to know more about him. He grounded me. If I truly were the reincarnation of my mother, as I believed I was, then Gabriel was also my eternal soul mate. However, he was also my uncle, and my

desire for him was tempered with guilt. I also knew my father would be devastated to know of my feelings for Gabriel.

Still, I desperately wanted to know more about Gabriel, so I returned to my father's basement, where I poured over photographs of him and my mother. As I perused each one, I began to experience *déjà vu*, as though I could vaguely recall where and when each photograph had been taken but nothing really concrete.

I suddenly sensed my mother's presence from beyond the basement. I climbed the stairs into the kitchen, where I thought I heard her voice calling me from the rear garden. I went outside, but all I heard was a strong wind rustling the leaves and trees. I smelled a sweet, pungent aroma and saw rain clouds in the distance that had already passed this way. All my senses were on high alert, and I could smell fragrant petrichor from the soil and vegetation. I heard my mother's voice again, this time emanating from within the rainforest, and I followed her into it. I knew where she was leading me and allowed her to do it.

By the time I reached Gabriel's house, the wind had become strong and gusty, mirroring my thoughts and emotions. I stood outside his house, deliberating on whether to see him again. I made up in my mind and approached his front door. I rang his doorbell and waited for him to appear. Gabriel opened the door and saw me standing before him. My body was shaking, and my voice quavered above the din of the whistling wind.

"I want you to do it," I told him.

He looked perplexed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Yes, you do. I want you to transform me into my mother.”

“*You* don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I want to be her. I *am* her.”

“Go home, Stasya.”

He slowly closed the door on me, but I stopped it with my foot.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Whenever I’m near you, I can sense her presence growing stronger within me, and I know you can feel it, too. Whenever I touch you, I can recall some of my mother’s thoughts and memories. Sometimes I can recall what she felt, what she thought, and what she saw. She led me here today. I’ve kept her repressed within me, but I can’t contain her any longer. If we consummate our love, I know you two can be together again.”

He stared at me in disbelief. I didn’t even believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. It seemed as though they were coming from my mother, and I was merely acting as a vessel for her.

“You can’t live your mother’s life for her,” he told me.

“My life *is* her life,” I said. “Ever since I was a child, I’ve been searching for a connection with someone or something, and I never knew who or what it was until now. I’m meant to connect with you so I can connect with her. I’ve finally found my purpose in life. This is how I’m

meant to sacrifice my life for her the way she sacrificed her life for me.”

“This is not what your mother would have wanted.”

“It’s what *I* want. And I know it’s what you want, too. I can sense it. Now I know why I’ve been having nightmares about dying on my twenty-fifth birthday. That’s the day I was destined to give life to her just as she gave life to me. I can help you rekindle your lives for each other.”

“You can never rekindle a first love,” he said frankly. “It will never be the same because people change. I’m a different person from the man I was when I knew your mother.”

“Tell me that you’ve never imagined this moment,” I told him. “Tell me that you’ve never wanted this to happen.”

“I have, but that doesn’t mean it should happen.”

“Why not?”

“I told you. I’ll only end up hurting you the way I hurt your mother.”

“More than you’re hurting me now?”

“You don’t know the pain I caused your mother.”

“I’m doing this for me as much as I’m doing it for her. You have the power to release me from the guilt and shame I’ve carried inside me my whole life.”

“This is not the way to do it.”

“I’ve always wanted to be like my mother, and you’ve always wanted to bring her back to life. It’s what we’ve both always wanted. We’ll both be happy. Why can’t you see that?”

Gabriel shook his head in disbelief. “Go home, Stasya. Please.”

As he closed the door, I realized I was about to lose the only worthwhile connection in my life. I stopped the door with my hand and pushed it back. I was surprised by my strength, just as he was, but I desperately needed to change his mind.

“I can’t lose you,” I said in a raised voice. “I won’t lose you.”

“We will be together one day—but not like this, not this way.”

I sensed the finality in his tone, and my strength drained from me. I felt as though I would topple in the strong wind. I looked away in despair, knowing I had lost him. I turned to leave when he held my wrist.

“Let me drive you home,” he said, glancing at the stormy weather.

I didn’t have the strength to free my wrist from his grasp.

“No, I want to be alone.”

I managed to pull my hand away and turned my back on him. I allowed the blustery wind to blow me back into the forest and drift my dispirited body home.

CHAPTER 83

Gabriel's rejection had deflated me, but the roaring wind that swirled around me within the rainforest was enlivening. Although I was dying on the inside, I hadn't felt this impassioned since I had reconnected with Lincoln and Harrison. As I made my way through the rainforest, lightning intermittently lit up the darkened trees like a beacon showing me the way home.

I was exhausted by the time I reached my father's house. I drew a hot bath to calm my anguished mind and weary body. I stepped into the soothing hot water, but it was unable to relieve my pain. I needed something else for that. I reached over to the bathroom stool and picked up the large kitchen knife I had placed there. Only this could purge my troubled mind in the quickest-possible way.

I brought the knife to my throat and slipped the point through my mother's eternity ring that hung around my necklace. As I raised the ring to the light, I sensed my

mother's presence slowly slipping away from me. I let the ring fall to my chest and lowered the knife onto my inner forearm, poised to release my demons.

Moments later, I heard several loud bangs, as though an external window shutter had become unclasped in the strong wind. I ignored the noise and placed the blade against my skin. I was about to cut through when I heard several more bangs, followed by the sound of someone's voice.

I stepped out of the bath and quickly put on a bathrobe. The banging continued, along with the sound of a distressed voice calling my name. I unlocked the front door and grasped the doorknob. The wind was strong—it flung the door inward, revealing Gabriel standing there in drenched clothes. His face was strained as he looked into my eyes, searching for something within me. His words revealed his torment.

“My will is losing the fight against my desire,” he said in defeat.

“Surrender to it,” I told him.

I took his hand and pulled him inside. I pushed the door closed, silencing the wind. He looked helpless and vulnerable standing there in silence. I wiped the raindrops away from his face with my hand. He took my hand and kissed it. I then kissed him gently on the lips, and he wrapped his arms around me. He pressed his mouth against mine and kissed me passionately. I kissed him back.

We stopped kissing and couldn't stop smiling at each other. We were like two teenagers who had fallen in love

for the first time. We were both deliriously happy. He glanced down at the gold chain around my neck and held Anastasya's eternity ring in his hand. I reached behind my neck with both hands and unclasped the gold chain, releasing my mother's eternity ring for the first time. He took the ring and slid it down my left index finger. It was a perfect fit. We smiled and admired our matching eternity rings.

I took his hand and led him up the stairs. As we reached the upstairs corridor, he lifted me up in his arms, catching me by surprise, and carried me into my darkened bedroom. He placed me gently on the bed and switched on the bedside lamp. He lay down next to me, and we wrapped our arms around each other. He stared into my eyes with the same wild expression I saw in his photograph in my father's basement. I knew then he desired me in the same way that he had desired Anastasya—the same way I desired him. We stared silently into each other's eyes, as though we were looking at each other for the first time—or after a long absence. He had unlocked Anastasya within me. She had been caged for too long, and now she was about to be set free. I was incredibly happy for her, for him, and for me.

I unwrapped my bathrobe and revealed my naked body to him. He nuzzled my breasts and slowly kissed my nipples. He then kissed his way down to my stomach and navel, licking it softly and slowly, as though he were teasing me. He kept kissing his way farther down, and I parted my thighs slightly so he could reach my clitoris. He

pressed his mouth hard against it and kissed me passionately. This aroused me even more, and I could sense my vulva swelling and becoming moist against his lips. I raised my knees and parted my thighs farther for him to bury his head between them. As he pressed his mouth against my vagina, my mouth began to tingle, and my body became afire. I needed to have him inside me. I clutched his hair with both hands and pulled his body on top of me. He pressed his mouth against mine, and we kissed each other breathlessly as he breathed new life into Anastasya.

I helped him pull down his pants and underwear and then seized his erect penis, guiding it gently inside me. His presence within me triggered familiar sensations. It felt so natural and so right to be joined together like this, as if we were meant to be one. I made love to him in a way I had never done with any man before. I knew instinctively how to arouse him, and I guided him in arousing me.

We gyrated in unison, as though we had known each other a lifetime and were suddenly rediscovering our bodies anew. With each slow, purposeful thrust, he was gradually filling me with my mother's presence—her thoughts, her memories, her persona. It was as though he were freeing her from captivity. He was the key that had finally unlocked my mother after being imprisoned inside me for all these years. I was like an eternal spirit who had cast aside an old identity and adopted a new one. I was gradually becoming Anastasya, taking on her confidence, her self-assurance, and her alluring persona.

LUIGI SANTO

As I came, passionate emotions I had never experienced before overwhelmed me. My whole body shuddered along with a crescendo of sounds and images that flashed intermittently inside my head, like lightning strikes erratically illuminating the darkness within the forest. I could see brief glimpses of trees but nothing that would help me view the forest in total. Yet I was sure I would eventually gain full access to my mother's memories and emotions.

Gabriel continued thrusting inside me so he could come, too. He looked unblinkingly at me with increasing awe as I transformed into Anastasya right before him. She had finally been set free and could now run wild. She had returned from the past and into his life.

CHAPTER 84

We lay in bed together, gazing silently at each other as we took in the surreality of the moment.

“I remember being with you like this,” I said.

“What do you remember?” he asked.

I had to think about the question because I wasn’t sure myself. “It’s like my mind is being flooded with scattered thoughts and emotions and I’m trying to sort and categorize them.”

“What does it feel like?”

“It feels amazing ... Like I’ve had amnesia for such a long time, and now all these forgotten moments and sensations are gradually coming back to me, although I don’t have any context for them. I don’t know where or when or how they occurred. Some of them seem fresh, but others are distant, and I can only get a glimpse of most of them. But I’m sure everything will fall into place with time.”

“I hope so,” he admitted.

“How about you?” I asked him. “How do you feel?”

“Me?” he asked with a boyish grin. “You know that feeling where you’re helpless to your own emotions? You can’t think properly because you’re consumed by the other person and by your love for that person. You become someone different, but you know you were always meant to be this person. Well, that’s how I feel.”

“Before, there was you and me,” I told him. “But now, there is only us.”

He gave me an impish grin, as if he were a teenager again.

“Shall I test your memory?” he asked.

“Sure,” I replied cautiously.

“Do you remember our first kiss?”

“Okay, let me think ...”

I concentrated on trying to recall the memory of my mother’s first kiss with Gabriel, or some aspect of it. It was difficult to explain what it felt like, but it was similar to searching in a distant part of your mind for buried treasure and not understanding the map that would take you there. It was akin to being drunk or drowsy and having trouble remembering something that was normally straightforward, only I was trying to access my mother’s memories and not my own.

Jumbled pieces of sounds and images slowly came to mind. At first, I struggled to connect them in order to make sense of what I was recalling. I persisted until all the pieces fitted, and I suddenly knew the answer. I pressed

my lips against his ear and whispered my response. His eyes widened with disbelief, and he smiled with delight. I knew I was right.

“Test me again,” I said excitedly.

“Okay. What about the first time we made love?”

This one should have been easier to recall because I tended to remember my first sexual experience with someone with greater clarity than my first kiss. Yet I struggled to find any pieces that matched or even went together. Everything was blurred and vague, and nothing made sense no matter how hard I tried to recall my mother’s memory.

“I can’t remember,” I said, disheartened.

“Think about what it felt like when we made love just now,” he said. “And then imagine where you were when you first felt this sensation.”

He was right. As soon as I visualized making love to Gabriel, I quickly recalled the memory. It was easy. I again whispered my answer in his ear, but he seemed confused by my response.

“No, that was probably the second or third time,” he said.

“No, the first few times we just had sex,” I told him. “We didn’t start making love until after that.”

He smiled and nodded. “You sound exactly like her.”

“It feels like I’m falling in love with you all over again,” I said freely.

“I’m already there,” he said. “I’ve just been waiting all these years for you to catch up to me.”

CHAPTER 85

The following morning, Gabriel and I made our way back to his house. The first thing I wanted to do was visit my mother's bedroom again to help me recall her memories. As I studied everything in her room, I caught Gabriel staring at me with an inquisitive look, as though he were studying everything about me. Perhaps he couldn't believe that Anastasya had truly returned, albeit in my mind and body. I smiled to reassure him it was real.

"Her memories are slowly coming back to me," I said. "I remember being in this room. I remember the emotions she felt whenever she was here. I want to remember everything she felt or thought. I want to know everything about her."

"You smile like her too," he said.

"I feel so ..."

"Happy?"

“More than that. You know those brief moments in life when you’re carefree and happy to be alive? You’re not anxious about your future, and you’re not resentful of your past. You’re just happy living in the present. Well, that’s how I feel.”

“I haven’t experienced that elation since your mother died,” he said.

“I hope that’s how I’ll always feel from now on.”

“I knew we’d meet again—but never in my lifetime.”

“She’s been inside me all this time.”

“But is this what you really want?” he asked, still anxious about my transformation.

“I want to be happy, and this makes me very happy.”

“I would love to take you where your mother and I used to go together. It was our favorite place.”

“Take me there now.”

* * *

We drove several hours along the Great Ocean Road, passing the same white house I used to admire. I thought I caught him glancing at it, too, but he was merely admiring the view. We continued driving until we had reached our destination: The Otway National Park.

“I’ve been here before,” I said excitedly.

“I took your mother here many times.”

“No, I meant me. I came here recently, and I saw you, too.”

“That’s not possible. I haven’t been here since your mother died.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It was too painful.”

“I’m sure I saw you.”

“Maybe it was your mother’s memory.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right,” I said tentatively.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sometimes it’s just difficult for me to work out whose memory I’m recalling—my mother’s or mine.”

“So you can recall only her memories and nothing else?”

“No, her emotions and some thoughts, too. I can sense how happy she was being with you. I’ve never experienced this kind of happiness before.”

“You’ve never been happy before?”

“Not like this. I feel confident. Well, maybe a little hesitant about our love, but I’m confident this is the right thing to do.”

“That’s what your mother said before we broke up,” he said sadly.

“That’s not going to happen to us,” I assured him. “I feel very hopeful about us. Even though I’ve been through pain and sadness, I’m not afraid anymore. I feel the same way my mother always appeared in her photos and video. She looked happy and self-assured, and I hope I can be like that, too—all the time.”

“I’ve never seen you this happy before, either. You have the same playful look in her eyes.”

“Now do you finally believe she is coming to life within me?”

“I *am* beginning to believe it. Though I’m still hesitant.”

“Why?”

“How will we tell people about us? How do we tell your father and Yvonne? They won’t understand. No one will believe us. I have trouble believing it.”

“Let’s keep this our secret until we work out how to tell others about us,” I suggested.

He looked wounded, as though I were ashamed of what we had.

“Is that something my mother used to say, too?” I asked remorsefully.

He smiled and shook his head, but I knew he was lying for my benefit.

“Let’s be selfish for the time being and enjoy our happiness,” I said. “I don’t want anyone to ruin what we have. And I don’t want you ruining it with your uncertainty.”

“I’m not uncertain,” he said. “This is what I want.”

“Good. Me, too. Until we work out what we have, we have to hide our love from the world, because people just wouldn’t understand. Okay?”

“I know. You’re right.”

I kissed him to reassure him of my devotion to him. That made him happy. Actually, he looked more relieved than happy.

CHAPTER 86

Gabriel guided me through the Otway National Park, and I gradually began to recall my mother's memory of it—the tall trees, the ferny gullies, the magnificent waterfalls, and the tranquil lake. I felt a deep connection to this place beyond the physical realm, one that was as timeless as the love between Gabriel and my mother. I truly felt I was part of an eternal love that would never die and would live on long after our bodies did. I believed I had encountered Gabriel's soul many times before in past lives and would continue to do so in future lives.

Gabriel appeared so loving and kind that it surprised me to see him that way. I had never known him to be anything other than the shadowy and forbidding man I was warned about. Yet right before my eyes, he was transforming into a child who treated me like his prized possession.

As the day went on, I experienced surges of distant thoughts and emotions but was never able to fully recall my mother's memories with clarity. It was as if I had been given a small taste of my mother's soul but was unable to satiate myself. I tried to explain it to Gabriel as best as I could, but it was difficult to put into words how it felt to slowly transform into another person.

"It's like having the feeling of *déjà vu* but with no context," I said. "I want to know the thoughts and emotions behinds all these moments I can recall. I want to know what she was thinking and feeling. I want to know her hopes, desires, and fears. I want to get closer to her, but she's always just out of reach."

"I dread you knowing too much," he said.

This surprised me. "Why?"

"We went through terrible times together, especially toward the end. I don't want you to remember how cruel and heartless I was."

"All relationships have their ups and downs," I said. "We just have to work through them. Besides, I know you wouldn't hurt me. I trust you."

"I don't know if I can ever stop these hurtful emotions that I have no control over," he admitted.

I held his hand and looked into his eyes.

"I won't abandon you like my mother did," I said. "I will always be here for you. Unconditionally."

He was touched by my proclamation of love.

"I haven't been treated this kindly by anyone for many years," he said. "I haven't experienced unconditional love

for such a long time. I lost that when my mother died, and I lost it again when Anastasya died.”

“She’s not dead,” I said. “She’s here, and she’s not going anywhere.”

* * *

That evening, I visited my father in hospital. Yvonne looked relieved to see me again after our last awkward encounter and gave me a hug. I kept my distance from her, afraid she could sense the change in me. I didn’t want her knowing the truth about my relationship with Gabriel, at least not yet.

As for my father, he looked frail and tired. He could remain awake for only several minutes at a time and slept for most of my time there. He was still not strong enough to have his pancreas operated on. And the longer he forwent the operation, the more formidable his cancer would become. His attending doctor could prescribe only herbal medicine but stressed this was merely a supplement to and not a replacement for traditional medicine. The best we could hope for was to stop the growth of the cancer until he was well enough for curative surgery.

CHAPTER 87

That night, as I lay asleep with Gabriel, I had an unsettling dream. I had never experienced anything like it before. My breathless gasps eventually woke Gabriel, who struggled to wake me. When I eventually calmed down, I recounted the dream.

“I dreamt we had a huge fight. I had to go away, but you wanted me to stay. I left you. But you followed me. You said you were in great pain. I took your hand and took on your pain, which was heavy and weighed me down. I let go of your hand, and I was flung into the sky, which was filled with water. The water was everywhere, and I was drowning but couldn’t get back down to earth. My arms became tired, and I was struggling to breathe and knew I was slowly dying. You swam toward me and kissed me, breathing life into me. But we were suddenly separated by a riptide that tore you from my grasp. You tried to swim toward me but the riptide was dragging me farther

away from you. I soon lost sight of you and became devastated. It seemed like I was drowning in a sea of unhappiness. My body sunk to the bottom all the way to the other side, and I put my head above water and saw the sun above me. A wave came crashing over my head and I found myself being washed ashore on a deserted beach. I crawled to the beach and looked ahead of me, but all I could see was deserted wasteland all around me that felt like unending loneliness. It felt so lonely and desolate ...”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not your fault. It was only a dream.”

“Your mother used to have the same types of dreams, especially before she left me to be with your father.”

“*She* may have felt lonely and unhappy at times, but don’t,” I said. “I’m only remembering her nightmares—that’s all.” Yet my smile failed to put him at ease.

I was uneasy too. I tried to go back to sleep but remained awake for a while. The nightmare had shaken my confidence in my transformation. I had never experienced such deep sadness before, even in my own tragic life, and I feared worse was yet to come. Although I was still determined to become my new self, I was concerned about the consequences of doing so. I prayed that my fears and doubts would diminish in the light of day.

The next morning, I struggled to shake off the effects of the dream, but a deep melancholy lingered within me. I was unexpectedly depressed all day and couldn’t fathom why. All my wishes had finally come true, so I couldn’t understand why I felt so sad.

I hid my sadness from Gabriel and secretly feared my transformation had been a failure. I was able to recall my mother's thoughts and emotions, but I hadn't taken on her confidence and self-assuredness. I was merely a shell of my mother. By the end of the week, darkness fully descended on me. I tried to remain positive by convincing myself that it was only my own fears and doubts that were crippling my transformation, and nothing else. I was certain my fears would gradually subside in the coming days.

But I was wrong. Outwardly, I was content with my new life with Gabriel. Inwardly, however, I became increasingly depressed. I had no logical explanation for my melancholy, given I had succeeded in achieving all I had ever desired. My depression became so debilitating it affected my sleep. And when I did manage to fall asleep, I continued to experience increasingly haunting nightmares. On one occasion, I woke up in the middle of the night screaming. "Please save my baby!"

Gabriel eventually calmed me down, but I had to share my strange dream with him.

"I dreamt I was pregnant and delivering my baby," I said. "But I was in so much pain. Not physical pain but spiritual pain. I felt as though my soul were being torn apart."

Gabriel looked on helplessly, not knowing what to say or do to relieve my profound sadness. However, I had to admit my failure to him.

"I'm nothing like my mother." I wailed in self-pity.

He looked at me uneasily. “You’re too much like her,” he said sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know your mother suffered from bouts of depression?”

“Because of you and my father?”

“No, but that probably made it worse.”

“Was it because of me?”

“No, she loved you very much and couldn’t wait for you to be born so she could begin her relationship with you.”

“Then, what?”

“Because of who she was.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your mother wasn’t the person you thought she was. She wasn’t always the person you saw in photos and videos. That was another part of her illness.”

“What illness?”

“Anastasya suffered from bipolar disorder.”

I was stunned by this revelation and found it difficult to accept.

“But she never looked sad or depressed.”

“You saw only the manic side, the face she showed most of the world. But she hid the other face, her depressive side. She had alternating periods of mania and depression.”

I was stunned. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Your mother wanted to keep her illness a secret from others because of the stigma attached to it. No one could

convince her otherwise. I guess your father and Yvonne were honoring your mother's wishes and protecting you by not telling you the truth."

"And my father knew about this?"

"Of course, but perhaps not to the full extent that I knew. I had grown up with her and experienced firsthand her energetic highs and her crippling lows. She could be like two different people. She inherited her mental illness from my mother, who suffered from depression, so I recognized the symptoms in Anastasya."

"No, it can't be that," I stressed. "I get melancholy all the time. It's me. It must be me."

"Then you've probably inherited her mental illness too."

"If that were the case, I would be manic, too."

"It doesn't work that way, Stasya. Children may inherit only some aspect of their parent's mental illness. You could suffer from depression only—a depression mild enough that deceived you into believing you were just more melancholic than most people."

"Did she take medication?"

"Perhaps not as often as she should have. She believed that medicating herself made her dull and lifeless. She said it made her feel normal and ordinary. But that was the whole point of taking the medication, to make her a normal person. She wanted to remain the person we all fell in love with and not a pale imitation of her."

"I always thought I was sad because I felt guilty for causing my mother's death," I said.

“It was probably your depression that fed your guilt,” he said. “I felt the same guilt when my mother died. I thought it was my fault she chose to end her life. Everyone I loved abandoned me—my father, my mother—so I thought it had to be me too. I thought I wasn’t worth loving.”

The revelation of my mother’s mental illness hit me hard. Although I accepted the fact I had inherited her depression, I was deeply saddened for her mental pain. Gabriel told me how her depression was sometimes so debilitating she didn’t have the energy or resolve to get out of bed. Her illness also explained so much about my own life—my deep sadness as a child and my painful anxiety as an adult. Ironically, it also explained my desire for an impassioned life—one filled with equal parts pleasure and pain, joy and despair, love and hate. I was unaware of the fact that I was mirroring my mother’s manic-depressive persona. I always believed I was responsible for the thoughts and feelings I experienced in my life when in fact I was merely at the mercy of my mother’s mental illness.

Gabriel gradually became more uneasy about my affliction. So did I. But I hid my doubts from him and suffered in silence for his sake. In the coming days, I began to recall and relive more depressive episodes from my mother’s tormented life, allowing me to see behind the fragile veneer she allowed the world to see.

I decided not to seek help or medication for my depression, at least for the time being. I wanted to continue reliving my mother’s own dark thoughts and

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emotions. I wanted to fully experience her state of mind—her joys and her sorrows—to better understand what she went through, especially during my impending birth. Only when I could fully understand her could I better understand myself. At least, that's what I believed.

CHAPTER 88

As I learned more about my mother's mental illness, I became more sympathetic toward my father, who must have been equally distraught to see my mother experiencing tremendous anguish. I decided I needed to spend more time with him in hospital. Even though he rested and slept most of the time I was with him, I believed I needed to be there as often as possible. Yet when I told Gabriel of my intention to spend more time with my father I was unprepared for his reaction.

"What do you mean put our relationship on hold?" Gabriel asked me tersely. My announcement had sounded colder than I had intended, but that was exactly what I was asking him to do.

"We have the rest of our lives to be with each other," I said. "But I don't know how long I have left with my father, and I want to spend as much time with him as possible for the time being."

“Why now when we’re just getting to know each other?”

“Why are you acting this way?” I asked defensively.

“Why are you acting like your mother?” he asked spitefully.

“Isn’t that who you want me to be?” I asked with equal spite.

“Maybe it’s not who you want to be.”

“Then you don’t know who I truly am.”

“All I know is that the closer I get to you, the more distant you become,” he said with a pained expression. I knew he was right, and he deserved an explanation.

“I’m just unsure of myself,” I told him. “The deeper I fall in love with you, the more I sense I’m losing myself, not only to my mother but to you, to the world around me. I feel adrift. I need to be alone to sort out who I am and what I want out of life.”

But Gabriel was not appeased. He was wounded, and he wanted me to bleed, too.

“You’re just as bad as your mother,” he said coldly. “I wish I’d never seen you. I wish you’d never been born.”

His final words were especially hurtful, as I had often wished the same throughout my life.

“Why would say something like that?” I asked with a wavering voice.

“Why would you ruin the first true happiness I’ve experienced in years?” he asked.

“I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“You can’t make up your mind who to be with either. You’re just like Anastasya. You’re doing everything she did.”

“Stop playing the same conversation you had with my mother over twenty-five years ago.”

“How can I not when you’ve brought her back into my life?”

“That doesn’t mean I feel the same way she did.”

“Why do you want to spend more time with him?”

“Because he’s my father.”

“For part of you. But for the other part, he’s also your husband.”

“This has nothing to do with my mother. I need to spend more time with my father.”

“How can you be so sure? You said you were having trouble separating yourself from your mother. Perhaps a part of you still prefers to be with him.”

“But he’s still my father.”

“So it’s all or nothing with you? Is that right? You can’t spend time with both of us?”

“Well, right now I’d prefer to be with him than you.”

“Go to him,” he said cruelly. “I don’t care anymore. You’re just as indecisive as your mother.”

I was furious, but I didn’t want to enflame this conversation any further. It was hurting me too much to endure these explosive emotions detonating all around me. He seemed to thrive on our impassioned conversations, but I was quickly growing weary of them. I had to leave him for my sanity and for my well-being.

“You’re right,” I said sadly. “You did end up hurting me just like you hurt my mother.”

I turned around and walked out on him to be with my father.

* * *

Gabriel had taken advantage of my feelings of inadequacy and had used them to punish me. Or perhaps he was trying to punish my mother by reliving their toxic arguments. I wasn’t sure if I could ever forgive him. I wasn’t sure if we could ever be the same again. I had hoped that becoming more like my mother would allow me to experience the love and adoration she received from others, but I was far from feeling loved and adored. Gabriel had trouble accepting me for who I was, or who I had actually become—a hybrid of my mother and me.

I began to fear I would never be loved and accepted for being myself. I didn’t have the courage to forgo my mother’s identity and embrace my own. I still didn’t know what I was meant to do or who I was meant to be. My duty to my mother, my loyalty to my father, and my commitment to Gabriel crushed me, and none had provided me with any of the lasting happiness I had longed for.

As I drove to the hospital, my miserable state triggered one of my mother’s more painful memories. I recalled how Gabriel had demanded she leave Ethan and marry him. My mother was unprepared to do that and instead chose to marry my father. Yet even after their marriage, Gabriel persisted in his demands for her to leave Ethan, who had

equally demanded her full love and devotion and to break all ties with Gabriel. I understood her torment and realized how the constant battle of wills eventually wore her down.

My mother sporadically resumed her illicit affair with Gabriel with the understanding that Ethan would be her husband for life and that she would see Gabriel only in private. However, no one was the real winner in that triumvirate liaison. They had tried to conquer love, but it had left the three of them battered and bitter.

* * *

I entered my father's hospital room and was relieved to see him sitting up in bed. He still looked tired, but at least he was awake and lucid. Yvonne and I exchanged anxious smiles as I hugged him.

"How are you feeling, Dad?"

"Okay," he said. "I'm okay."

He didn't have the energy to say much, but his smile conveyed how happy he was to see me. I stayed with him for most of the day to give Yvonne a break. This gave me the opportunity to bond more with him. However, I didn't ask him any questions about my mother to avoid aggravating his fragile condition. When Yvonne returned later that evening, my father's eyes lit up when he saw her.

"He refused to go to sleep until he saw you," I told Yvonne.

"Please rest now," Yvonne said to him.

"I'll come visit you again soon, Dad," I said. "Bye, Dad."

My father nodded with a smile and offered no resistance to either of us before closing his eyes. He fell asleep, and I asked Yvonne to step into the corridor with me so we wouldn't disturb him. Yvonne braced herself in anticipation of another altercation.

"Why didn't you tell me my mother suffered from bipolar disorder?" I asked her.

She wasn't sure how to respond. "Who told you?"

"Never mind who told me. Did you know she suffered from mental illness?"

"Yes, I did," she said calmly.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your father didn't want you to know."

"Why does everyone keep everything from me?"

"You idolized your mother so much that he—and I—didn't have the heart to tell you she wasn't as perfect as you thought she was."

"I wish you had told me earlier. It would have made my life much simpler."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Is there anything else you need to tell me? Any other secrets or skeletons I should know about?"

"No," she said, slightly affronted by my accusation. Or perhaps she was being guarded. I couldn't be sure. I wasn't sure whether to believe her—or anyone else—anymore.

CHAPTER 89

Exactly like my mother before me, I was torn over my love for my father and my yearning for Gabriel. Yet, were these my own emotions or merely a reflection of my mother's feelings for the two men in her life? All I knew was that I wanted to see Gabriel again but was unwilling to accept his ultimatum. During my short time with him, I had grown to dislike our emotionally charged disputes, which he and my mother thrived on. After a lifetime of thinking I yearned for a passionate love, I now preferred serene and gentle love. My mother's presence within me had fueled my desire for an impassioned love, and I now finally understood why I had felt divided and uncertain my whole life and pulled in opposite directions. I was still torn about seeing Gabriel again. Was it really me who wanted to see him, or was my mother leading me toward him? Either way, I needed to see him again to gauge whether we had a future together.

When he opened the front door to his house, he seemed both pleased and unhappy to see me. But most of all, he looked unsure and as confused as I felt. I ended his turmoil by taking his hand and leading him back inside. Neither of us exchanged any words. I kissed him softly, and he reciprocated tentatively. I sensed his reticence to express his desire for me after our last argument. Only when I began kissing him more amorously did he finally respond, releasing a torrent of love and desire for me.

He led me to his bedroom, where we undressed and where he soon lost control of himself. He mounted me from behind, pounding his body into me. With each violent thrust, he appeared to be venting his frustration and resentment toward me or my mother—or both. I felt equal parts pleasure and pain and wanted it to end quickly, but he was unable or unwilling to stop until he was fully spent.

When it was over, he peeled his body away from me, slunk toward the headrest, and sat up in bed. I remained motionless, facedown. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw him gazing at me with an uneasy mind. I looked up to face my tormentor, but he averted his eyes, ashamed to meet mine. I got up and sat next to him, troubled. He turned his head away, but I held his face in my hands and forced him to look directly into my eyes. I wanted him to witness my pain over the callous way he had just treated me. I also wanted him to know how disappointed I was in him.

“This isn’t you,” I said.

“No, this *is* me.”

“This is hate and anger and jealousy. This is *not* you.”

“Maybe it *is* me. Maybe I’ve become so used to hating people all my life I’ve forgotten how to love anymore. I don’t know if I can love anyone. I feel like I have this inner desire to punish you.”

“And I have a desire to be punished,” I said. “But we shouldn’t be like this. We shouldn’t be guided by our own failings.”

“I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“Then don’t.”

“I haven’t had a serious adult relationship with a woman since your mother died. I don’t know how to have a loving adult relationship.”

“You need to let go of your anger for her. I can’t be free until you do this. Neither of us can.”

“It would kill me to let you go a second time,” he said with a pained expression.

“You’re killing us now, so let go of your hate for her. Maybe then your love for her will return.”

“I don’t know if I can change how I feel.”

“Then control your emotions so that they don’t rule you.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“Do you want to live like this for the rest of your life?”

“I’d rather live a tormented life with you than a peaceful life without you.”

“Then we have to make this work somehow. All we have is each other.”

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A tear came to his eye, revealing the wounded child within. He looked away, embarrassed by his vulnerability. I wiped away his tear and kissed his forehead.

“You’re the only other person besides your mother who could do this to me,” he said.

We silently eyed each other, both of us unwilling to go back to our old dysfunctional ways but unsure how to move forward in any functional way. Perhaps we wouldn’t ever be able to move forward. I became despondent at our future together and dreaded what fate awaited us.

CHAPTER 90

I had hoped my mother's renaissance within me would finally make me happy and feel more complete, especially after reuniting her to Gabriel. Yet many pieces were still missing. My mother's life had not slotted into place as effortlessly as I had hoped. More importantly, I still felt disconnected and incomplete. I still couldn't get a full picture of who she was as a person. I didn't truly know her hopes, her fears, or her beliefs.

As for her memories, many of them were accompanied by love and happiness, yet many more were accompanied by sadness and loneliness, which I had not anticipated. Some were easy to recall, whereas others required a lot of effort on my part. However, most of the memories were vague and incomplete and tinged with pain and anguish. These were the memories that were the most difficult to recall or even understand. It was as though her mind had consciously—or unconsciously—repressed any painful or

destructive memories deep within her psyche and blocked them from me. Perhaps this was a good thing, because it meant I didn't have to experience the debilitating emotions that were attached to it. Yet it also meant I couldn't get close enough to understand her. I knew her even less than before because I didn't know where she ended and where I began. The dividing line between us was increasingly becoming blurred.

My short time with Gabriel had proven unfulfilling, and I needed to know why and how to fix it. I returned to my apartment and went through my mother's belongings for any clues as to why I had been unable to connect with him or her. I started with Lincoln's bequeathed items—the presents my mother had given his mother—when I noticed the necklace jewelry box.

As I touched it, an image of a handwritten letter flashed through my mind that instantly made me nauseous. I couldn't understand why. Moments later, I envisioned the words in the letter. It was my mother's terrible secret. As I reread the words I saw in my head, my stomach churned. I couldn't believe the shocking memory I had recalled. I prayed I was wrong. I hoped I had merely been anticipating the worst and that this was not my mother's memory but my imagination.

That's when I noticed a slight bulge in the lining of the jewelry box. I immediately knew it was the letter Lincoln had hidden from me, the one that revealed my mother's terrible secret. I stared at the jewelry box, paralyzed with fear. I didn't want to read the letter, lest it confirm my

mother's awful memory. However, I needed to know the truth. Not knowing the contents of the letter was just as agonizing as knowing what was written inside, so I had no choice but to read it.

My hands became sweaty as I carefully peeled back the lining. I saw the envelope, exactly as I had envisioned it. I slowly pulled out the envelope, which was addressed to Sophia and sent by my mother. I took out the letter, and my hands began trembling as I unfolded it. I started reading it, hoping I would not see the words I had envisioned, hoping I was wrong.

My mouth became dry as I quickly scanned the letter, searching for the words that would confirm the truth. As I read a particular passage, I gasped in horror. The terrible secret I had envisioned was correct. Yet that didn't stop me from rereading the letter, vainly hoping I had misunderstood its meaning. But the words were there. I had not misread them. I became violently ill. I almost retched as I dropped the letter in disgust. I buried my head in my hands, moaning in pain. I wanted to block out the words in my mind, but they lingered and left a bitter aftertaste.

I wished I had recalled this memory earlier, given how devastating it was. Perhaps it was because the memory was far too traumatic for my mind to cope with, and my unconscious mind had buried it deeply. Now I had to break the shocking news to Gabriel. I feared this even more than reading the letter.

CHAPTER 91

That evening, I entered Gabriel's house looking disheveled and trembling as I carried my mother's letter in my hand. He could see that my eyes were swollen from crying. I felt demoralized as I neared him.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I didn't reply. I threw myself at him and kissed him passionately, as though it were for the last time. Tears ran down my face as I pulled away from him. I held his head in my hands and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Do you love me?" I asked him with desperation in my voice.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you love me?" I asked again.

"Yes, of course," he said with a confused look.

"Then say it. Tell me you love me."

"I love you. Now tell me what's wrong?"

“Everything is wrong. Everyone was wrong. We were all wrong about my mother.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My mother’s terrible secret.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not my uncle,” I said bleakly.

“What do you mean?”

I struggled to say the words, but I had to say them aloud; otherwise, I wouldn’t believe them myself. “You’re my father.”

I looked away, unable to take his gaze.

“What are you talking about?” he asked skeptically.

I showed him my mother’s letter, which he snatched from my hand. I waited uneasily for his reaction as he scanned the words for himself. He reacted the same way I first did.

“This is wrong,” he said in disbelief.

“It’s true. That’s why my father disliked you so much. He knew you were my real father. That’s why he wanted to keep me away from you.”

Gabriel shook his head in denial.

“No, no, no,” he kept saying with a pained expression.

“I didn’t want to believe it either,” I said. “But it’s true. I know it’s true.”

Gabriel remained silent and motionless for a while, too stunned to do or say anything. Suddenly, he exploded. He became enraged and began yelling. He started throwing furniture around the room and cursed angrily as he punched the walls. I was truly frightened, not for myself

but for him. I was afraid he was going to hurt himself. He stopped his tirade and began crying, wailing at an unseen, heartless god who had no mercy for him.

“Why do you keep punishing me like this?” He spat furiously. “Why? Why me?”

He felt abandoned and betrayed, and I could empathize with him. Fate had conspired for his eternal soul mate to be both his sister and his daughter in the same lifetime. Nobody deserved that type of torment. Nobody deserved such a tragic life.

He dropped to his knees and slumped his head forward in defeat. I knelt next to him, wrapping my arms around him for comfort, but he was inconsolable. We remained locked together like that for a while, rocking each other like two abandoned children, weeping in despair. When we both had no more tears left to shed, I needed to unburden my soul.

“Now I know why my father treated me the way he did,” I said impassively. “He had brought up someone else’s daughter.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” he asked angrily.

“He looked at me every day knowing I wasn’t his real daughter.”

“Why would he *do* that?” he asked. “*How* could he do that?”

“Because he loved my mother, and I was a part of her. No wonder she was tormented when she gave birth to me. I did this to her. I hurt her.”

But Gabriel wasn't listening to me. He was wallowing in his own private pain.

"Why didn't they tell me?" he kept asking. "They should have told me."

"Lincoln knew, too."

He looked aghast.

"He told me he had discovered the terrible secret but kept it from me. He knew I was his half-sister and was trying to protect me. But he couldn't protect himself."

"Why didn't he tell me?" he asked softly to himself. "Why didn't you tell me, Lincoln?"

We hugged each other, hoping to relieve our pain, but nothing could heal our suffering. He then pulled himself away from me and looked earnestly into my eyes.

"This shouldn't change how you feel about your father," he said. "He's still your father."

"I know," I said.

"But we can *never* see each other again."

I was horrified. "No. There has to be another way," I said.

He grasped my shoulders and shook me violently, as though trying to knock sense into me.

"There *is* no other way," he said.

"We can't end like this," I said in desperation.

"Listen to me. We can *never* see each other again. I'm your father."

"Biological only. In my heart, the father I grew up with will always be my father."

“Think with your head and not your heart, because this will only end badly for us both.”

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I was thinking with my heart instead of my head. I didn’t know. All I knew was that I needed Gabriel in my life.

“How can we be apart after all we’ve been through?” I asked.

“That’s exactly why we can’t be together.”

“No, we have to work things out.”

“We would only be tempted to continue what we have. We can’t keep going on knowing who we really are.”

“Eternal soul mates—*that’s* who we really are.”

“This changes everything. *Everything*. I’m not going to cause your death, too. It stops here.”

“Shutting me out of your life will only hurt me even more.”

“Can’t you understand that I’m not meant to be happy?” he yelled. “I’m cursed. Stay away from me.”

I stood there, not knowing what to say to make him change his mind.

“Go,” he said angrily. “Leave me alone.”

I wouldn’t move. I couldn’t move. That’s when he grabbed my arm and escorted me out the door. I tried to resist, but it was futile. He slammed the door in my face and locked the door. But I refused to leave. I refused to be shut out of his life. I banged on the door with my fists and pleaded with him to let me in. But my lament failed to move him. He was inconsolable and could not stand to see the face that would remind him of his tragic life. I

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remained there for a while, unsure how to deal with his second rejection. However, there was one place I wanted to go—one person I needed to see.

CHAPTER 92

I entered the hospital at midnight in a semi lifeless state. It seemed a fitting place for my broken soul. When I entered my father's room, I was relieved that he and Yvonne were both asleep in their beds. I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I just needed to be near my father—that is, the man I had always known as my father.

I held his hand and gazed at his sleeping face with newfound love and respect. He had no obligation to raise someone else's daughter, but he'd raised me as his own child, perhaps due to his great love for my mother. I admired his selflessness. Not many men would have been prepared to do what he did. My eyes welled up, and I kissed his cheek as though this were my last good-bye. I left his side and walked past Yvonne, gently caressing her arm on my way out. I stood at the door and glanced back at them one last time before departing.

I returned to my father's house to be near Gabriel. I couldn't sleep, but I was surprisingly calm after the tumultuous day I had experienced. In fact, my emotional bloodletting had been cathartic. Yet I was still conflicted about Gabriel. I thought that knowing he was my real father would douse any desire for him. But it didn't. He still aroused me—perhaps more so—and my perverted thoughts filled me with guilt and repulsion. Perhaps I was merely experiencing my mother's own sexual longing for him. I couldn't be sure anymore. What I was sure about, however, was that I needed to see him one last time. I only hoped he wanted to see me, too.

Early the next morning, I drove down his driveway. His car was there, so I knew he was home. I got out of my car and mentally prepared myself as I approached the front door. I rang his doorbell and waited. He didn't answer, so I called out his name. He still refused to acknowledge me. I took out my phone and dialed his number. To my surprise, he answered.

"Yes," he said in a raspy voice. He evidently hadn't slept, either.

"Can I speak to you for a moment?"

"We can't see each other," he said in a defeated tone.

"I know. I want to say good-bye properly. I don't want yesterday to be our final good-bye. I don't want to remember us like that. Can you please open the door so I can see your face and say good-bye to you in person?"

He remained silent. All I could hear was his breathing as he deliberated his answer.

“Okay,” he said uneasily.

I ended the call and waited for him to answer the door. I didn’t know how I would feel when I saw him again. I didn’t know how I would react. I didn’t know how he would react. I hoped he would be calmer than last time. He opened the door slightly, and I could see that he looked as bad as I felt. His eyes were bloodshot, and his face looked pale. He didn’t say anything but stared at me.

“Can I come inside?” I asked.

He pondered for a moment before finally relenting. I entered the house, and he closed the door behind me. We stared silently at each other until I made the first move.

“I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you,” I told him. “I’m sorry how you were treated by my parents.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I want to acknowledge what you’ve had to endure in your life.”

He nodded but said nothing. He clearly didn’t want me to be there, so I made the first move to bid him farewell.

“I’ll always remember our time together with fondness, and I hope you can move on from this and find some kind of happiness in your life.”

“Thank, you,” he replied with little emotion. “You, too.”

He didn’t say anything further, and the conversation spluttered awkwardly. I saw no point in staying any longer.

“I’ll go now,” I said.

He nodded and opened the door. But I was unable to make a move. I couldn’t leave knowing I was bereft of any

happiness. I couldn't say good-bye to him like that. I turned to him and gave him a hug. He hugged me back, and I knew he still cared about me.

We remained embraced for a while, as though neither of us wanted to be the first to let go. I enjoyed feeling his body so close to me, and I dreaded not being able to hold or touch him again in the future. I looked at his wounded eyes and kissed him on the cheek. He reciprocated with his own kiss, which caught part of my mouth. I moved my mouth until it was pressed against his. I was so aroused I couldn't help myself. I parted my lips and kissed him passionately. He didn't respond—at least, not at first. Moments later, he parted his lips and pressed his mouth hard against mine, kissing me fervently. We kissed each other breathlessly as he caressed my body. He kissed the nape of my neck, and I moved my hand down toward his crotch to arouse him.

He closed the door and pressed my back against the wall as his hands explored my breasts and hips. He went hard in my hand and I unzipped him. He reached underneath my skirt and pulled down my underwear. He dropped his pants, and I pulled up my skirt. I leaned against the wall and wrapped my left leg around the back of his thighs while he held me firmly in place with his hands pressed against each hip. I grasped his erect penis and inserted it inside me, sighing with pleasure.

He hugged me tightly, rested his head on my shoulder, and began thrusting into me. But I wanted to see his face. I grabbed his hair with both hands and pulled his head away

from the wall so I could look into his eyes. So many thoughts were going through my mind, such as love and desire, but my most overriding emotions were guilt and shame.

However, I was too caught up in my longing for him that I couldn't stop myself, even if I had wanted to. Neither could he. Everything escalated so quickly that neither of us considered the consequences of what we were doing. Previously, I'd been unaware I was his daughter, but now I clearly knew. Yet I was convinced I was his soul mate, and the reincarnation of my mother. Although, even that didn't sit well with me, as I knew my mother and Gabriel were siblings. I stopped thinking about the repercussions of what we were doing and enjoyed the pleasure of feeling his body next to mine.

Our lovemaking built up to a crescendo until he came breathlessly and rested his chest against mine. I hadn't come yet, but it didn't matter, as I merely yearned to feel his rapidly beating heart next to mine and to feel him inside me again. I knew then I couldn't live without him. After it was over, however, we both looked away from each other, ashamed of what we had done. But I did not regret it. I regretted only that we could not keep doing this. Our consciences would eventually get the better of us, and we would have to stay away from each other. Yet at the moment, all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around him and hold his body close to me.

He peeled himself away and pulled up his pants with guilt in his eyes. He couldn't look at me as I pulled up my

underwear. We both remained silent, as though not talking about what had transpired between us would somehow wipe it out. Suddenly, he spoke as he looked at me mournfully.

“We can’t do this anymore,” he said, exasperated.

“I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again,” I said.

“How can you make that promise after what we just did? I can’t even make that promise.”

“I still need you in my life somehow,” I said. “And I know you need me, too. We can’t change how we feel about each other. We can’t turn it off like a tap.”

“That’s right. And that’s why we can never be together again—because we can’t control ourselves. This will only happen again. We have to stop seeing each other so this never happens again.”

“Please, there has to be a better way. There has to be another way we can somehow be together.”

He didn’t argue with me. In fact, he didn’t say anything. He opened the front door and turned away from me.

“Please go, Stasya,” he said in utter defeat.

He continued walking and retreated to his bedroom. I heard him close the door, and I knew then I was going to lose him forever. I stood by the open door, confused and in tears. I couldn’t think straight anymore. Was I right or wrong to want to be with Gabriel? I didn’t know where Anastasya ended and where I began. As far as I was concerned, I was Anastasya. And I had to leave him, just as she had left him.

LUIGI SANTO

I got into my car and drove away. But I didn't want to go home. I wasn't even sure where home was. I had always felt rootless throughout my life, and now I felt rudderless and directionless. I drove for hours and had no idea where I was going—and didn't care. All I knew was that I couldn't be still when my mind was besieged by so many dark thoughts. I kept driving until I eventually found myself on the Great Ocean Road, where I admired the white house on the cliff. As I glanced at the house, I realized what I needed to do.

CHAPTER 93

Night had descended by the time I arrived back in Melbourne. The soothing darkness contrasted with the harsh light of day. As I continued driving, my mind gradually became clearer, and I realized what I needed to do to end the darkness within me. I began searching along the city streets for something that would help me soothe my weary heart.

Half an hour later, I found it: a small and quaint bed-and-breakfast in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. For some strange reason, I sensed I was coming home. I clutched my handbag and booked a room for the night. The night manager escorted me to my room, which was small but charming, and I quickly drew a bath. The water was hot and soothing as I passed my hand through it.

I undressed and took out a red lipstick from my handbag. I wiped the warm condensation from the bathroom mirror and gazed at my reflection, determined. I

pressed the lipstick against my chest and began writing in large letters: “Do Not Revive.”

As I prepared for my own death, I ruminated on the deaths of Lincoln and Harrison. Lincoln could not endure his father’s overpowering shadow, and Harrison could not endure his inherited illness. Now it was my turn. I could not endure the knowledge that the man I was drawn to was also my birth father, so succumbing to death was better. I was tired of fighting my fate and wanted to end my pain.

I sat down in the bathtub, and the hot water instantly relieved me. I reached over to the chair next to the bathtub and retrieved a box of double-edge razor blades from my handbag. I pulled out a single razor blade and held it gingerly in my fingers. I made a tight fist with my left hand several times to help the veins expand. I then placed the tip of the razor on my forearm and sliced lengthwise into my vein. I winced. It was painful at first, but I kept cutting deeply until the artery underneath was exposed. The blood soon began flowing freely, and I dropped the razor blade on the tiled floor.

I placed my head against the wall and got into a relaxed position. I stretched my left arm to ensure it wouldn’t inadvertently fall inward against my body once I lost consciousness, as this would block the blood flow. The hot water would also slow down the clotting process. All I had to do now was wait for death to come.

However, even in my dying moments, I yearned for a connection with someone. I needed to speak to someone

before I left this world. I reached into my handbag, pulled out my phone and made a call. The phone rang for a while, but no one answered. I was about to end the call when I suddenly heard Gabriel's somber voice.

"Yes, Stasya," he said.

"Don't worry. This is going to be my last call to you. I just wanted to tell you something. You're right—I have ruined your life."

"It's not your fault, Stasya."

"Yes, it is. I've caused so much pain for you and my father. My mother would still be alive if it wasn't for me and so would Lincoln and Harrison."

"Lincoln's death was an accident. But if anyone is to blame it's me. And you never caused Harrison's death."

"But I wasn't reason enough to stop his death. I wasn't worth living for. You're right. It would have been better for everyone if I'd never been born."

"I only said that in anger. I didn't mean it."

"It doesn't matter. I've said it to myself many times."

"Where are you, Stasya?"

I ignored him. "I can't undo the past, and I can't live with my guilt anymore."

His tone became desperate. "Stasya, are you at your father's home or your apartment?"

"I've finally made peace with life," I told him. "Not everyone achieves what they wish in life. Not everyone is meant to live a happy life. But I've accepted that, and I'm no longer angry or sad with the world. I'm not even afraid anymore. I never thought I would be able to say that. But

I'm not afraid of dying anymore because I already feel dead inside."

"Stasya, don't talk like this," he said with urgency. "Let's meet and talk about this. Tell me where you are."

"No, we can never work this out. But we at least had a brief moment of happiness together, so I shouldn't be too selfish. Most people never meet their soul mate, but we did. I was glad to know you. I wanted you to know that and tell you not to feel guilty."

"Stasya, this isn't the end. Think of your father and Yvonne. You have your whole life ahead of you to meet people and have great experiences."

"What's the point in living without love?" I asked. "You're the only person left in my world that could make me happy, but I know I can't be with you. And I can't live without you."

"Stasya, tell me where you are," he said.

"Some lovely little bed-and-breakfast. I think you'd love this place."

"Stasya, what have you done?"

"I'm taking a bath. I call it my red bath."

"Stasya, don't do this. Please, tell me where you are."

"I only wanted to hear your voice one more time before I said good-bye."

"This is your depression talking. It's not you. I want to help you. Let's get some help so you can think more clearly."

"Nothing is going to help me. No one can help me. You have to let me go, just as I let you go."

“Stasya, please call an ambulance.”

“I’ve wasted my whole life. I’ve wasted all this time searching for meaning and purpose in my life when it was all for nothing. I have no purpose, and my life never had any meaning.”

“I want to see you. Tell me where you are so we can talk. Please, Stasya.”

I suddenly became tired and wanted to asleep. I closed my eyes, listening to Gabriel’s frantic voice.

“Stasya?” he shouted over the phone.

“I love it when you say my name.”

I became drowsier and my phone almost slipped out of my hand.

“Stasya, please listen to me. I need to see you. I desperately need to be with you. Please tell me where you are.”

“Good-bye, Gabriel,” I said.

“Don’t hang up,” he yelled.

“See you in the next life.”

He screamed my name, but I ended the call. I knew this was for the best. I knew he would try to find me, but I hoped I would be dead by then. I began to lose consciousness, and my arm flopped over the side of the bathtub, causing the phone to slip out of my hand and crash to the floor tiles. I looked down at the bathwater, which had a beautiful, rose-tinted hue. As the blood flowed freely out of my body, my guilt and sadness flowed out, too. This was soon replaced by a tranquility I had

never experienced before. I smiled to myself, knowing I was finally ending my unquiet slumbers.

As my vision began to blur, I saw the indistinct outline of a figure standing in front of me. I could barely make out my mother's apparition. She had visited me in Paris under similar circumstances. This time, however, I was determined to remain conscious to finally hear what she had to say. But I was slowly losing the battle to remain awake, and my eyelids became heavier. My mother's apparition approached me and knelt beside me. Her warm breath brushed against my neck, and I was grateful to experience her presence one last time.

CHAPTER 94

I waited for my mother to say something, but everything suddenly went silent. I couldn't hear anything. I opened my eyes to see darkness surrounding me. Was I dead or alive? My mind was still active, so perhaps my senses were slowly shutting down. Perhaps I had only a few more moments to live before my brain also shut down as a result of a lack of oxygen running through my blood.

But I wasn't afraid at all. I felt no pain. I didn't feel anything, as if I were on another plane of existence. I was alive in spirit but not in body. I assumed I was undergoing an out-of-body experience before death came to take me. Yet the darkness around me was warm and soothing—life-giving. My mother's presence was all around me, even though I couldn't see or touch her.

As I prepared to meet my death, a small, bright ultraviolet light shone above me. I wanted to get closer to the light but did not know how. Suddenly, lightness within

me helped me move up toward the light, which grew larger and brighter as I neared it. The light quickly became blinding, and I shut my eyes to shield myself as I slowly passed through it.

I opened my eyes, and the light gradually receded. I soon began to make out distinct colors, shapes, and sounds. Perhaps I wasn't dead after all. But where was I? I then heard muffled voices around me. As my senses gradually returned to me, I realized I was in a hospital operating theater. I assumed Gabriel or someone had contacted emergency services and I'd been rescued before I died. People were muttering all around me, and I heard the clanging of utensils.

I saw a blurry face in front of me. It was my father. He was wearing a surgical gown and had pulled down his surgical mask. I was surprised to see him standing there in the operating theater, given his poor health. He was smiling happily at me, so I sensed he was fine. However, as my vision fully returned to normal, I realized he looked remarkably different. Everything about him was different—his hair, his eyes, his skin, and his smile. That's when I realized he was now a young man. His hair was long and luscious but untidy, and the clothes underneath his surgical gown appeared more casual and fashionable compared with the conservative and staid clothes he wore later in life. I was experiencing my mother's memory.

I was lying on my back at a slight angle looking down at my swollen belly. I was in the birthing position with my

feet in the stirrups and about to give birth. That is, my mother was about to give birth to me.

I heard an urgent voice warning the obstetrician that my blood pressure was falling rapidly. I suddenly experienced a shortness of breath. I felt nauseous and tasted some bile at the back of my throat. I looked down and saw a large amount of blood on the obstetrician's hands. I then heard Ethan's troubled voice.

"Hey, Ana," he said, straining to maintain a smile.

I could hear my mother answering through me.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is Stasya okay?"

His face became grim.

"There's been a complication, Ana," he said, glancing anxiously at the obstetrician. "Dr. Hughes needs to perform an urgent operation on you."

Dr. Hughes tried to put me at ease by smiling behind his surgical mask but his alarmed eyes betrayed his concern.

"Anastasya, I don't want you to be alarmed because we're doing everything we can to help you. Remember when we spoke about the possibility of an amniotic fluid embolism?"

"You said it was a very small possibility," I replied. "Negligible."

"Yes...yes I did," he said softly.

"Is that why I feel so nauseous?"

"Yes. Amniotic fluid has entered your bloodstream through a partial separation of the placenta and you're experiencing an allergic-like reaction. You also have

bleeding where the placenta was attached, which we will stop but it requires surgery.”

I was dazed and couldn't process any of this information. I was only concerned about was Stasya.

“What about Stasya?” I asked. “She seems distressed. I can sense it.”

Nobody answered me. A nurse quickly inserted a tiny plastic tube into a vein in my arm and then connected it to a drip, which filled with blood.

“We’re giving you a plasma transfusion to replace the blood you’ve lost,” Dr. Hughes explained. “Your blood is losing its ability to clot so we need to repair the tear before you lose more blood.”

Dr. Hughes turned to the head nurse and issued instructions. “Atropine 0.8mg, Ondansetron 4 mg, Ketorolac 30mg.”

He turned back to me. “Anastasya, we’re going to administer a combination of medications to treat the embolism.”

But none of this mattered to me. “Will Stasya be okay?” I asked again.

I began shivering and had an unpleasant taste in my mouth. I coughed several times and almost vomited.

“What wrong with Stasya?” I demanded to know.

Ethan took my hand but struggled to speak. I turned to Dr. Hughes, who gave me a solemn look.

“Your cardiovascular system is collapsing, which is endangering the life of your baby,” Dr. Hughes explained. “It’s running out of oxygen.”

After that, I couldn't think or speak. A ventilator was shoved against the birthing table and a nurse placed a breathing mask over my mouth and nose. I took off my mask.

“What about Stasya?” I asked him. “Can you save her?”

“We have to stabilize your condition first,” Dr. Hughes stressed. “We have to get your heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate back to normal.”

“But if Stasya’s running out of oxygen that means she could be dead soon,” I said frantically. “Right?”

Dr. Hughes paused and nodded uneasily.

“We need to take care of you first,” Ethan explained.

“No, you need to take care of Stasya first,” I insisted.

“If they don't operate on you now, you could go into cardiac arrest or fall into a coma,” Ethan said with agitation in his voice. “There’s no other choice.”

“There are always other choices,” I replied. I turned to Dr. Hughes with a steely gaze.

“Are my chances of survival lower than Stasya’s?” I demanded to know.

“I can’t be certain,” he demurred.

“If you deliver Stasya now, could you save her?” I asked him.

“Only by emergency caesarian and only at great risk to you,” he replied. “You’re losing too much blood and your rapidly weakening heart will not be able to sustain the strain or the delay.”

“But can you save her?”

He glanced anxiously at Ethan and then turned towards me.

"I probably could but we're quickly running out of time to save either of you," Dr. Hughes replied bluntly.

"Then save Stasya," I instructed him. "Save my baby."

Dr. Hughes looked puzzled, and glanced at Ethan, who glared at me in disbelief.

"We don't have time to argue," Ethan insisted. "They have to operate on you now."

I felt a sudden tightening of my chest and brought my hand to my heart. My vision began to blur and my thinking became cloudy. But I knew exactly what I wanted.

"You're experiencing cardiac failure," Dr. Hughes told me. "We have to operate on you now."

"No," I said brusquely. "You have to help Stasya."

"We have to let her go," Ethan explained.

"I'm not going to kill my baby," I told him.

"We can always have another child, Ana. But I can't replace you."

I understood Ethan's point of view but he couldn't understand mine. No one could.

"Besides, they're going to sedate her so it won't feel any pain," Ethan added.

"What about my pain?" I shrieked. "I've spent nine months bringing Stasya into this world. I'm not going to end her life."

I suddenly vomited and quickly felt cold. My body began shivering. A nurse slipped on my vomit as she tried

to clean me and another nurse quickly threw towels on the floor to prevent anyone else slipping.

“You’re dying, Ana,” Ethan yelled at me. “You’re not going to make it unless they operate on you now.”

“Ethan, please listen to me,” I told him. “You have to save Stasya.”

“I’m not going to lose you.”

“And I’m not going to kill my child.”

“You don’t understand what you’re saying,” he said tersely.

“No, you don’t understand me. You’re not a mother.”

Ethan turned to Dr. Hughes with a defiant look.

“Commence the surgery now,” Ethan ordered Dr. Hughes.

“No,” I shouted. “You do *not* have my permission to operate on me.” I looked fiercely into the eyes of the medical staff and issued my instruction again. “You have to save my baby.”

I turned back at Ethan, who looked at me with coldness.

“Please save my baby,” I said softly to him. “You have to save Stasya.”

“It’s because it’s *his* baby, isn’t it?” he asked spitefully.

“It’s *my* baby,” I said angrily. “And no one is going to take the life of my child.”

“Ana, you’re not thinking clearly without your medication. Eventually, you’ll realize this is the right thing to do. It’s the only thing to do.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing, and I’m not going to kill Stasya,” I said. I looked around at the hospital staff. Embarrassed, they could not meet my eyes. “I do not consent to this,” I said. “You have my permission to let me die. Just let me live long enough to hold my child.”

Ethan drew back in horror as Dr. Hughes nodded and instructed his team to commence the caesarean. Now all I needed was for Ethan to make a solemn promise to me.

“Ethan, please come here and take my hand,” I said.

He refused to move or even look at me.

“Ethan, take my hand,” I said. “Please come here.”

He looked up and glared at me.

“Ethan, promise me you will look after Stasya and bring her up as our child.”

He remained silent. I tried to raise my voice, but my energy was slowly being sapped.

“Ethan, please don’t let me die alone. Take my hand so I can die in peace.”

Everything suddenly became blurry, and my words were slurring. I began having seizures.

“Ethan,” I said breathlessly. “Don’t let me die in pain. Please take my hand.”

However, he refused to come to my side.

“Ethan, if you love me, please take care of Stasya. Please do this for me.”

He gave me a wounded look, but I wanted him to know how I truly felt about him. He had always been in doubt over my love for him, but I didn’t have the energy

to tell him. All I could do was whisper my final words to him. "I love you, Ethan."

Ethan's torn face was the last thing I saw before my body began convulsing and I went into cardiac arrest. Everything became dark, and I was once again deprived of my senses. However, I felt myself rising upward toward the bright surgical lighting, which suddenly blinded me.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I looked down and saw my mother's body lying on the birthing table. I watched the nursing staff trying frantically to revive her using CPR. My father had moved to my mother's side to hold her hand, but it was too late. Anastasya was already dead. He buried his head on my mother's shoulder and began to sob. All I could think of was that my mother never got to hold me before she died.

I looked down at Dr. Hughes and saw him reaching into the incisions in my mother's abdomen and uterus. He then pulled out a seemingly dead baby.

My baby skin was purple all over and I was gasping for breath. I needed immediate help to avoid suffering any brain damage. The head nurse quickly put me down on my back and wrapped me in warm blankets, leaving my chest exposed. She positioned my head face up, which would open my throat and help me breathe. However, I was still not breathing properly. The nurse suctioned my throat to clear my airway of any mucus and amniotic fluid to encourage me to breathe. She then placed a valve mask over my mouth and nose. I was provided with a small amount of oxygen and was soon resuscitated.

LUIGI SANTO

I began wailing but my father didn't notice or seem to care. The nurse quickly presented me to my father before I needed to be transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit. He looked at me but displayed no emotion. All he felt was the pain of losing Anastasya, which he blamed on me. He turned away from me, got up, and walked straight out of the operating theater without holding me or touching me. This was my welcome into the world.

I hovered above my father and followed him as he ripped off his surgical gown and entered the corridor. He came to a stop. Standing in front of him was Gabriel, who was oblivious to everything that had happened moments earlier. My father threw Gabriel a searing look and walked right past him down the corridor. I then followed Gabriel as he rushed into the operating theater. He heard me crying in the arms of a nurse and then saw my mother's lifeless body. He fell to his knees and pressed his head on my mother's shoulder, sobbing in pain.

CHAPTER 95

I sat up in the bath with a violent jolt. I quickly opened my eyes and began hyperventilating. I was still alive. I spluttered and coughed as I struggled to breathe. I staggered to my feet and emerged from the water covered in blood, like a newborn baby emerging from her mother's womb. My body was light and unencumbered, as though the overwhelming weight of my sadness and guilt had been lifted, setting me free.

I stepped out of the bathtub and grabbed a hand towel, which I wrapped tightly around my forearm to put pressure on my wound. I raised my bandaged arm above my head to help clot the blood and stem the blood loss. With my other hand, I dampened another towel to wipe the blood off my body and the lipstick from my chest.

Even though my mother's apparition was gone, her memory still lingered within me. Everything suddenly became clear to me. It was as though the mystery of my

whole life had been unraveled, and I knew the answers to all my questions about Anastasya, Ethan, and Gabriel. I now understood my father's ambivalent relationship with me, his animosity toward Gabriel, and his conflicted emotions for my mother.

I also understood my mother's tortured spirit and her ambivalence toward the two men she loved most. It was the same ambivalence I had experienced toward them my whole life. I now knew why I was the person I was and why I had made the decisions I'd made throughout my life. My mother's tormented heart had fed my own uncertainty, and her divided love for Gabriel and my father had also fed my own divided loyalties. That was the reason I had felt disconnected my whole life. Yet that was no longer the case. My life had instantly been turned on its head, and everything I thought or knew or felt had changed. I needed to share this revelation. I picked up my phone and dialed Gabriel. He answered his phone sounding frantic.

"Stasya?" he shouted.

"Gabriel. I'm fine."

"Tell me where you are."

"I'm okay. I want you to do something for me."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm okay. Can you meet me in the emergency room at my father's hospital?"

"Will you really be there?"

"Yes. I need to tell you something. I know the real reason why my mother returned."

"What?"

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

“I’ll tell you later. Just meet me in the waiting room.”

CHAPTER 96

I arrived at the crowded emergency room of the hospital at two in the morning. When the personnel realized my wound was the result of a suicide attempt, they placed me at the head of the queue. They then rushed me into the emergency section to have my wound stitched and my forearm bandaged.

As part of their procedure, the emergency staff were required to contact the police. I didn't argue with them because I knew they were doing what they thought was best for me. Once the police arrived, they could see I was no longer a threat to myself and decided against taking me into custody. Instead, they referred me to a mental health service and suggested I contact them first thing in the morning. However, I had no intention of taking my life. I was relieved to still be alive and grateful I had come to the realization of the truth after so many wasted years.

Gabriel arrived at the emergency room shortly afterward. He saw my heavily bandaged forearm and was unsure what to say or whether to even approach me. I gave him a warm smile to put him at ease. It was my mother's smile—confident and self-assured. I stood up and kissed him on the cheek, as though I were kissing a relative I had not seen for many years, which confused and saddened him at the same time. He could sense a change in me and was unsure whether this was a good or a bad thing.

“Sit down,” I said. “I need to tell you something.”

He still looked anxious, so I took his hand and looked directly into his eyes.

“I relived my mother's death and recalled her dying thoughts. She didn't die because of the stress of the delivery. She sacrificed her life for me.”

“I was told she went into cardiac arrest during your delivery,” he replied.

“She did but that's because she decided not to save her own life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Amniotic fluid had entered her blood stream and she was hemorrhaging from internal bleeding. With little time to decide, she needed to make a choice: accept surgery that would save her own life but cause my death, or agree to an emergency cesarean that would save my life but end hers. She chose to die so I could live.”

“I never knew that,” he whispered.

“My father knew I was your child and was angry at my mother’s decision to save me,” I explained.

“Is that’s why he still carries the grudge against me?”

“He thought my mother loved you more than him, but the truth is she loved me more than either of you, and she chose to save me. All my life, I’ve searched for acceptance and forgiveness, but what I really needed was to accept and forgive myself. She showed me how to do that.”

He sat back, taking in everything and breathing a sigh of relief. I could see in his eyes all the pent-up anger and frustration toward my mother slowly withering away. It was as though he no longer needed me to vent his ambivalence toward my mother. More importantly, I no longer needed or even desired Gabriel.

“But she died in a lot of pain,” I said sadly. “Spiritual pain. She wanted Ethan to bring me up as his own child. She wanted him to promise to love me as much as he loved her. But he refused to make that promise. He even refused to hold her hand as she was slowly dying. That’s why her spirit couldn’t soar. That’s why it took hold of me. She wanted to be there for me, knowing my father could not love me as she wanted.”

“What happens now?” he asked.

“I need to set her spirit free,” I said boldly.

CHAPTER 97

After saying good-bye to Gabriel, I went upstairs to my father's ward. I entered his room and saw Yvonne asleep on her own bed next to him. He was propped up in bed asleep, but he must have sensed my presence because he opened his eyes as I entered the room. He looked even frailer than the last time I saw him. When he saw me, his eyes lit up with wide-eyed wonder, and a huge smile spread across his face.

“Anastasya,” he whispered.

I let him believe I was Anastasya. In a way, I still *was* Anastasya. I smiled for him the way Anastasya smiled for him. I moved closer and held his hand. I could sense the fatigue in his body as he struggled to hold on to me. I wanted to soothe his anguish over Anastasya. I needed to release the pain that had stunted his heart ever since she died.

I leaned forward; pressed my mouth against his; and gave him a long, slow kiss, just as Anastasya would have. I wanted him to know and feel that she truly loved and desired him, even in her dying moments. He kissed me back and then stopped. I raised my head and saw his face and body relaxing, as though a huge burden had been removed from his shoulders. He closed his tired eyes and whispered something startling.

“Renascence,” he said with a smile.

I didn’t know why he had said that. Perhaps he said it because he knew it was my mother’s favorite word. Or perhaps he realized he was actually speaking to me and was recalling the name of the house I used to draw as a child. In any event, it turned out to be the last thing he said. His grip weakened, and he let go of my hand. The cardiac monitor began beeping erratically before slowing down rapidly.

Yvonne woke up because of the loud beeping and saw me standing next to my father. She took charge of the situation and frantically pressed the nurse call button to get their attention. When the attending nurse did not immediately appear, Yvonne ran out of the room to call for help.

I held my father’s hand, hoping he would not slip away. I didn’t want this to be our last meeting. I wanted to spend more time with him now that I had finally found peace with myself. I wanted to show him my gratitude for loving me, even though I was Gabriel’s child. I wanted to say so many more things to him before he left.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

Yvonne quickly returned with two nurses and a doctor, who all worked furiously to stabilize his heart rate. But he wasn't coming back. He had made peace with the world and no longer had the will to fight off death. The monitor flat-lined and no amount of frantic CPR or defibrillation could save him. The only comfort I could take from his passing was the look of serenity in his eyes and his contented smile. I had never seen this expression on his face before, and it was my lasting image of him.

* * *

My father's body was placed in his family's mausoleum next to Anastasya. I noted the statues of the two grieving angels and was comforted by their acknowledgment of my grief. At the end of the funeral service, I took Gabriel aside and placed something in his hand. It was a key to the mausoleum.

"I've made a copy for you so you can visit her anytime," I said.

"Thank you, Stasya."

"I hope you'll agree to see me from time to time."

He nodded.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

"I need to say good-bye to my mother and move on with my life. I want to create a new life for myself and not the life I thought others wanted of me."

CHAPTER 98

After everyone had left the cemetery, I stayed back alone, finally ready to exorcise the ghost of Anastasya and set us both free. I remained alone inside the mausoleum, where I still sensed her presence. Yet I found it difficult to let go of her. Even though I was ready to move on without her, I still sensed her strong hold over me. I spent some time staring at her photograph, hoping to feel liberated, but something was holding me back. Her presence lingered within me.

I went back to my father's house to talk with Yvonne about my failed attempt to let go of my mother.

"Perhaps it's because she doesn't want to let go," Yvonne said.

"Or perhaps it's because I've been with her for so long I don't want to let her go," I said. Regardless, I was unable to relinquish her presence that day and hoped that it would eventually happen with time.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

* * *

Moments later, the executor of my father's estate, Mr. Wilson, arrived to finalize my father's will. Mr. Wilson was an elderly man who looked ready to retire and eager to fulfill the final wishes of my father, even though that was the furthest thing from my mind. However, he insisted on speaking alone with me.

"I have one more question about your inheritance," he said.

"Can it wait?" I asked him. "My mind is elsewhere, and I don't want to make any hasty decisions."

"I understand. I just need to know what you intend to do with the summer residence, as there were no instructions from your father."

I threw him a bemused look. "What summer residence?"

He threw me an equally bemused look.

"Renaissance," he said.

* * *

I never knew the house called Renaissance existed. However, I suddenly understood why I would often write the word on the door of the house I used to draw as a child. Perhaps this was why my father whispered this word to me before he passed. The only other person who would know more about Renaissance was Yvonne, so I queried her about it after Mr. Wilson left.

"I thought your father sold the property after your mother died," she told me.

“No, he kept it. Apparently, he had it cleaned and maintained regularly, even though he never rented it to anyone. Why would he do that?”

“Sentimental value,” Yvonne replied.

“What’s so significant about Renascence?”

“Renascence is where your parents holidayed during the summer. But she especially loved being there in winter. She loved watching the huge ocean waves crashing against the rocks on the empty beach on a cold, windy day. Your mother would often go to Renascence by herself in winter, and Gabriel would sometimes join her. Your father knew about this, but they both pretended otherwise. She told me the time she spent at Renascence with Gabriel and your father were the happiest days of her life. But your father didn't want you to know anything about it.”

“So she’s been leading me to Renascence all this time,” I suggested.

“I have a feeling the answers to all your questions will be found there.”

CHAPTER 99

I drove down the private gravel road, off the Great Ocean Road, and stopped at the gated entrance, which was secured by padlock. I stepped out of the car and took out a set of keys, one of which was labeled “front gate.” I inserted this key into the padlock and slowly turned it. It unlocked with a satisfying clink.

I got back into my car and drove up the steep private road that led to the pristine, white residence—the same white house I used to draw as a child and always admired whenever I drove past it—ensconced on the wooded cliff overlooking the sea. I had been completely unaware of its significance in my family’s life, other than I liked it because it reminded me of the house I once drew.

My heart started beating faster as I came to a stop outside the front door. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I sensed an auspicious event was about to unfold. The house was unoccupied, and all the curtains were drawn

shut. I got out of the car and approached the front door, where I saw a nameplate with bright, colorful butterfly imprints at both ends. The name read “Renaissance,” exactly as I had written it as a child. Now I understood why my father was astonished when I had bestowed this name on all the houses I drew.

I pulled out another key labeled “front door” and a remote labeled “alarm.” I pressed the remote to disable the alarm and then inserted the key in the front door. I opened the door and entered the foyer, where a cool patch of air washed over me, causing my body to shiver.

As I moved slowly through the house, I heard my mother’s voice emanating from one of the rooms. I followed the sound to what appeared to be the main bedroom. When I entered it, I glanced at my reflection in a full-length vanity mirror and saw I was wearing my mother’s distinctive full-length white dress rather than my own clothes. It was the same vanity mirror I had recalled in her memory.

Suddenly, her ghostly apparition separated from my being and exited the bedroom. I followed her, going from room to room—much as I did as a child—and felt rejuvenated. I felt cleansed of all my troubles. Perhaps my mother experienced the same emotions whenever she stayed at this house. Perhaps this was why I loved to draw this house as a child whenever I was anxious or unhappy.

I followed her to a set of stairs leading down from the house and to the wooded cliff, which was at a forty-five-degree angle. I ventured directly beneath the house, where

seven cylindrical columns supported the structure against the steep cliff. I continued following her apparition until she led me toward the front of the house, which overlooked the ocean. Her apparition suddenly vanished, and I sensed she wanted me to admire the ocean waves, as she used to. Serenity washed over me as I looked toward the ocean's horizon.

Suddenly, profound grief overwhelmed me. A huge weight in my heart pulled me down, causing my legs to tremble beneath me. The weight grew larger and heavier until it enveloped my whole body. The intensity of my grief soon became unbearable, and it felled me to the ground. I knew then that my mother was not buried at the cemetery. Renaissance was her final resting place.

In front of me, facing the ocean, I saw a modest headstone. This marked her place of burial. My father must have wanted to fulfill her wishes to be near the ocean. I knelt next to her headstone and touched it. She was here. Her spirit resided here. But it also resided within me, and now it was time to say good-bye to her for the last time and set her free.

I rested my head against her headstone and ushered her out of me. I sensed her spirit leaving my body and began sobbing uncontrollably, knowing I would never be the same person afterward. I would no longer have her to comfort and guide me as she once did. I was now on my own. It felt bittersweet knowing we would never be together again. With each tear I shed, I felt her slipping away from me. I cried until exhaustion took hold of me

and no more tears were left within. I cried until I was fully free of Anastasya.

Afterward, I remained motionless on the ground in a fetal position for the longest time, listening to my beating heart as I said farewell to my mother. With her spirit no longer within me, my body was unburdened. I was no longer weighed down by my fears and doubts or even my hopes and desires. I was at last living in the present and enjoying it without any anxiety about my future or resentment about my past. I felt transcended.

As I slowly got to my feet, I knew I had undergone a profound experience and needed to share it with someone who knew the significance of Renascence. I took out my phone and called Gabriel.

“Hi, Gabriel,” I said excitedly. “It’s me.”

“Hi, Stasya.”

“Do you remember Renascence?”

He was silent on the other end before he finally replied.

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m here now. Can you meet me later this afternoon?”

“Of course.”

“See you then.”

I went back inside and explored the large sunroom at the front of the house, facing the ocean. Not only did the room have an expansive bay window with a 180-degree view but the ceiling and floor were partially made of glass, giving the impression the room was floating above the steep cliff. The room was perched high above the trees and had a spectacular and unobstructed view of the ocean.

ETERNALLY HAUNTED

I stared hypnotically at the ocean waves, which almost put me into a trance, when my ring finger suddenly twitched. I looked down at my mother's eternity ring.

I slowly pulled off the ring, which caused my eyes to tear up. I knew this was a momentous occasion—one of the most pivotal moments of my life. It was the first time I had ever parted with this ring since my father had bestowed it on me on my fifth birthday. Yet I no longer felt tied to it. I no longer needed it, and taking it off was liberating. All my life, I had never felt in control of my own fate, yet I now made a conscious decision to surrender to my fate. I was truly empowered.

CHAPTER 100

Gabriel entered Renascence, silently eyeing every part of the house as though he were seeing it for the first time, even though he had been here many times, long before I was born.

I was delighted. “Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” he said with wonder.

“She’s buried here.”

He looked confused. “She isn’t buried at your family mausoleum?”

“No. She wanted to be buried here overlooking the sea. She wanted to be buried at Renascence, her favorite place in the world.”

I took his hand, opened his palm upward, and dropped my mother’s eternity ring in it.

“This ring brought me closer to my mother, but it’s also been a burden around my neck. Time to let it go.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep it?”

“Yes. It has served its purpose. It has reunited you two. That’s why I want you to have this, too.”

I handed him the keys to Renascence.

“No, it belongs to you,” he said. “It belongs to your family.”

“You’re the only family I have left. Besides, I need to let it go so I can start living my own life.”

“Have you finally let go of her?”

“She let go of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought she had been leading me here toward Renascence itself, but she was actually leading me to *my* renascence all this time. Her love pact was with me – not you or my father.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Ever since I was a child, I thought I needed to connect with someone, some place, something to make me feel complete. But what I really needed to do was connect with myself. And I couldn’t do that until I had finally accepted and forgiven myself. She didn’t want to leave me—she couldn’t leave me—until I finally understood this. She couldn’t be there for me in life, but she wanted to be there for me in spirit. And now she’s free.”

“Will you live in your father’s house?”

“No, it belongs to Yvonne now. I know she’ll take good care it.”

“What will you do? Where will you go?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to discover who I am. All my life, I’ve been someone’s child, someone’s lover,

someone's wife, but I've never been me. I've never known me. I didn't even want to know myself because I never liked myself."

"And now?"

"Now, I'm slowly beginning to like that person."

"I hope you find what you're looking for."

* * *

Gabriel remained behind at Renascence to be haunted by the ghost of Anastasya, biding his time until they could be reunited in the next life. I walked out of Renascence and took my first tentative steps into the world as my newborn self. I admired the same ocean view Anastasya used to admire and no longer felt haunted. Just then, I saw a white butterfly fluttering past me, and I couldn't help but smile. I had regained my desire to live, and I had finally learned to appreciate the beauty of life.

Now liberated from my guilt and sadness, I noticed that the world looked different. It even smelled and felt different. My senses had been unblocked, and I perceived the world in a brand-new way. I connected to everything around me. No longer burdened by the weight of my demons, I felt as though my soul were fluttering through the air.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luigi Santo was born in Melbourne, Australia.
This is his first published novel.