

ABDULLAH ABU SNAINEH

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GRAY
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This book was electronically published in November 2022

to those who have been shelved

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Chapter 1

I wanted the clock to stop, not because I had a presentation to prepare, but because I wanted to be in that moment for a long time. Claire, my wife, and I were sitting on a sofa watching something I can't remember on TV before she asked,

"Do you want to hear what I've been working on?"

Claire is a violin player. And she used to play to me first whenever she came up with a new piece or was practicing one. I didn't open my mouth. Nevertheless, she was gone and back in a flash, with a violin in her hands. I put the TV on mute.

Whenever she was working on something new, and even if she knew it wasn't perfect yet, she always wanted me to be the first to listen to it, though I never gave professional feedback. Even if she played the theme of Sesame Street I would still be mesmerized by her music. Or by her. I'm not sure.

She didn't play for long as she abruptly stopped and put the violin between us on the sofa and said, "My Mom called."

It wasn't uncommon for her mother to call, but when Claire didn't add anything, I realized she was reminding me that my mother-in-law didn't visit us in our new house.

We bought it two weeks earlier, with the fresh smell of paint still on the walls. It's not huge, but it's an improvement to the apartment we used to live in, especially since the new house has a nice small patio, which a back door led to. There were two dwarf apple trees in pots already placed on the eastern side. Claire insisted I didn't move them. She said she loved how the light from the rising sun filtered through the leaves of the two trees. There weren't any trees on the other side of the patio, but she also said that she was thinking of growing some plants there. A small part of the patio was covered with a shade sail, and we placed a small table underneath it. The shade sail protected us from vertical sunlight, but it didn't when the sun wasn't in the middle of the sky. We didn't mind that as the sun wasn't particularly hot during mornings and evenings.

"We should invite her to come tomorrow," I said.

Claire smiled that I got the hint. She asked, "But don't you have a presentation to prepare for?"

"I'm almost done preparing it."

"Yeah? The company's looking for new prospects?"

"Everyone is."

She put the violin on the table, and moved a bit closer to me, one of her knees bent under her thigh. Smiling, she asked, "What are yours?"

"It's you. You're my prospect."

She got even closer, her bent knee touching my thigh. "Only me?" she asked, rather playfully.

"Yes," I confidently answered. However, it seemed that what I said wasn't what she wanted to hear. Her face changed. She looked at the violin on the table, and said while still looking at it,

"I wonder if other sounds could be heard in this house. Other voices."

This time I got her hint even quicker. Regardless, I didn't have a suitable reply. Claire wanted a baby. We wanted a baby, and we tried. Still, there was no success. Her face turned enthusiastic again and looked me in the eye, "I'll be teaching music to kids at Pasadena Conservatory of Music."

Claire is a professional violin player, but she'd always wanted to teach. I knew she could teach more advanced players, but she chose to teach kids, probably because she wanted to be near them. I felt a bit sad that she couldn't be near one of her own, but also happy for her getting another job she liked.

"That's lovely, Claire. We should invite your mother. We should celebrate."

"Well, that's not the only reason why I wanted to invite her."

I looked at her for a moment, but she kept silent.

"And because we got this house, right?"

"Well, I was thinking, if she, if it's okay she came to live with us."

It was my turn to keep silent. In my case, I didn't choose to be silent as much as it was a result of shock. My mother-in-law lived alone in her old home. And never hinted she wanted to move out. I thought that Claire was feeling lonely sometimes, especially when I was at work and she had no performances to play at. But with her new job, I thought that her feeling lonely wouldn't be a thing anymore. I suggested, "But she can come here anytime she wants. And with your new job, I'm not sure you'll find much time to be with her."

"It's not about me. It's about her. I mean sometimes I get worried about her."

I didn't know what to say. My mother-in-law is a cool person, but Claire's suggestion came as a surprise.

She put her hand on my thigh and said, "Go and have some rest. Sorry if I brought it up at the wrong time."

"It's okay, honey. I'll think about it."

Amanda, my mother-in-law, was home before I got there from work. (I work in marketing at a local furniture company.) She and Claire were on the patio, where the weather was nice, so we eventually decided to have lunch there.

To be honest, I haven't thought about inviting Claire's mother to permanently stay with us. I was anticipating some hints from Claire to open the topic. However, for some reason I must have missed, all they talked about was how to remove blood stains from clothes. That made me wonder whether I got married to a serial killer or not. I didn't interrupt their conversation, but I only spoke when Claire asked me,

"Babe, didn't you mention you might be the new head of the marketing department at your company?"

I didn't remember mentioning that. And if I did, I absolutely didn't wish that this topic would be brought up in front of her mother. I preferred to keep silent at that moment, but their anticipated looks made me think of a quick answer. "I'm happy where I am now," I said.

Amanda smiled and said, "It's nice when one knows where they want to be, and maybe more importantly, with whom."

I looked at Claire. And I thought that it was really nice knowing I wanted to be with her, maybe even needed to. Claire stood up and asked me to help her,

"I need you inside. To bring dinner." She briskly walked to the house, and at the door, she shot me a glance to make me hurry.

I excused myself and followed her.

"Aren't you going to do it?" Claire asked me.

I knew what she was talking about, but I played dumb as I said, "Do what?"

"You know what. Or didn't you think about it? Don't you want her to live here?"

As a matter of fact, I didn't think about it. I also wasn't completely sure I wanted Amanda to live with us. "She's your mother. You ask her." I said.

"You do it. I don't want her to think that you don't want that."

I stayed silent for several seconds. She said,

"You don't want her here?"

"She can visit whenever she wants. I mean she's in good health."

She seemed to think about what I had said. She nodded in agreement before saying, "You're right. But I'll ask her if she wants to sleep here someday."

"That's fine. Now, where's dinner? I'm hungry."

I didn't mind either answer Amanda would've given to our proposition for her sporadically sleeping at our house, so I just enjoyed my strip steak while trying to chew each bite. Nonetheless, I heard Amanda when she said,

"Thanks for the offer. But there's no place else I'd rather stay other than our home."

I loved the fact that Amanda referred to her house as "our home" and not "my home" even though her husband died more than fifteen years ago. I told her, "You're welcome here anytime."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. I really love being with you guys. I'll come visit. But I don't promise I'll sleep here. You two, hopefully, more soon, make memories here. A house without memories is not a home."

It was a quotidian event that Mr. Walters, a blind old man, waited for me every morning to help him cross the street. There were plenty of people who could've done that, but it became a habit to help him just before I went inside ComfoCo, the company I worked for.

I parked my Ford Taurus in the empty parking lot.

I went back to the street. I cleared my throat as I was approaching Mr. Walters. I grabbed his arm.

"Jake," he said, knowing it was me.

"Hope I'm not late."

He started sensing the way ahead of him with his white cane, slowly crossing the street. He asked, "Do you know what I was thinking about lately, Jake?"

"What?"

"Oedipus Rex. The King. Have you seen the play?"

"No."

"Neither did I." He laughed at his joke.

We reached the pavement on the other side of the road.

He added, "It's a good play. Painful. Anyway, I was thinking, I'm almost ninety. That's it for me. There's no more for me, you know. And only now I can look back at my life and say 'I had a good life,' but not 'I'm having a good life.'"

I didn't quite understand what he meant. And I didn't see where Oedipus fit in the short conversation. So I asked, "Why wouldn't I, or can't I, say 'I'm having a good life,'?"

"Because you never know what's coming."

For a moment I had the urge to keep the conversation going and tell him that bad things happening doesn't mean that life as a whole is bad. And bad things do happen. However, I didn't have the time for a longer conversation as I had to go to work. Besides, I wasn't sure that there was a point in changing the opinion of a ninety-year-old man.

"Thanks, son," he said and started sensing his way to his favorite coffee shop.

Chapter 2

I don't know if the coffee they serve at Mr. Walters' favorite coffee shop is excellent or not, but the coffee Paul, my friend and colleague, sometimes brought me was mediocre at best.

I was working in my small office when Paul knocked on the door.

"Good morning, Jake."

"Morning, Paul."

He stepped in and put the cup of hot coffee on the desk, just right beside some files I'd spent so many hours working on. He held some files with the other hand.

"Thank you," I said.

"Any time. So, I'm having some problems with the SteenTech files. I looked for you today. I don't know. If you want to take a look at them. That'd be great."

"Sure. No problem at all."

He put the files next to the cup of coffee. He said, "Thanks. And by the way, how's your new house?"

"Yeah. Actually, we're having a little barbecue party next Sunday. So make sure you have some space for some food then."

"I will. And thanks," said Paul before leaving the office.

Paul is a nice guy. He was my friend even before becoming my colleague. Tom also was a friend before being a colleague, or to be more precise, boss. He's a few years older than Paul and me.

We started the company about ten years ago. Paul and I were around twenty-five, with about three or four years' worth of experience. Tom, on the other hand, had financial support as his father decided to financially help us. And about a decade later, here we are. The company with the second most sales of furniture in Pasadena.

Tom entered the office and stood by my desk. "Hey, Jake. When will you finish the report I gave you?"

I grabbed the report from one of the drawers and gave it to him. "Here, Boss," I said.

"My man!" Tom said. He spun around and was about to leave. He then faced me again, "Oh. I almost forgot. A young journalist called. They want to do a story on you."

No journalist has ever done a story on me. I thought Tom got some things mixed up. I said, "Me? Why not you? You're the CEO!"

"But I'm not the hot guy. You work in marketing and you know that my ugly face doesn't sell. Are you okay with that?"

"With the fact that you have an ugly face?"

"Smartass."

"Yeah. I'm okay with it, I guess," I reluctantly said.

"Fine. See you."

After Tom left, I thought for a minute about what kind of story would be done on me. I mean I was a player in a team sport. Not even the captain. Anyway, that didn't stop me from sipping the brown hot drink Paul called coffee.

I was walking toward my car when Claire called me after work. Just before I got into the car I answered, "Hello!"

"You still at work?"

"Just left."

"Well, I had to go visit an old friend with Molly. And maybe do some shopping for some clothes after that."

"Have fun."

"I mean I didn't make lunch as I said I would. So if you could have something outside. Or grab something with you. Or if you're not that hungry I'll make something for dinner."

I looked around the parking lot and saw that it was empty, so I thought it was okay for some banter with my wife over the phone. I said, rather loudly, into the speaker, "You're saying this because Molly's with you. You want her to think you cook. Hey, Molly. Claire doesn't know how to cook."

"Ha. Ha. She believes you. Especially since she met me in a cooking class."

"Don't worry, honey. You two have fun. I'll be a little late today."

"Meeting?"

"Kind of. Bye, sweetie."

"Bye."

I was glad she didn't ask where I was going. I would've had to lie then. I got into my car and headed to my "meeting."

I was told that Dupont's was the best place to manufacture and sell violins. I thought it would be busy with music lovers looking for a new instrument. The truth was the opposite.

I entered the shop and saw no one there at first. I didn't even see the owner. Anyway, It was warm and nostalgic. The walls were beige and had brown guitars and violins and other instruments the names of which I'm not sure about. I cleared my

throat to let anyone who might have been there know that they were not alone.

"Who's this?" a sound came from another room.

I didn't notice there was a pocket door in one of the walls before hearing the question. It led into a smaller room.

There was an old man, maybe not actually as old as Mr. Walters, but looked older. He was trying to reach a guitar hung on the wall. It was too high for him. I approached the guitar and offered,

"May I?"

I took the guitar off the wall and gave it to the old man.

"Thank you, young man," he said.

"Anytime."

A moment of silence passed before I extended my hand to the old man. "Jake Gray," I introduced myself.

"Dupont," the man said while weakly shaking my hand.

"Of course, sir," I said, just realizing that the place was named after that man. I heard a lot about him but never saw his image.

"You are the one who wants a violin? Called my assistant days ago?"

"Yes. That's me. So I hope it is ready?"

Mr. Dupont looked at me in a manner that suggested he didn't understand me. He said, "My assistant tried to call you back, but she lost your card."

"Why?"

"She forgot where she put it, maybe." He looked around and said to himself, "Where did I put the strings?"

For a moment there, I believed that the man got oblivious of my presence. I said, "I meant why she wanted to call."

"Ah. You asked for a handmade violin. Made by me. But I don't make anything anymore." He showed me his shaky hand. The other was holding the guitar. He said, "Too old. But there are some good pieces here. Made by good designers."

His hands were shaky. And his handshake made me fear for his brittle fingers. But I wondered a bit about his holding a guitar and looking for strings. Was he going to repair it? I didn't try to hide my disappointment when I said, "Thank you. But I was hoping... she was hoping... that you made it. Actually, she doesn't know I'm here. She just mentioned your violins several times."

"Age has its own rules."

I stayed silent, and I believe that disappointment was obvious on my face.

He offered, "Son. I'll be glad to give you one. For free."

"Sir, money is not a problem. It's just that Claire keeps... it's okay. I appreciate the offer. I really do. But I was hoping that you could make one for her."

"Tell Karen I'm sorry."

"Claire!"

"Sorry. Look. Let me give you a violin. I'll even write something for her. What's her name? Claire what?"

Mr. Dupont went to a wall with several violins on it. They looked older than the ones hanging on the walls of the outer room.

"It's really okay. She has a lot of violins. Actually, she plays professionally."

My last sentence stopped his search. He looked at me. He asked, smiling, "Great! Have I ever heard of her? Claire...?"

"Gray. Claire Gray. She's my wife."

"I once taught a student named Claire. She was the most brilliant student then. She still plays. But her last name isn't Gray."

"She plays under her maiden name. Peterson."

"I know her! That's the Claire I'm talking about. She's a great musician."

"Thank you. She really is."

But when I said she was great, I didn't only mean her playing. But as a whole.

Mr. Dupont's face lit up. He got a little closer to me and said, "I might have enough energy for one last violin."

With his frail body, I wasn't sure he had enough energy to make violins. But what do I know about making violins? "Anything you ask!" I said.

"Just ask her to keep playing beautifully, as she always does," he said, grinning.

I didn't know how to repay his generosity. And I knew money didn't matter to him. Fortunately, that night Claire had a charity event, and I thought that inviting Mr. Dupont would be nice, even if I wasn't sure he would be capable of going. Nevertheless, I invited him.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he replied.

I thanked him and left.

When I arrived home, I saw Claire's Kia Picanto. I stayed in my car for two or three minutes before entering the house. I had to make something up in case she asked where I was. Eventually, I

thought that I would tell her I went to one of the showrooms we sell our furniture at.

As soon as I stepped into the house, my nose caught the delicious smell of food that was wafting from the kitchen.

Claire was making what seemed to be some kind of salad.

"Did you go shopping?" I started.

"Yes. I bought some clothes. I'm getting fat."

Claire sensually licked some food off the spatula before throwing it into the sink. She looked at me knowing I noticed that. "Do you want some?" she asked, not so innocently.

"I want all of it," I said, hugging her from behind. The smell of her hair and olive oil and spices filled my nose. I breathed the aroma in.

She turned to face me and stood on her toes. There was less than an inch between our faces. Then I hoped I was going to get more than a salad that night.

"Tonight we're playing at Alex Theatre," she whispered.

I moved away, holding her shoulders, "Oh!"

"Sorry. But it's for charity. For kids. The theater isn't far. I told you about it. And you said you were coming!"

"Do you want me to come with you? I'll change the preposition later tonight, hopefully."

It took her a few seconds before she replied, grinning, "But aren't you busy with that presentation?"

I stepped back a few steps and leaned on the wall, facing her. I said, "I haven't finished it yet. I'm not in a rush."

"I'll give you something to eat after the performance. Promise."

I looked at my watch. It was minutes after seven and the sun was about to set.

I had a quick shower.

Musicians have their dress codes at such events, and it was always black. I, as one of the audience, had more freedom when it came to what to wear. I usually chose to wear something that's business casual. What was special for such events was a family heirloom. It was a watch my father handed to me more than two decades ago.

I was out of the house when Claire pointed out to me that I forgot my wallet. She had it with her. We took my car.

I was there early. I took a seat in the middle of the house. I've never taken a seat on a balcony. I wouldn't have loved it if Claire had to look up to see me. I looked around at the faces in the audience and smiled when I saw Mr. Dupont there.

One of the things I find special about music is that it could be heard by hundreds at an event, yet it had a distinct impact on each individual.

I looked at the faces of some people in the audience while music was playing. I wondered if they thought the same as I did. Frankly, I doubt it since I wouldn't have been objective if someone asked me about the music that my wife played.

While she was playing, immersed in what she was doing, took a few glances at me. She smiled. I did too.

I believe if someone saw me at that moment, they would've thought that my smile was caused by the music. I tried to imagine the performance without Claire in it. It wouldn't have been the same to me. I think she could be replaced by another professional violin player and the performance still went smoothly. But what I was sure about is that no one would replace her in my life.

About thirty minutes after the end of the show, she was ready to leave. I approached her, but she was basking in the adulation of some fans who were congratulating her on her performance. I stopped for a minute. I didn't want to hurry her. She deserved all

the praise she got. She kept smiling and thanking them until no one was talking with her.

She turned to me and said, "Wow!"

"These were two amazing hours," I said while I was walking toward her.

"Were they?"

I nodded. I wanted to tell her that not only these two hours were amazing, but all the time I spent with her. But I didn't.

"I'm starving," I said.

"Yeah? Did I mention that this event is aimed at raising money for hungry kids?"

"You're making me feel guilty."

"That's the point, sweetheart," she said while patting my jaw. I believe she meant it on my cheek but only reached the jaw.

"That's admirable."

"We'll have something on the way home. My treat."

"Cool."

Just before we reached my car, I saw Dean Ryans, the CEO of the company that has the most sales of furniture in our city. He saw me too.

He approached us and said, "Jake Gray."

I extended my hand to shake his. His grip was firm.

I said, "Hello, Mr. Ryans."

He lifted his hand as to wave away a fly and said, "These formalities make me seem older than I truly am."

"Well, Dean, this is my wife. Claire. Claire, this is Mr. Dean Ryans."

"My pleasure, ma'am," he told her.

"The pleasure is mine. But the name's familiar. The CEO of..." my wife said as if remembering something.

"HomeGo," he replied.

"Our competition," I jokingly said.

"There's no competition. We're way ahead," he playfully said before turning to Claire and telling her, "By the way, ma'am, your performance was captivating."

He sounded sincere. To tell the truth, I would take Mr. Ryans for someone who's educated in music, in addition to a lot of things. He then turned to me and said in a friendly tone, "In business, I might have the better company, but here, you have the better company. You know what I mean?"

I smiled at his remark and thanked him. Claire thanked him as well.

"Don't thank me. Just stating facts. And it's a fact I wanted you to work with me, Jake. Still do," he said, believably enough.

"I'll take that as a compliment. But business is good."

"Well, it was nice seeing you, Jake. Ma'am, it was a pleasure. I have a dinner meeting. They must be waiting for me."

Mr. Ryans is a busy man. Nevertheless, one could see him at such events regularly. And despite the time he spends writing books, he also could be seen running some mornings in the empty streets of the city. Maybe I should've asked if he was considering taking part in a marathon. That wouldn't have surprised me at all. In truth, the way he made time for his business and writing and hobbies and running and social interactions, made me believe he would be able to distribute his energy well during a marathon course.

We could run together sometimes. I guess people with sedentary jobs tend to take up running if they ever decide to do sports. It makes them feel comfortable since they can go at their own pace. Personally, I don't run more than 10k. I mean I think I have the stamina to run farther than that, but not the technique.

He was walking away when he abruptly stopped and turned again toward me, "Why don't you join us? Albert is there."

"Albert Berg? Your chief marketing officer?"

"That's the one. He's retiring in two weeks. It's in his honor."

"Thanks for the invitation, but my wife has already invited me to dinner. Thank you."

"That's lovely. You *two* enjoy your night."

The way he said "you two" was peculiar. He emphasized the word "two" when I thought the emphasis should've been on "enjoy." Anyway, he wished us good luck and left in his Jaguar.

Only then did it hit me, only those who came early could park outside the theater and not in the parking lot below the ground. And Dean's car was outside.

Claire looked at me with a grin on her face. She said, "He likes you."

I shrugged, not knowing what to say on the matter.

She held my arm and suggested, "Would you walk with me a little bit?"

I could hear the pink noise of light traffic in the distance, but the street we were on was empty. It was suffused with a yellow light that looked like gold dust. Besides, the weather was breezy and nice. And maybe most importantly, Claire wasn't wearing high heels.

"Sure!" I said.

The best walks are the ones that don't aim to go anywhere. But they're taken with someone you like just for the sake of having great company.

We sometimes took nightly walks. We also used to see a film almost every weekend. She sometimes played the violin for me. Those were my best. Even better than the biggest orchestra there is.

But I knew that with less free time we wouldn't have been able to do all of those activities. At least not as frequently. A baby would've done that. There would be less free time for us. Our walks would get shorter. The films we saw would be paused several times. Our sleep would be interrupted. But I was willing to accept all of that for a baby with Claire. Because I don't believe it gets better than waking up with your baby's tiny hand on your cheek, and behind the baby, you're able to see the face of your beloved, probably still sleeping. And then you realize that waking up to such a scene is more beautiful than the most delightful dream you ever had.

Despite having seen hundreds of music sheets, I can't read them. But I know that notes are placed sporadically on the staff,

some are placed low and some high. Some notes have more space in between than others. I looked at the buildings on the sides of the street we were walking on. They quite resembled a music sheet. Some buildings were higher than others. Some were standing alone. Some were shoulder to shoulder with other buildings. Like Claire and I were. Or to be more precise, head to shoulder due to height difference. I loved to think we weren't walking down a street, but in a musical piece that we were composing as we walked.

There were several restaurants on the two sides of the road, but I didn't point that out to Claire. I just preferred walking with her to having food. But a minute later I saw an opportunity that would allow me to do both simultaneously. I saw a falafel stall on a curb. The shape of the man who was making falafel was only seen in glimpses through a veil of steam coming out of the stall.

Claire said as she saw the stall, "Here. Let's have some."

I agreed.

We went farther from the theater. My car was still parked there. I didn't care. I enjoyed looking at her when brisk air touched her clothes and turned them into ocean waves for a second. I was captivated by that image.

I jumped when my phone vibrated as it was unusual for me to have a call at that time. I had the phone in one hand, and in the other, I had a falafel sandwich. I didn't see a name on the screen. Nonetheless, I answered, "Hello!"

"Hello. I'm Lisa Sullivan. A writer from *Biznis Blaze Magazine*. Sorry to call at this time."

"It's okay. Tom told me about you."

"So I was calling to know if you have any free time soon."

"Sure. Is it okay if I call you when I have free time?"

"Looking forward to."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome."

"Thank you again for the opportunity."

"I'm honored. See you soon."

"Hopefully. Good night."

"You too."

I hung up. The voice belonged to what I assumed was a young lady. Professional and straight to the point.

Claire stopped eating and said, "You rarely take business calls when we're out. Especially at this hour."

She must have thought it was a business call because I mentioned Tom.

"But I didn't know it was a business call. Actually, it wasn't. Well, kind of. A journalist wants to write a story," I said.

"On you?"

"Yeah."

"You as in the company or you as in Jake Gray?"

"Linguists should figure this pronoun right."

I hoped for a laugh, maybe a chuckle, but neither came. She just kept looking at me, waiting for an answer. I said, "Me. But let's not talk about work."

I felt the falafel sandwich getting less warm.

"Yeah. But do you ever think about your job? I mean, you know, what if you were the leadman?" she asked.

"Sometimes I get curious."

"Curious? Unanswered curiosity could be dangerous."

"Yup. But I'm happy this way."

I looked at her, and she didn't seem satisfied with my reply. I said, "And happy I'm with you here and now, and every time."

She smiled for a second.

I looked around and noticed that we'd walked several miles. We were then closer to our house than to Alex Theatre. We decided to keep walking home.

Chapter 3

Claire gave me a ride the next morning. I was almost as early as usual. She dropped me off at the entrance and quickly left. She was still in her sleeping pajamas.

Tom stood at the door of my office and asked, "Did that journalist call?"

"She did. By the way, can you and Haley make it to the barbecue party on Sunday?"

"Sure. I'll tell her."

It seemed that not saying "good morning" was becoming a tradition at the company. Tom didn't say it. And Paul just rushed into my office seconds after Tom had left, and shouted, "You lucky bastard!"

"Good morning to you too."

"Quit acting innocent. That journalist. Wow. Did you see her? Man! Her legs. Lips. Her breasts. I saw them... I saw her the other day. Oh!"

Saying "good morning" wasn't the only thing Paul forgot that morning. Because it was obvious that he also forgot proper human conduct. He put his hands on his breasts and tried to

squeeze. His phone rang, waking him up from his fantasies. He answered,

"Yes. You awake?"

"..."

"I didn't."

"..."

"That's why you're my favorite woman."

"..."

"Sure. Bye."

Paul hung up. I was surprised by what I heard as I hadn't known Paul was in a relationship with a woman.

I said, "You didn't tell me you've got a woman. Praise her breasts, but not in the middle of my office, please."

"That was my mother."

I have to admit that it was awkward. But again, awkwardness is relative, and with Paul, it has to be super awkward to be considered mildly awkward.

He shrugged and continued objectifying the journalist, "I want to know the way to her heart. Pants. I don't care."

The last comment about finding the way to the journalist's heart reminded me of Mr. Walters.

"Oh. I have to show Mr. Walters the way," I said and quickly left my office.

Mr. Walters didn't seem irritated due to my being late. I apologized to him nonetheless. He didn't say anything about the matter, even though I thought he would ask about the reason I was late, but he didn't. He said like he was waiting for me to come to finally let the words out of his mouth,

"Sometimes when I cross a street I remember this joke."

"What is it?"

"There is a man. A very curious man. While he's walking down the street he sees a big commotion and people and police and an ambulance. He wants to know what happened. He is so curious, so he tries to make way for himself among the crowd. He can't. He hears someone saying that the hit must be fatal. He now knows there's a dead body on the ground. He gets more curious to see it. He finally shouts, 'He's my cousin.' Finally, he's able to see the body. It belongs to a dog."

When Mr. Walters was finished, I faked a laugh, making sure he was able to hear it.

I went back to work

Forgetting to help Mr. Walters cross the road wasn't the only thing I'd forgotten that day.

Tom was on the telephone when I went to his office to deliver a folder I'd been working on. Mrs. Harris, the chief marketing officer, was working on that folder before she got sick. She stopped coming to work. And we knew that one of the current marketing team will be promoted to fill her place. For the duration she was too sick to work, she entrusted me with most of her work, and I was doing well, and that made me think I could be promoted. Should be even. Tom pointed to the table, so I put the folder there. I almost turned to go back to my office when he gestured to me to wait. He covered the mouthpiece with his palm and asked me,

"Can that journalist come today?"

"Oh. I forgot to call her." That was the second thing I'd forgotten to do. I reached my pocket for my cell, but Tom said,

"It's okay. That's the editor on the phone."

"Well, okay. I have some time."

Tom resumed the call, and that was my cue to leave.

It felt weird when coworkers passed by my office and saw a journalist interviewing me. Sitting behind the desk without working was weird too.

Opposite of me was Lisa Sullivan, a freshly graduated journalist. She was interviewing me and writing notes in a small notepad. I thought journalists now use their phones to write notes or even record the whole thing. Maybe she did, but I guess using a notepad makes them look more professional. I believe an interviewee might think the interviewer is phubbing during an interview if the latter was using the phone to take notes. Therefore, I guess it's better to stick to the traditional way of taking notes and the occasional nodding after something that the interviewee says.

Her first relevant question was, "Did you find a job quickly after you graduated?"

"I did. But I guess that for us, my friends and I, it was more about creating a job. But of course, I had some experience before co-founding this company. I was hired just right after I graduated. So was Paul. He attended another university, though," I said.

"Let's focus on you. Has it ever—"

She was interrupted when Paul stepped into the office, holding two cups of coffee. He offered one to Lisa, but she politely refused it. Paul nodded and left without even looking at me.

Lisa continued, but with a different question, "Was starting a company hard for you?"

"There were times when we were hesitant. But fortunately, Tom's father helped a lot. We had courage. A plan. Support. And personally, my wife gave me all the support I needed to go on."

Lisa fidgeted in her chair. She asked what I assumed to be an unscripted question, "It's true that support is essential, but don't you feel that being married might slow you down from becoming, let's say, more?"

"What's there that's more than being with the one you love?" I rhetorically asked.

She thought for several seconds then said, "I don't know. I've never... I really don't."

Although there was going to be a barbecue party the following day, Paul and Tom insisted that we went out the night before. It made sense to me since we liked to go out together sometimes,

just us. But what didn't make sense was that Tom wanted to go to a casino. And that was the only time I went to one.

Paul had his reasons to go there, too. He claimed that a night at a casino was his-kind-of-night, unlike a convivial gathering like the one I invited them to.

The way Paul put it, he spent the night checking out the "scenery." As for me, I didn't gamble a single cent during our night there. On the other hand, Tom spent hours betting and losing in every single game he played. When it was about midnight, Tom said we should leave. I thought it was weird because it was he who first suggested the idea of going there. Besides, he seemed thrilled gambling. Anyway, he said that if he stayed longer he would lose much more money. Too much. He claimed that he had to leave in order to cut his losses. Paul didn't seem happy about leaving early. He asked Tom,

"Do you want to give up? Don't you want to try and win some money back?"

"The signs are clear. If I go on, I will just lose more money." Tom turned to me and asked for my opinion. "I just don't like it here," I said. Then we left the casino.

Chapter 4

The pillar of smoke coming out of the grill was going straight up. The high sporadic clouds were staying still in their places. Claire and I haven't invited a lot of people. Paul thought that I should've invited an extra person. I was attending the grill when he complained,

"I haven't seen Lisa here. You should've invited her."

"Why didn't you?"

"You know. We're not on the same page."

"And you want me to hook you up with her?"

"That'd be great."

"I don't think Lisa... What was her last name?"

"I forgot. Who cares!"

"Well, maybe she does. If you cared, really cared, about the woman, not just the way she looked, who knows!"

"Sounds like a lot of work."

I looked at Claire who was chatting with some of her friends. One of them was in the third trimester of her pregnancy, I supposed based on the size of her belly. Claire gently put her hand on her friend's belly, I guess waiting for the baby's kick. Apparently, it came as the women got delighted. The other

friends put their hands on the big belly too. I moved my eyes to Claire. I finally said to Paul, "But some things are worth the hard work. It could be rewarding."

Incidentally, Tom heard my last line, as he told me, "You know what could be rewarding? You doing this chicken faster. I'm starving, man."

"You're always hungry. Always eating but never getting fat."

Tom replied, pointing at Paul, "Just like him. Always checking on girls but never getting laid."

Tom and I laughed. Paul didn't. He said,

"Alright. I love women's bodies. It's not a problem."

"It is a sin. Lust," Tom decisively said, then he grabbed a piece of chicken off the grill, and it burnt his fingers. Yet, he still held to it and took a bite.

"And it seems your sin is gluttony," I jokingly told Tom.

Tom cough-laughed as he was chewing the bite he'd taken with an open mouth. Still, he managed to ask me, "And what's yours?"

I thought about his question, probably more seriously than the situation demanded.

"I know what your sin is," Tom said after a few seconds. "You make horrible barbecue."

Paul laughed. I did too, but I was still thinking about Tom's question.

I thought of doing it while all of us were around the table having food and drinks. After all, I decided to do it after everyone left. I would have probably done it if there was a special occasion then, like a birthday or an anniversary.

After Claire and I were done cleaning, I quickly got into the house and brought the case to the patio. She was sitting in a chair, her elbows on the wooden table. She was looking at the sun that was about to set. I could feel the sun's warmth on my face.

I took a chair next to her. "Hey," I said.

She looked at me without saying a word. The fading sun was behind her, making her shape visible only in silhouette for a few seconds. These seconds were enough to make me realize I was right not to do it in front of our friends. It was too special.

"I got something for my special one," I said. I put the violin case on the table, and she immediately noticed the word *Dupont's* on its side. I looked at her face searching for a reaction

that didn't come. I noticed there were loose strands on her face, so I reached over and tucked them behind her ear. She then sprang up from her chair and kissed me.

She put the violin case on the chair without even opening it and she sat on the table. I stood up to be able to keep on kissing her. I knew I'd have more than barbecue that day. But unlike the night we went to Alex Theatre, that day I was right.

Chapter 5

My back was hurting the following day, and I was still sleepy. Paul got into my office with two cups of coffee.

"She's not here," said Paul, disappointed.

I didn't have to ask about whom he was asking. "No," I said.

"Why isn't she here?"

"She didn't come."

He didn't say anything. He turned to leave before I stopped him.

"Hey, Paul, whose coffee is that?" I asked him, knowing what kind of coffee he made, but I needed a cup badly.

He looked at the cup in his left hand and gave it to me. "Don't be late for the meeting," he said.

"I won't."

I know I said I was happy where I was in my job, but at that moment I was expecting to be promoted, and perhaps wished for it to happen. After all, I believe I deserved it.

I sat on a chair that wasn't so close to the speaker in the meeting room. I reminded myself to look surprised when the speaker declared my name as the new chief marketing officer.

Tom stood up and greeted us before saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have some news. Mostly good."

He paused for a moment to look at the relieved expression on the faces of the people present. He continued, "And an unfortunate thing. Anyway, our sales have risen significantly in the last quarter. And we're planning to market our brand extension soon. Hopefully."

Some of us applauded when hearing that, and the rest just smiled.

He added, "The unfortunate news is that Mrs. Harris can no longer still work due to health problems. Therefore, the board decided to elect a new CMO."

I was careful not to be obvious about it when I made sure that the hem of my shirt was tucked inside my pants.

Finally, Tom said, "Ladies and gentlemen, here's Paul."

For a moment I thought he said the name wrong. To be honest, I expected him to say my name. Frankly, I used to do some of Paul's work. I did most of the work that Mrs. Harris had to do but couldn't due to her illness. Maybe the board thought that Paul actually did all of his work by himself. Even in that case, he didn't do half of the work I did.

I may have been surprised if I wasn't promoted, but I was absolutely shocked when the one who got promoted was Paul. But I was conflicted about it. He didn't deserve it but he was my friend. So I just went to him and congratulated him on his "hard work."

Chapter 6

I almost didn't do any real work during the rest of the day, because it seemed that if I did, someone else would get the credit. I even left so early.

When I was in my car after work I thought about Lisa hearing that Paul got promoted. Maybe then she might think I wasn't that special and perhaps stop writing the story on me.

My phone rang. It was her. The call reminded me that we had an appointment at my office later that day. It rang for a while before I decided to accept the call,

"Hello!"

"Hey. Sorry to bother you."

"It's okay."

"I went to your office, but you weren't there."

"I had to leave early."

"Fine. It's just that I went there. You told me to."

It was my mistake forgetting the appointment with Lisa. It was true that I was still feeling appalled by the decision not to promote me. Or rather, to promote someone who wasn't as deserving as I was. Yet, that didn't justify acting

unprofessionally with someone who was uninvolved. "That was my mistake. Are you free now?" I asked her.

I suggested we meet in a small diner downtown, and she accepted immediately. Fifteen minutes later we were there. There weren't many people there at the time. Most of them were old-timers.

She had pasta salad in front of her, while I had only coffee. She noticed that I didn't order anything else and said,

"You're not eating. Is that how you keep your body in shape?"

If the question was asked any other day, I would've probably answered differently. However, anything after that meeting was able to irritate me. I abruptly answered,

"Is this going to be in the story?"

"Sorry."

"I'm just, you know, you might be one of those who believe that following a certain lifestyle affects all aspects of life, including one's career," I said, not thinking thoroughly about it. I just didn't want the conversation to halt at her apologizing.

"Are you one of those?"

"I guess everything is connected in a way. Or, I don't know, symbolizing something else."

"And what does not having lunch now symbolize in relation to your career?"

The truth is that I wasn't hungry. Or to be more precise, I just didn't feel like eating anything. I took a sip of coffee and thought about the possibility that that story would be a step up for my career. I could've given a straight answer to her about why I wasn't eating. It would be boring. I thought of a response that could be used in a story. Some kind of metaphor. After all, I'm working in marketing, and at that diner, I was thinking about marketing myself. I said, rather pretentiously, to be honest, "Sometimes food gives us short-term joy. If you eat too much you'll enjoy the food for a short time, but then you have to struggle with bad shape and some diseases for years. And in business, some decisions are like food. They could be alluring, but in the long run, the results could render disastrous."

She wasn't holding her notepad, but she was paying attention to what I was saying. She asked, "What about the effect of your personal relationships on your career? I'm sorry if this is private. If it's too personal."

"You're doing your job. You ask the questions and I answer those I can. I suppose you'll interpret them professionally. But to try to answer your question, profession and personal life can coexist. But balance is needed."

"What if someone close wanted to make you choose either your profession or personal life?"

"Someone who wants that shouldn't be close to you. Close people support you with what you do."

As soon as I was finished with my answer my phone rang. It was Claire. I answered, "Hello, honey."

"Hey, I wanted to tell you that I finish lessons early today. And Mr. Dupont passed away."

I was saddened by the news, even though I saw the man only twice. Before I said anything I noticed that Lisa had taken a notepad from her purse and started writing something. I continued with my wife on the phone, "Oh. When?"

"I don't know. I was just told. Some of the teachers are going to the funeral service. Do you have time?"

"When?"

"Um. Are you in the company?"

"No. I'm with the journalist I told you about, Lisa."

"Mmm. Lisa?"

"Yeah."

"An hour? Is it enough or will you still be busy with her?"

Her last question sounded accusive.

"An hour. Perfect."

"Bye."

Claire hung up before I said goodbye.

"Sorry," I said to Lisa who was still scribbling in her notepad. She looked up and asked,

"I wasn't eavesdropping or anything, but do you have to be someplace?"

I looked at the plate of pasta salad in front of her, and it was almost untouched. "That was my wife. We have to be somewhere."

"Well, thanks for meeting me."

"Not at all. It's my fault forgetting we were supposed to meet at the company."

"Doesn't really matter. Your office. A diner. Jake Gray is still Jake Gray."

I grinned at what she said despite not knowing what she meant. I tried to figure out what she meant by "Jake Gray is still Jake Gray." The most reasonable conclusion I've reached was

that she wanted to boost my ego so the story would be better, or at least would seem about a really important figure.

Chapter 7

Claire and I got home from Dupont's funeral service each in their car.

I went straight to change my clothes and have a shower, as I went to the service straight from the diner. When I was done, Claire told me to come to dinner. She heated some spaghetti from earlier.

We were having dinner when she said, "The service was beautiful."

"It was quiet."

"Quiet. Like you today."

I kept silent, faking that I was trying to chew the food. She noticed that. She didn't say anything for a while before she asked,

"How did your interview go?"

"Fine."

I was avoiding her eyes, but I could notice her looking at me with my peripheral vision, not liking my taciturnity. We almost didn't talk at the service. Claire wanted to know more about what she called an interview,

"Is she good? Lisa."

I stopped eating at that moment, and I guess I looked irritated. "She's okay," I said.

"Are you?"

"It's something, you know, has got to do about my career."

"Career? You weren't used to using that word. Does it have to do with promotion? Anything new?"

"I didn't get it. Never mind. How's your job?"

She waited for a bit before answering. I guess she was trying to read my expression. I started eating again to give her the impression that everything was okay. I even smacked my lips after a big bite.

She finally said, "It's interesting. Different from playing. I mean both are interesting in different ways. But teaching makes me meet young talented people. And passionate teachers, too. By the way, I noticed something. I noticed that the furniture at the conservatory is from *your* company." She excitedly stressed "your."

I finished eating and wiped my mouth and stood up. I said, "It's not my company. I just work for it. And thanks for the dinner."

I went and washed my hands and I could see that Claire was still at the table, not eating.

Chapter 8

I had to get the pressure off, so I decided to go for a run. I haven't been running as I used to, but I was sure that muscle memory would enable me to go on a night run. I played a suggested playlist for running on Spotify and went straight for the road. The mistake I made was that I didn't warm up.

I went relatively fast at the beginning even though I intended to run at least for more than half an hour. I felt my heartbeat racing and my chest tightening. I slowed down to a conversational pace.

By the second mile, I started to feel more comfortable. Controlled breathing and steady heart rate.

I rarely think about a certain topic during my runs. Sometimes it's just jumbled thoughts that come and go. And mostly it is void. But then I had to think about what had happened before I went for a run. It was too important not to think about.

The music stopped, and right away I sensed the phone vibrating on my arm. It was a phone call. I thought of ignoring it, but I feared that it was Claire. And if I ignored her phone call I'd make things worse. I slowed to a brisk walk and looked at

who it was. It wasn't Claire. Nonetheless, I answered, gasping for air between every other word, "Hi, Lisa."

"Sorry if I interrupted you!"

"It's nothing. Actually, I could use a break."

"From what?"

"I'm out for a run. For the first time in a while."

"Yeah. Well, I guess it's good to be back doing something good."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, I was calling because I was checking your LinkedIn and it seems you haven't updated it recently. Even the picture looks a bit different."

"Different? You mean younger?"

"I didn't say that. So, I guess I won't be using much of the information there. I'm afraid it would be outdated."

In truth, I thought that such a matter could've been discussed face to face, but it gave me a hint that she likes to do her work immediately. Earlier that night I made a mistake with Claire, and I thought I should learn from Lisa to work immediately and not postpone it.

"Never mind. I'll update it soon."

"Okay. Because for a moment I thought you stopped at a certain point, business-wise, I mean."

I didn't have a quick reply to that comment. I decided to dodge it as I said, "Well, I don't want to cool off too much now. I don't want any cramps."

"Oh. Sorry. Have a nice run. Good night."

"Good night."

I hung up, but I was still thinking about her comment about my being satisfied with where I was. Days earlier it would've been an immediate yes. But things change.

I started running again, and I was in the fourth mile when it came to me that relationships could be like a long-distance race. Runners sometimes divide the race into splits. And if one of the splits went slower than planned, that doesn't necessarily mean the race as a whole should be bad. But in order to avoid a bad race despite having a slow split, the runner has to focus and work well on the other splits. And I had to do that in our relationship. I had to do better.

I felt the need to apologize to Claire for being blunt during dinner. I heard that the water was running in the kitchen when I got home.

She was doing the dishes when I stood at the kitchen door. She turned her head for a second and saw me there but kept doing the dishes anyway.

"I didn't mean to be rude earlier," I said.

"It's fine," she said, her back still to me. "If you don't want to talk about it with me, I'd understand."

"You know there's no other person I'd rather talk with but you."

"Doesn't seem so."

I was about to tell her that I was talking to her to make it up, but I knew that that would make things worse. I just said, "I thought I was getting a promotion. Someone else got it. Someone who doesn't know half of what I know. And it feels like a punishment to be led by someone inferior to you, knowledge-wise."

Then she stopped cleaning the dishes and spun around to face me. Some water drops were falling from her apron to the kitchen floor. She asked, "Do you want more? A more important job? A bigger paycheck?"

"Not really. But it's not fair not to be chosen. I mean I am the most deserving if we compare qualities."

She laughed for a second before she said, "Qualities? I play Enescue, Kreisker, Heifetz, Perlman. I compose music. But a teenager lip-syncing to a song about piercing one's belly button on TikTok makes much more money than I ever did. Qualities?"

There was no arguing with that. What she said was a fact.

She smiled and said, "Forget it, Jake, it's an unfair town."

I smiled at the reference and was delighted she stopped being mad at me.

We had an early meeting for the marketing team the following day. I had to deliver a presentation that I had spent several days working on. Paul, our new chief marketing officer, had the first presentation. He pointed at some charts while talking,

"This, my colleagues, according to my estimates, will increase the revenues up to 30% in one fiscal year. Brand extension... Starting to make electric appliances in addition to furniture makes the company the cynosure of everyone who wants to furnish their home. Housing corporations will now go to one place. Us. Thank you."

In theory, what he said was true, but for another company. Nonetheless, most of the attendees, especially Tom, liked what he said. They even applauded when he was done. Then it was

my turn to deliver my presentation. However, with what Paul has just said, I had to modify it a little bit. I started,

"I have to disagree with what Paul said about this. Actually, I think it could do more harm than good to the company."

I looked at the faces of both Paul and Tom who weren't happy with what I'd just said. I continued, "Our slogan is 'Locally made for global comfort.' Customers hear of us and think of reliable, reasonably priced furniture. But if we introduced a new brand it would distract our customers. They're not familiar with our electric appliances, which I'm not sure where we're going to make them if we're going to, and I was at the company from the start, but I'm in the dark. I heard an employee saying they'll be made outside of the country and I wish I heard that wrong. Besides, marketing something unfamiliar would be a nightmare. I believe we should still focus on furniture. Otherwise, we'll threaten our reputation. We've spent years establishing a good name for ourselves in the furniture business. Going through that to make a name in electric appliances would take too much time and money. In conclusion, I see that brand extension is an uncalculated risk at the time being."

My presentation would've been very much similar even if I had been promoted, but I guess the tone wouldn't have been as austere as it was. After all, I was a professional whose interest was the best for the company he was working for. No one applauded after I was done. In truth, some of them only thanked me under their breath after I had returned to my seat.

Tom was behind his desk in his office. Paul and I were sitting opposite each other. A table between us. Paul looked unsettled while Tom was furious. Tom started, talking to me,

"I know what you're doing. You're doing this as a protest because it was not you who was promoted."

"I thought you knew me better, Tom," I said, calmly.

"Then what?"

"It is what it is. I am doing my job the best I can. The presentation was already made days before the promotion meeting. You know that."

Paul said, trying to ease the tension, "Maybe it wasn't the best idea to make individual presentations about the same issue. Maybe next time we'll always work together as a team on every single presentation."

We usually collaborated on our presentations, but some issues were debatable to the point that we couldn't have reached an agreement on them. The brand extension was one of them.

I continued, "I would never put the jobs of the employees at risk because of some personal ambition. It's not even ambition, I think it's just a bad judgment from your side."

"*Your* side? We're on different sides now?"

"You know what I mean."

The three of us kept silent for a minute. Paul didn't look to be encouraged to participate in the conversation more than he already did. Tom seemed to be thinking. He finally said,

"I guess I know what you mean. Do you want a raise?"

I almost laughed when I heard Tom saying that. But I was in the CEO's office discussing business. So I made sure I, at least, was talking business, "It's not that. It's what the company is trying to do."

"You mean going bigger? Don't worry. Production will handle it."

"If what I heard was right, about where you're producing the appliances, that's what worries me."

I noticed that I said "you're" when I was talking about the production of the new brand line. With each sentence, I felt I was alienating myself from the company.

"Take the rest of the week off, Jake. Paid," Tom said before he turned his attention to a stack of papers on the desk in front of him.

Claire and I were watching *Kill Bill: Volume 1* in the living room at home later that night. We've seen it several times together, and each time Claire used to flinch whenever the Bride kills someone. Nonetheless, Claire never moved the channel when it was on. That reminded me of the little conversation she had with her mother the other day about removing blood stains from clothes.

I said, "I have the rest of the week off."

"Yeah?" she said.

"Yes. I'm thinking of something to do."

"Don't do anything," she said, her eyes on the film. "Maybe visit some old friends that you don't see that often. Or just spend your days at home."

I thought about her two suggestions. And I considered holding a second barbecue party for the friends I haven't seen in

a while. I dropped the idea because Claire wasn't familiar with those friends, and that might have made her uncomfortable during the party. As for the second suggestion, I just never loved spending my days languidly. I only commented on her suggestion, "I'm not into being lazy."

"Then make dinner."

"Why? Don't you want to buy me falafel again?"

She looked at me and said, "Ha. Ha. Ha. By the way, you said you had the rest of the week off?"

I nodded my head yes.

"We, some musicians, got an invitation to play at the city hall in San Bernardino the day after tomorrow," she said.

"Could you go and come back in one day?"

"No. That's why I wasn't very fond of going. I might change my mind if you're willing to come."

I thought of what she said as a way to support her in what she did. I said, "Sure!"

She grinned for some seconds before the corners of her lips drooped. She said, "Great. I have to buy something to wear. I guess I'm gaining some weight."

I didn't think of what she said as the thought of watching people getting killed in the film while we were in the living

room crossed my mind. Then I thought of the film *Night of the Living Dead*. The title alone made me wonder about the possibility of how two seemingly paradoxical qualities could simultaneously exist within the same entity. I entertained the notion that an individual had all the qualities in them, but voluntarily showed only some of these qualities. Yet, a certain stimulus might cause some undesirable qualities to surface.

Chapter 9

I occupied a seat in the same area I always did in every theater I went to. I felt that that made it easier for Claire to take an occasional glance at me while she was playing. However, that night at San Bernardino City Hall was the first time I left before the end of the performance.

Lisa called once, but I didn't answer. I believe that Claire saw that I was checking my phone. Two minutes later Lisa called again, and I wanted to send her a message telling her I'm in the middle of a musical performance. Anyway, when she called the third time I went out to accept the call.

I was right. Claire did see me checking my phone, as we were in a restaurant later that night she asked, "Who was that?"

"Who?"

"The one you left to answer their phone call."

"How can you play and pay attention to me at the same time?"

"Is it work? I thought you had the rest of the week off."

"It's nothing," I said, starting to feel irritated by her constant questions. I was thinking of a new topic to change the subject when she said,

"I'm just saying you never left a performance before."

"It was urgent. I forgot to tell her I wasn't going to work." As soon as I said that I knew she wouldn't stop asking questions. Nonetheless, I thought she would ask about the fact that Lisa called more than once at a late time at night, hours after the end of a working day. She didn't ask that question, but she asked another,

"Her?"

"Lisa." I guess I should've said "the journalist" to make it sound more professional.

"Yeah. Lisa."

"Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just that this is the first time you left during the show."

"It's nothing, honey. Besides, I've seen this exact performance many times. Live and on video."

She stopped moving the food around her plate and sat upright in her chair at that moment. She said, "So, you get bored of the show because you've seen it many times?"

I heaved a sigh at her question, and it was obvious that I'd had enough of that conversation. I looked around at the faces of some of the people in the restaurant so that Claire would notice that we weren't alone and stop talking about the topic. She didn't.

"I'm just saying. You see me every day. Does that make you get bored of me?"

I knew she wouldn't stop so I decided to tell her what I was thinking about, "This story might be good for my career. You see, with the promotion thing and... Actually, Tom gave me this week off. I didn't ask for it. And I feel I lost my footing in the company."

Claire leaned forward to the table, not blinking her eyes.

I added, "More like the ground is shaking underneath me, you know. I was always a part of a team. But now I feel like a runner in a relay race where I'm the fastest runner and all of my teammates are so slow, too slow. That eventually we won't win anything."

"And this story is going to be good for you?"

"I hope so. I've always marketed products. Maybe it's time to market myself."

"To who? You said you were happy this way!"

"I am. But sometimes I wonder."

"About what?"

I had no clear answer for that, so I just shrugged. She nodded once and started eating, for real this time.

We were silently walking toward our hotel room when we saw Dean Ryans and two other gentlemen with him just a few steps away from the room. Mr. Ryans instigated the conversation,

"Jake! Claire! What a coincidence!"

I liked the familiarity he talked with us. I also liked the fact that he remembered Claire's name. We exchanged salutations with him and the other two gentlemen whom Dean turned to and told that he'll meet them later. After they left Dean turned to me and said,

"Maybe it's not a coincidence. Maybe our paths are destined to cross."

I knew why he was there. He was there because his company signed a contract to furnish not only the hotel we were staying at but the whole chain across the country. And he liked to see things on the ground, not only on paper.

"I believe everything happens for a reason," I said.

Claire excused herself. She told me before she went to our room, "Honey, I forgot my purse in the car. Could you bring it when you come?"

"Sure, sweetie."

She turned to Dean and said, "Always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is mine," he said with a smile. Then his smile vanished and turned to me, and asked, "Do you want to have a cup of coffee?"

"Sure. When?"

"Now?"

I looked back at the closed door of our room and thought that Claire needed some rest after her exhausting day.

I walked with Dean to the hotel foyer.

I wasn't sure that having coffee so late at night was a good idea. Nevertheless, I wouldn't have refused an invitation from Dean Ryans.

Dean motioned for me to sit down at a table with two chairs. There were some people within earshot so we had to talk quietly. The people did the same as I couldn't hear what they were saying. The argument Claire and I had had earlier that night crossed my mind, and I wondered if people could hear us or not.

Dean wasn't beating about the bush as he said, "I heard the company you work for is trying to expand. Introducing a new brand."

His tone didn't sound as if what he said was a question. He also said "the company you work for" instead of "your company" and I wasn't sure if he meant it that way or not. But to be honest, I think that it was calculated to make me feel distant from the company.

"It's not a secret," I said.

"It's not. I heard it's estimated that the company will make some notable profits."

"People invest money expecting profits."

"You believe that money breeds money?"

I took a sip from my coffee, then said, "I believe you know the answer. Frankly, I read all of your books, and I know you believe so if the money was managed well."

He gave me a genuine smile before he said, "My books may educate minds, but not hearts. And I'm not sure what education is worth if it doesn't teach hearts how to be compassionate. But I encourage reading. My granddaughter loves it when I read to her. She loves the *Harry Potter* books. I believe you know them?"

"I've only seen the films though."

"Good enough. And I trust you might agree with me that there's something about Harry. What I'm saying is that he was a child when he survived the evil attack of Voldemort. It wasn't his skill that made him survive. He didn't do anything. And all of a sudden he's looked at as this great wizard, or a great wizard to be, even when he was just a kid. Hermione on the other hand had no magic blood in her. Still, she became one hell of a wizard. I truly find the magic of the muggles so appealing."

I knew he wasn't discussing the books or the films, but I wanted to say something that wasn't so formal. "Did you say that to your granddaughter?" I asked.

He laughed, and in the middle of his laugh, he noticed that the people in the foyer might hear him so he tried to keep it quiet.

Just right then I wondered how a busy man like him could find time to read to his granddaughter.

Every trace of his laughter was gone, and only a smile was left on his face. He stood up and excused himself, "It was a nice chance. See you soon."

I followed him with my eyes until he went up the stairs. He didn't use the elevator.

After a few minutes, I went up to our room via the elevator. Claire was sleeping. And only then did I notice that I forgot to bring her purse from the car.

Chapter 10

I've always believed in the proverb that says, "Nine people, ten ideas," but after the last couple of meetings held at the company, I still did believe in the proverb, but I added a few words to suit the newly-transformed company better: "Nine people, ten ideas, all of which sucked."

"The first shipment of electric appliances has arrived," Tom said before turning to Paul. "You and the team, get ready to market it. Do you have plans? Have you brainstormed anything?"

Paul was stunned by the question that he said nothing. He only looked at me and said, "Jake, do you have any idea of how to market our new products?"

"The ones you just imported?" I started, making sure they noticed I implied that I didn't agree with that decision. "I think I have. New products. New slogan. They're not made here, so we can't use 'Locally made for global comfort' anymore. The phrase that gives trust to our customers, we can't use it now."

Paul always trusted my opinions or at least considered them well. He knew I was being serious about what I said, so he thought about it for a while. He finally suggested, "What if we

drop the 'Locally made' part and leave it at 'Global comfort.'
What do you think?"

Paul might not be the smartest, but he's loyal and considerate to the company he works for and the colleagues he works with. He has always tried to do the best that he saw was better for the business.

Tom seemed to be considering Paul's suggestion for a second before he said, "The decisions are made here. That makes the products 'Locally made,' technically. We won't put the country of origin sticker on the products. I say let's stick with our original slogan."

In the end, it was his father's corporation in the eyes of several employees, so they just accepted what he said at face value.

I stopped doing extra work at the company and started to leave as soon as I could. And all of my interviews with Lisa happened outside the company after the day I wasn't the one who was appointed the new CMO.

We met at the same diner we'd met days earlier, but the second time she didn't order any food. She didn't have her notepad in front of her either. She started,

"My mother called this morning."

"You have a mother?"

She smiled at the question and playfully said, "Maybe you're not as smart as I thought you were."

I truly felt flattered by her comment. Though it was told as a joke, I felt she meant it when she said she thought I was smart. I said, "I'm sure she's a great woman."

Her eyes lit up. "She is," she said. "She's also a journalist. Freelancer. She's also an activist. She's in Africa now covering a horrible famine there. So, she called this morning and asked me if I had breakfast. I started naming the things I could've taken out of my fridge or cupboards, but she didn't say anything. I was like, 'Mom? Is everything okay?' And she just said no. That's why I'm not eating anything today. I'm trying to have a glimpse on how kids there live their life day in and day out."

I looked at the tables around us. There were some people eating, some already finished, but with some food left on their plates. I thought about how these leftovers would be thrown in the garbage after we left. Yet, some people in some places on

Earth couldn't even find crumbs to eat just enough to keep them alive.

There was a menu on the table in front of me. Sometimes it took me several minutes just to choose what to eat. On the other hand, those kids Lisa was talking about never had the chance to even choose what to eat.

I remembered the charity event at Alex Theatre and I thought that we could do more than that. We could truly give a helping hand. A hand that could lift them up from the gorge they're falling into. Not just a hand that shakes theirs before they drop.

I thought of how terrible the world could be. Or how terrible we could make it.

Would I have still wanted a baby if I was born on the other side of the world?

The other side of the world was very far from me to help at that moment, but the other side of the table wasn't. And there Lisa was, as fair as she looked, there was an air of sorrow about her. And I thought that that could be helped.

I said, "Not eating for a while could be good for you." It was a joke. Paul might misjudge a lot of things, but he didn't when he said Lisa was attractive. Not that I'd put it the way he

did. Frankly, I wouldn't put it to anyone in any other way, but surely I thought she was.

She made a grumpy face but she wasn't good at it as she laughed immediately.

I smiled too. And when I finally composed myself I said, "You and your mother seem close to each other."

"Yeah. It was just us, and Mona, my sister. My identical twin sister."

"You have a twin sister?"

"Had."

"Sorry!"

"She passed away when she was thirteen."

It must have been terrible for her. Losing a loved one is heartbreaking for anybody at any age. I found it strange that she kept talking about Mona, whose name made me ask,

"Whoever named you, is he or she into art?"

She chuckled before she sheepishly said, "I guess it was like, she went out first and they were like, here's Mona. Minutes later I came out and they were like, and now here's Lisa."

I smiled at what she said but tried to hide it, as I didn't want to look unsympathetic to her talking about her deceased twin sister. Anyway, she added,

"Once at school, there was a singing contest which I won."

"You're full of surprises!"

I had to say that. I didn't know much about her, but I wanted to say something uplifting.

"Good ones I hope," she replied.

"Sure are. You said you won the contest?"

"I did. But I didn't get the trophy."

"There was no trophy?"

"There was. But the thing is that I sang the winning song. Mona didn't even participate. But when the principal announced the winner it was Mona. The principal called her name over and over. I was shocked. So, a teacher pushed Mona to receive the award before I even processed the mix-up. Mona went up and received the award. Mona apologized to me later and said she tried to push back when the teacher tried to make her go on the stage. It wasn't her fault. I could've walked up and got the trophy, but I just froze there. For days I wished I had the strength to go on the stage even if my name wasn't called upon. But I deserved it. I should have got it."

I knew exactly how she felt. "We don't always get what we deserve," I said.

"But if we deserve something we should get it. Walk up the stairs to the center of the stage and be in the spotlight. I don't know if what I'm trying to say makes sense."

It made complete sense. I remembered how Claire told me to "forget it" because it was unfair we sometimes didn't get what we deserved. But I think we shouldn't forget it. We should earn and fight for what we deserve. Forgetfulness doesn't solve the issue of unfairness. Walking up the stairs to the center of the stage does.

"But you participated in other contests?" I asked.

"No," she said. "A week later she died. Drowned in a nearby lake. After that, singing, and even swimming, reminded me of her death. So..."

Her voice trailed off, and I averted my eyes in order to give her some time to calm herself down.

After a minute I said, "Have I told you about Oliver, my cat?"

She shook her head no. I believe she had a lump in her throat that kept her from saying the word. I decided to tell her the story of Oliver. It was the first time I ever told it to anybody,

"When I was a small kid I found a weak cat in the streets. It was snowing then. And he rubbed his wet head against my leg.

So I took him home and cleaned him and fed him. I thought I'd keep him until the weather gets warmer. Days later the sun shone brightly. The weather was warmer. But I didn't let Oliver go. That's what I named him. Instead, I made him a collar with his name on it and kept him for more than two years until he died. When he did, I took his collar and was about to throw it away. My father stopped me and asked why I would do something like that. I said because I didn't want to remember Oliver's death. That I didn't want any attachments to him. My father knew I loved Oliver so he just told me, 'Son, your mother died two days after you were born. Does that mean I should throw you away in order not to remember her death whenever I see you? When we remember someone or something we should be grateful for the happy moments we spent with them. When I see you, I don't remember her death. I remember her life. And the life she gave birth to. You. And how great you two are. When I die, whether I'll be in hell or heaven, I'll be furious if I knew you wanted to forget all about me!' Then he gave me his watch. I still wear it sometimes."

She just smiled and took her phone out of her purse. "I'm sorry. I didn't bring my notepad," she said.

I didn't know if she was going to use the story about the cat in her story or not. At that moment I just wanted to make her feel a little less sad. But in truth, I also found solace telling a story I never told anyone.

"Don't apologize for walking up the stairs to the center of the stage," I said. She stopped typing on her phone for a second so she could look at me and nod in gratitude.

Chapter 11

Tom was in his office behind the desk, the muscles in his jaw flexed. He held some reports and walked and sat on the other side of the table. Opposite to me. He put the reports on the table and said, "You were always one of the brightest employees here. Smart. Passionate. Team player. What happened to you? Are you settled with our current position? Don't you want to go bigger?"

I thought that settling down and being satisfied with a certain situation might suit some individuals. But Tom asked about a whole company, not a single person, so I didn't give an answer to that question. I commented on the second one, "Bigger doesn't mean making hasty decisions."

Tom pointed to the reports on the table and said, "Hasty? Our profits are through the roof now!"

Not through HomeGo's roof, I thought. I adjusted myself on the couch and said, trying to be conciliatory, "For now. I mean I wish it would last. I wish I'm mistaken about this but have I ever?"

Tom sighed with exasperation and said, "This is nonsense."

I wished he would have listened, or at least debated on the issue. What he did was disrespect my attempt to be reasonable. I started, "I'm afraid that this gluttony w—" Before I finished he had interrupted me, with a shock on his face, "Gluttony?"

"Unreasonable decisions."

"Unreasonable?' You're not listening to yourself, Jake. I've heard enough."

He held the reports before he stood up and went back behind his desk. I wanted to tell him that he was the one who wasn't listening except to what he wanted to hear. I wanted to do that as a friend more than as a colleague. He sat in his chair and swiveled back to reach a filing cabinet at the back of his office.

I left his office without saying anything.

There were three violin cases in the living room. Claire was cleaning the violins and I was watching TV. I looked at the cases but didn't see the one from Mr. Dupont and I thought that the reason would be that it didn't need cleaning.

She asked, "Do you want to come with me?"

"I don't think so. I don't feel like going out tonight."

Claire stopped cleaning the violins and looked at me and said, "You didn't even ask where."

"Charity event? I swear I'll give charity but I don't think I'll come."

"That's very generous of you," she started. "Anyway, I was picked to play at the Royal Opera House. The biggest event in my career so far."

"It's in London, right?"

"Yes."

"That's marvelous. I'm so happy for you."

"So, do you want to come with me?"

I thought about it for a minute. Not to say yes or no, because it was a yes immediately. But I thought of what clothes to bring. I even thought if I should wear my father's watch then or not. That reminded me of the story I had told Lisa earlier.

"Sure, honey," I said. "By the way, do you want to hear the story of Oliver, my cat?"

"Not now," she said while getting up from the couch. "I need to get some vinegar."

I got a puncture in one of the tires when I was driving to the company in the morning. It wasn't a big puncture so I thought I should keep driving to a nearby tire repair shop.

I was lucky to find one that was open so early. And when I got there I sent a photo to Paul telling him I might be late for the meeting the marketing team was having early that day. He texted me that he could drive me to the company, but I said it was okay.

The young man at the repair shop told me it would take about twenty minutes to repair the tire.

I looked around and saw a hot drinks booth and I thought I'd have a cup of tea just to pass time, even though it was a warm morning. I asked the old man who was behind it for a cup of tea. He gave me a paper cup of scorching water and a tea bag. I put the bag in the cup and dipped it several times before letting it free in the cup.

Then the young man from the repair shop called me. I felt the cup and it was too hot to drink, so I left it at the booth to cool down. The young man wanted to tell me that I should get my tires checked as soon as I had the time. I thanked him for the advice and went back to the booth to have my cup of tea. It turned out that the bag was put too long in the cup which caused the water to get so dark.

The tea was execrable.

When I reached the meeting room, Paul was in front preparing to talk. He turned to me and asked in a voice he made sure everyone in the room heard, "Are you okay? Did you fix the car?"

Everyone turned to me and asked if I was alright. I said I was. They didn't seem bothered by my being late. I nodded at Paul in appreciation for doing that as I was looking for a seat that wasn't close to the AC unit which was blowing cool air.

Paul said, "We've made some profits lately. After introducing the new brand, that is. However, though there aren't official paper reports on this, several employees at our showrooms said that people aren't interested in the electric appliances." He flapped the collar of his shirt against his neck and added, "The initial sales might be influenced by our good reputation as a furniture company. But now, I guess it might be different. What do you think?"

Be honest with the customers, I thought.

A colleague suggested, "Do marketing."

Wow. Genius. A member of the marketing team suggested that we marketed products to customers. How imaginative.

The rest of the attendees shook their heads in approval of the suggestion. At that moment I wished that the engine of my

Tauros broke down that morning, not only having had a puncture.

Paul looked at me and said, "We need our best marketers to address this situation. But before marketing, we would like a more experienced observation of how our customers react to our products. The next shipment is about to arrive and we have to act in a hurry."

I considered telling him he ought to listen to his best marketer next time and not jump into this suicidal endeavor. But it would've been to no avail. They wouldn't have listened. Paul might, but not the rest of them.

I might have lost faith in most of my colleagues, especially Tom, but I was still working for the company. And I had to make sure I worked the best I could under the circumstances for the paycheck. Moreover, I had some shares in the company, and it was in my personal interest that it made profits.

I phoned the manager of the showroom I was going to visit. It took me about half an hour to reach my destination. It was the biggest showroom we had in the city and never was out of the best three-selling showrooms.

I met Mr. Flores, the manager, in his office. He started, "The customers don't seem satisfied."

"Is the quality not satisfactory enough?"

"The new ones aren't."

"And that affects the sales of our original products?"

"Our customers used to come here bearing in mind what they're going to buy. Now they're window-shopping. They don't know what we're offering them."

"We lost our identity."

I spent more than an hour in the showroom trying to draw a pattern of customers' behavior toward our products. They spent more time checking our furniture, and only a few of them bought something. Nevertheless, almost no one looked genuinely interested in the electric appliances. Some salespeople attended to several customers trying to convince them to buy some of our products. Most of them failed. And if a high percentage of our old customers didn't like the products, it's most likely that the new ones would follow suit.

When I went back to the company, I headed straight to Paul's office. Unfortunately, Tom was there so I couldn't be honest

with Paul about the situation. If I said something, Tom and I would surely have gotten into an altercation.

I thought of something to say quickly. And with my hand still on the door jamb, I asked Paul, "When do you want it?"

"I'll talk to you later."

I nodded and left.

Ten minutes later, Paul entered my office and immediately asked, "What's wrong?"

"A lot."

He looked behind his back and said, "Does it need much work?"

"With the quality of the new products, we could sell them in a short span. But I don't think these buyers will recommend us to their family and friends."

"That'll jeopardize the sales of furniture."

He looked behind his back again and entered the office. He closed the door behind him. He said, "What do you suggest?"

"Tell him that this is a bad idea. We also could sell our shares to show him we're serious."

He rubbed his forehead with his fingers before he suggested, "Let's wait for the next shipment. It'll be here

tomorrow. We'll see if the quality is better. Something we could confidently market."

I wasn't sure how the quality of the appliances would drastically change just one shipment later. Regardless, I thought that a single day wouldn't make much difference. I told him, "Okay. But talk to him."

Claire was wearing one of my sweatpants and reading a magazine. She was beside me on the couch in the living room. I wasn't immersed in the show I was watching on TV, so I looked at the magazine she was reading and thought of asking her if she knew or read *Biznis Blaze Magazine*. I didn't. I guess I was afraid that she might say no. In actuality, *Biznis Blaze Magazine* wasn't popular. At times I got afraid that the situation at the company might affect Lisa's story. I prayed that everything would turn out well for the company.

God didn't listen. Or to be precise, He listened and did the opposite.

Paul usually texted me instead of calling. However, that night he called, "Hey, Jake. Change to News 6."

I put on the channel while I was holding the phone to my ear. I leaned forward to make sure that what I read was right.

The chyron at the bottom of the screen read, "ELECTRIC APPLIANCES SHIPMENT SUNK ON THE SHORES OF THE COUNTRY!"

I forgot I had Paul on the line. I just gaped at the images of the sinking ship in silence. Like the ship, I was also sunk, but not in the water, but in my thoughts about not only witnessing but also being a part of a corporate fiasco.

The main person behind this disaster was behind his desk, his hands clasped in front of him. Tom told me,

"Due to our losses we've decided to lay off some of the employees."

I had no idea how the board was able to reach a decision within hours. Anyway, I wasn't going easy on them. I told Tom, "With all the mistakes you've made, I'm not surprised."

"The mistakes we've made?"

"You as in Tom."

"Are you being serious now?"

I wasn't sure if Tom was that ignorant or if he was acting. I nodded, almost smirking.

"Maybe the biggest mistake I made was keeping you when you stood against our recent endeavors. And the sinking of the ship was just bad luck," he said.

"The accident was the cherry on the cake," I sardonically said.

"Cherry on..." He slapped his hands on his desk and stood up. He said, "This is absurd! You're getting on my nerves."

"What about the nerves of the shareholders? Telling them the company is going down won't be a happy surprise."

"Neither will this. You're fired."

There was a sunken ship the night earlier. But the bigger ship had been sinking for a while then. In a sense, and logically speaking, it was better for me to be off the ship. But I didn't think for a moment that our recrimination would end with firing me.

Tom added, "I have to do it. It's not personal."

"Maybe it should be. Because it was I, the only one, who advised you against this venture, but you didn't listen. And now you're firing me?"

In all truth, I wasn't angry at Tom the CEO, but I was sad because it came from Tom, who I supposed was a friend. He sat in his chair again and said,

"Your vision doesn't agree with the company's anymore."

"It doesn't because the company's going blind."

"If that's the case, we're doing you a favor in letting you out."

I was about to tell him that he couldn't fire me, but I didn't want to look desperate. Besides, he'd say that it was justifiable as I couldn't convince him to change his mind. And that maybe I wasn't able to convince the customers to buy our products. And I'd reply that we were the second best-selling in the furniture business, and so on and on. But he was right that he was doing me a favor by letting me out. It was a sinking ship, and I reminded him of that, "You're the captain of a sinking ship."

"And who are you to say this?"

"Who am I?"

"Yes? Maybe it's time you know your real place."

That moment was one of those that couldn't be labeled as "just business." There was no turning back then. He became my adversary, even if that cost me my shares in the company.

It was all personal to me.

It was still 11 in the morning and I had no job. I didn't think much about that as I did about what Tom did to me.

At the company's exit, I was surprised to see Lisa walking in since we didn't have an appointment.

"Hey," she started.

"You didn't tell me you were coming!"

"Well, I was going to meet some of your colleagues, and get some notes from them."

"You know what? I need to update my LinkedIn again."

"How's that?"

"I don't work here anymore."

She looked dumbfounded for a moment. But when she saw I was serious she didn't say anything.

"I don't work anywhere at the moment. I was just fired," I said, trying to be calm.

It was getting more awkward with every moment we stood there. I wanted to be far from the company. After seconds of silence, she said,

"Then I won't need those notes from your colleagues. Former colleagues. By the way, my mother came back. I told her about you, and she'd like to meet you."

She started walking slowly toward her car, and I liked that she changed the subject quickly so I didn't look too

uncomfortable in front of her. She continued, "Actually, she's at my house now. Would you like to come now?"

It was the first time she had invited me to her house. I believe it would be awkward if it was at a different time. But it was before noon, and her mother was there. It was just a friendly visit.

Lisa led the way, and I drove behind her. She drove slowly even though there wasn't much traffic at that hour.

After about fifteen minutes of driving, she parked in front of a small house in a quiet neighborhood and got out of her car. The house had a closed wooden door.

I got out of mine as well and walked toward her. She wanted to open the door but it was locked.

"She must have gone somewhere," Lisa said while checking her purse. Eventually, she got a key out and opened the door.

I was hesitant to get in after knowing her mother wasn't there. In truth, for a second I thought she had told me her mother was there only to convince me to go to her house. I thought of pretending to have an urgent phone call, but she would know it was a lie. And that would've been rude.

Lisa went in and welcomed me. She didn't close the door, and that relieved me a bit. She had her hair in a bun, but seconds after being inside she let it loose. Her hair fell and reached her hips. It was the first time I noticed she had long, silky hair. "What do you want to drink?" she offered.

I didn't want anything, but I told her that coffee would be fine.

She showed me a seat. I started to think I made a mistake by accepting the invitation. Minutes later she came back with a coffee and a laptop. She put the laptop on the table in front of us, and she sat on an armchair next to me.

"So," she started. "Tell me about what happened today."

I looked at the open laptop and thought for a minute before I spoke. Finally, I said, "Maybe if you write what I'm going to say now it would be harsh. You know. It would be a reaction."

"Okay, then. Let's just talk between us. It's not going to be in the article if you don't want to. I'd be glad to help. I mean last night I thought of you when I was having a shower—"

She stopped mid-sentence when she realized that what she was saying was awkward. She corrected herself, "Sorry. It's not like that. I mean I sang for the first time in years. I remembered wh... never mind."

She shook her head with embarrassment. And I didn't want to make the situation more awkward so I didn't comment on what she said, even though I felt it would be nice to care about something she loved doing. But the idea of talking about something she did while having a shower was uncomfortable, so I didn't talk about it. Instead, I said, "Actually, anyway I'd put it, it would be harsh. One of my best friends just fired me even though I'm right. I can't see why I shouldn't be harsh on him."

"So you can't separate your work life from your personal life?"

"I guess I can't. Can you?"

"Now, my life revolves around work. I don't have anything else to do or think about."

"Isn't there someone special in your life?"

"Never been."

"You'll find someone. You're smart and passionate."

I thought for a moment about saying "beautiful" but I didn't.

"He might be in front of me and I won't realize that. Perhaps it must be some sort of connection I don't know about. I guess it's not about looking for that someone. It could be about finding him without even looking. So I'm not actively looking, you know what I mean?"

"I do. But one thing I'm sure I should be looking for is a job."

She laughed and said, reassuringly, with her hand on my arm, "Don't worry. You'll find another job. And you don't need friends like that. It's hard, but you'll get over it."

I nodded while my eyes were on her hand. She noticed that so she removed it quickly. I was aware that I could get another job, probably a better one. I had a sip from my cup. The coffee was bitter, but it was tasty. I found it rather confusing that I was enjoying my coffee while discussing being fired from my job by one of the people whom I considered a close friend. I looked at Lisa and thought that I might have indeed lost a friend, but also gained another.

"Do you want something to eat?" she offered.

"You're eating again?" I teased.

She cocked her head to the back with laughter, so her hair became a little messy. She just ran her fingers through it and it became like it was just combed. We didn't say anything. We just looked at each other for a minute before I said, "Maybe at another time. And it was nice of you having me. But I need to look for another job now."

"Having you here today was a pleasure."

I nodded appreciatively and stood up.

"And will always be," she added.

Chapter 12

Sometimes wars are won as a result of the enemy's mistakes. And I had an enemy, and I intended to use his mistakes against him.

One could fit a tennis court in Dean Ryan's office. I thought that one of the reasons he looked fit is the long distance he had to walk from his desk to the door. That long walk was enough to keep him in shape.

You could also play ping pong on the table that was set in front of his desk. Unlike Tom's office where there were couches, in Dean's, there were three chairs on each side of the table. The desk was made of strong, hard African mahogany. The chairs were covered with light brown velvet.

Dean was sitting in one of them, across from me. He said with a smile on his face, "I knew you would come. Never had a doubt. Actually, I reserved something for you, waiting for this moment."

Dean unlocked the door to a big empty office that could fit a squash court, or maybe half a tennis court. But it was empty. He said, "This used to be Albert's office before he retired. And I know just the right person to replace him."

We stepped inside, and I almost heard my voice echo when I said, "Thank you. It's nice when you're appreciated."

"You're here by choice. The good choices you made brought you here. You're not here by chance. And Tom didn't know your worth. And now he's facing the aftermath of his decisions."

"Even though I warned him that what he's doing is wrong. And what do I get? Fired. Without prior notice."

I looked him square in the eyes because for the next part of my plan I needed him.

He looked at me, squinting, "You can tell a lot about a person by seeing what they do with influence. And what did you say Tom did despite that you were right? He fired you. And without notice?"

"He did. They did."

"Arbitrarily. That's what they did. They fired you arbitrarily. That should tell you a lot about what Tom really is."

It took me a lot of self-control not to show my smile. He added,

"Our company has the best lawyers!"

I gave him a single nod of understanding and then looked at the empty office thinking what color the curtains would be.

Claire wasn't home yet when I got there. I was browsing films to pick one when she stepped in.

"You're home early!" she said the moment she saw me, with a surprised look on her face. Especially after noticing I was already wearing a t-shirt and shorts. "Is everything fine?"

The question didn't seem like a question asked out of habit. She looked like she was concerned. After all, she was sitting next to me when we watched the news of the sinking ship.

"It's fine. I got fired."

"What?"

"That's what happened."

She put her purse on the table and sat beside me on the couch, with her hand on my shoulder. She tried to console me, "Don't worry. You'll find a better job. But how could they?"

I didn't reply immediately as I was reading the synopsis of a film on TV. After I read a couple of lines, I turned my head to her and said,

"I already did."

It took her a moment to let that sink in before she said, "Ryans."

I nodded.

She headed to the kitchen without saying anything. I believe she was tired from work and perhaps wanted to make something to eat or drink. She stayed there for a while, and while she was there, I logged into my LinkedIn and updated my account. Then I sent Lisa a text with a screenshot of the updated profile.

"OMG!" she texted back immediately.

Then typing...

"I am so happy for you! I knew you'd find a better job. But not so fast :)" she added.

"Thank you," I replied.

"Gotta edit what I've written ^_^" she texted back.

I smiled at her text the same moment Claire came back from the kitchen. She saw me smiling at my phone, but she didn't say anything.

Chapter 13

I knew that Tom would choose a way to cut his losses. And Dean and I offered him that way. We agreed to buy ComfoCo and save them from falling into debt. In addition, I wouldn't sue them for arbitrarily firing me if they accepted our offer to buy their company.

The sound that was heard the most in the meeting was the sound of pens writing on paper.

My eyes didn't meet Tom's during the meeting. But after all the contracts were agreed upon and signed we met at the door. Tom whispered in my ear,

"You're like a dog that bites the hand that feeds it."

"Maybe it's the man's fault not knowing the dog is fierce. It's his fault he got too close. It's his fault he didn't know his real place."

He looked at me for several seconds then left.

I didn't settle for less than what I deserved. But one thing I settled for was coffee brown as the color of the curtains of my new office. As a matter of fact, when Claire came to the office for the first time she suggested the color,

"Coffee brown would be perfect."

"I think it would look nice."

"By the way, my mother is visiting today at 5. But maybe just for a cup of coffee. Would you be able to be home by then?"

"No. I have so much work. I have to prove myself."

She didn't argue, but indeed I had so much work. And the first thing I had to do as the chief marketing officer was to assemble a team. I already had several good members, but I wanted more. I wanted colleagues who were trustworthy in the first place.

As I was about to call Paul, my phone rang. It was Claire. I looked at the screen for a moment before I swiped left. I wanted to call Paul from my phone to give him a sign that I needed him mostly as Jake, and not as the CMO. His phone rang for half a minute. He didn't answer. I was about to hit redial when Dean entered the office with a small case in his hand. I thought it was a pen with my name inscribed on it or something similar.

He put the case on my desk and said, "Consider this a signing bonus." He immediately left.

I didn't open the case until he was out of the office.

Obviously, he wouldn't have given me a pen for a bonus. It was the key to a BMW.

The surprise made me forget about calling Paul then. However, when I inhaled the smell of the new car, I remembered to call Paul. He didn't answer. Nonetheless, he sent me his location. It was a smooth drive there.

It was a small office on the ground floor of a four-story building. Paul was in front of the building.

"This is my new office. Event management business," he started.

There were some pieces of furniture in the office, but it didn't look ready to entirely run a business. There was a young woman typing on a computer.

"That's Mary. She's my partner. Business partner. Actually, she attended university with me," Paul said before turning to me with a smile on his face. I smiled back as I sensed she meant more to him.

"Welcome," she greeted me.

"Thank you." Then I turned again to Paul and asked, "When are you going to start?"

"When we're ready. It's something we love doing. And it's nice to make money out of something you like. But we shouldn't rush things."

I initially wanted to talk to Paul to offer him a job, but when I saw that he was happy with what he was doing, I thought that it was best to leave him be.

"That's a nice car," he commented, nodding to the street where I parked the car.

"Thank you. I wanted to talk to you earlier."

"Never mind. I guess what happened is better for the both of us."

"Yeah. Well, good luck with your new business."

"You too. Good luck."

As soon as I got in the car, I got a message from Lisa,

"My mother was disappointed when she knew you had visited us, and she didn't get to meet you. We're inviting you and Claire tomorrow. Would you be able to come?"

"Let me see her first."

At home, I told Claire about Lisa's invitation. She looked at me while checking some music sheets. She lifted them in front of me and shrugged. I got the idea. And if Claire couldn't go, or

didn't want to go, I thought it was better to give the invitation a rain check. I texted Lisa, "We're sorry, but we can't make it tomorrow. Say hi to your mother."

"No problem. Maybe another time. She says hi, too."

I looked at Claire who was immersed in her work. I went for a spin in the new car.

Chapter 14

I could never forget the moment I got that violin from Dupont's for Claire, and how happy she was, even though she didn't look so. I thought that it was time for another present. An expensive one.

I felt elated when I opened the case that Dean brought me. And I believed that Claire would feel the same way when she saw what was inside the case I bought her.

It was after ten when I got home. And the first thing I did was show her the new present. I guess she knew what was inside because she said, even before I opened it, "Jake, you didn't have to."

I opened the case revealing a four thousand dollar necklace. I said, "Don't worry. The business was never better."

In truth, I had to sell the Taurus to secure the cash. Moreover, that wasn't the only precious present I bought that day.

"I'm happy for you. I saw your office and it is nice. But, honey," she said, not having the facial expression I thought she would be having after seeing the present.

The case was still open. I wanted her to ask me to put it around her neck. Or at least touch it with the tips of her fingers. She didn't do either.

"But what?" I said. "Can't I get a present for my special one?"

Only then did she force a smile, for a second.

"With this new job—" I started before she interrupted,

"With this new job, I won't be able to see you anymore. I mean I miss you."

"But I'm here!"

"And that makes the feeling worse."

Before I said anything, my phone chimed. It was a text message from Lisa, asking me for a suitable time for the next interview. Actually, our interviews became more like casual meetings between friends, and not formal interviews. Anyway, I texted her back immediately for a suitable hour to meet the day after at my new office.

After I put my phone back into my pocket, I asked Claire, "What about your job? How's practicing for London?"

"I'm fine, Jake."

"Good. You deserve that."

She stayed silent for a while before she thanked me for the present, verbally, and not the way she did on the patio when I got her the violin.

"Good night," she said and went to the bedroom. I was still in my business clothes, and the necklace was still in my hands.

Lisa came on time. She sat in one of the four chairs I had around the table in my office. Her eyes were roaming the office when she said, "This is much different than the first time I met you. It is huge, Jake." She stopped for a moment and looked at the notepad that was in her hand and added, "Maybe I'll have to bring a bigger notepad now."

She looked far from where I was sitting. I thought I would go and sit on one of the other chairs but I delayed that. I said,

"Well, Lisa, I didn't get the chance to thank you. You reminded me that I have to fight for what I deserve. To walk to the center of the stage."

"It's nothing. I'm the one who should thank you for letting me do this story. It could be a stepping stone for me."

"Seriously, though. I'm really grateful. Actually, I got you something."

I opened the drawer and brought out a case. I stepped up and went to Lisa and opened it. The necklace I wanted to buy Claire was offered for sale for five grand, but two of them were for only eight. I got two.

Lisa gasped and put her hand on her mouth the moment I opened the case revealing the necklace.

"This is too much, Jake. I can't accept that."

"Don't be silly. You try it now."

I extended my hands over the table separating us, and she reluctantly took the necklace and put it around her neck. She was feeling it with her fingers when she shyly smiled. I was still holding the case open when the door opened and Claire stepped in, her heels clicking on the floor.

She was walking and talking while holding my wallet in her hand, "Honey, this is the tenth time you forgot your wallet." Only then did she notice that Lisa was there.

"That's Lisa," I told Claire, who looked startled by the necklace around Lisa's neck.

Claire glared at me. Her nostrils flared. Her eyes looked down for a split second at the box on the table before she turned to Lisa, "Pleasure. And what a nice necklace there. It looks special." She shot me a look, her eyes starting to well with tears.

None of the three of us said anything. Claire tossed the wallet on the table and rushed out of the office.

Lisa was there, silent, probably not knowing what had just happened or who that woman was. But I believe she figured it out the moment Claire stepped into the office. I headed to the door to see if Claire was visible. She wasn't. I knew she couldn't have been far away, but the only way to catch her was to run after her. But because I was afraid the employees would think there was something wrong, I didn't, unlike I'd done about seven years earlier. Like I'd done the night we met.

After the first six-digit sale at ComfoCo, we celebrated, not in the sense that we went out to a rave or something, but we organized a celebratory event. There was food and drinks of course, but what I thought would be suitable for the celebration was a small musical ensemble without a singer.

Tom was against that idea, but I convinced him that a classy event would be beneficial for our image in the eyes of the public, instead of having a reckless party.

We found some local musicians who were good but didn't charge much. Claire was the violin player in the ensemble.

At first, I only heard her playing and liked it. But some minutes later I got closer to where the musicians were and I was finally able to see her from close range.

Every stroke of her bow sounded euphonic. Not only that, but the way she moved while playing music made her look like she herself was music in motion. Her arm and wrist seemed to be an extension to the bow. And her face on the chin rest looked like someone leaning on a dear friend's shoulder. For a blessed second, she looked at me and smiled. That moment was the highlight of my night, the night that was a celebration of the biggest achievement of our company then. And even after several events we had when we made bigger sales, that moment was the most vivid.

I wanted to listen to her play the violin infinitely, but I also waited for her to finish playing so I could talk to her.

Then Paul snatched me to introduce me to some guys whom I wasn't interested in. Indeed, I wasn't interested in anyone but the violin player at that moment. He pulled me nearly to the other side of the hall, and from there I couldn't see her. After several minutes of lame jokes, the music stopped, and that made me think the musicians were about to leave.

I excused myself and returned to check on her, dodging waiters and waitresses and some people who wanted to strike up a conversation. Some of the musicians were still there but she wasn't. I asked one of them where she was, and he said she left less than a minute ago.

I darted my eyes around the hall before I noticed her just getting out of the door. I ran after her, apologizing to four or five people whom I hit on my way.

I ran thousands of miles in my life, but the short distance I ran after her that night counted the most.

Lisa put the necklace back into its case and left it on the table. She excused herself and left.

I looked at the table where my wallet and the necklace were. I got my wallet and put the necklace in one of the desk drawers before heading home.

On my way home, I called Claire several times, but she didn't answer. But when I got home her Picanto was haphazardly parked in front of the house. So I jumped from my car and rushed into the house.

What I noticed first was the pair of sneakers she put in a bag. She was also shoving some clothes into the bag, too. She also cleaned the makeup off her face. Or at least tried to. She also held two violin cases under her arm, the straps on her shoulders. I asked,

"Are you leaving?"

"Why should I stay?"

"Because you're my wife!"

"But I'm not your special one anymore."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I? Do you want me to write a *story about* it to make it clear to you?"

She was about to finish her messy packing, so I didn't have much time to explain.

"Nothing happened. I swear. Not with Lisa. Not with anyone else."

She zipped the bag closed and headed toward the door, not saying a word.

I stood in front of her, but she pushed me aside and went for the door. The heel of one of her shoes broke which caused her to trip and fall on her right side. All of her weight fell on her right wrist.

"Are you okay?" I shouted as I was checking her. I looked at her ankle, and it didn't look sprained. Unfortunately, her wrist looked injured as she wasn't able to move it well. Neither was she able to carry the bag with her right hand.

Groaning, she was able to finally stand up. I asked her again,

"Are you okay?"

"Just get away from me!"

I stepped aside, and she scurried out of the house, almost hopping on one foot. I remembered when Amanda told us to make memories in the new house. I bet she didn't mean this kind of memories.

My initial thought was to follow her with my car, but I thought if I did that, she would start driving recklessly, and with her weak physical condition, it might pose some dangers to her health. I then figured that she would go to either Molly or Amanda. But I was hesitant to call Amanda because that would make her worried sick. Anyway, I decided to call Molly an hour later. I didn't want to call immediately because I wanted to give Claire some time to breathe and calm herself down.

I was reluctant to text Claire and ask her to ask Lisa if anything happened, but it was stupid because even if there was something between Lisa and me, Lisa would deny it. Besides, I didn't want to involve Lisa in this.

In hindsight, I shouldn't have brought the same presents to both of them. But even though I did that, Claire's reaction was exaggerated. In a way, Claire seemed jealous whenever I talked about Lisa or when Lisa called me. But can I blame her?

I was on the patio when I called Claire. However, she didn't answer. Then I called Molly, "Hey, Molly."

"Hello."

"I wanted to ask if you saw Claire."

I wanted to explain the situation to her. In truth, I wasn't sure that Claire said anything to Molly about Lisa. Maybe she made something up to explain her falling. Over the phone, I heard some whispering, and I knew that Claire was there.

"Yes. She's here."

"Is she okay? She fell on her wrist and I'm afraid it's broken!"

Only then did I realize that if it was broken, she'd miss the event in London. The biggest in her life.

"We don't know. I'm taking her to a hospital."

"Which hospital?"

Whispering again.

"We're going now."

"I'll call in—" I didn't finish what I was saying as she hung up quickly. I'd thought of redialing before I put the phone in my pocket. And as I was heading inside, I noticed that the two apple trees were starting to wilt.

Chapter 15

I wanted to distract myself so I went back to the company.

Dean saw me at the door of my office, holding some folders in his hands. He quickly asked, "What's wrong?"

He didn't assume there was something wrong. He knew it. And I knew better not to beat around the bush.

"Never mind."

"No. I'll be in my office in five minutes. I'll be expecting you."

Five minutes later, I was in his office, a cup of coffee in my hand. He was sitting in his chair, leaning on his elbows. I told him what had happened earlier with Claire.

His facial expressions didn't change. He took a minute before speaking, "I'll tell you something. Not about you. Something about me. I lost my wife when she was only thirty-seven. I try to keep myself busy. But it doesn't work. Not a day passes without thinking about her. But the thing is that she's not here. There's nothing I can do about it. But some people can do something about it. And if you ask me, keeping oneself busy isn't the way."

His words were comforting in a way, but I still felt a weird sensation in my stomach. And my head felt heavy.

Chapter 16

On my way home, my head was still spinning, I called Claire, but she didn't answer.

I decided to have another cup of coffee when I got home. Not filtered, but brewed. I went to the kitchen to make a mug. I put the water on the stovetop and took my phone out and called Molly again, hoping that Claire was feeling better, "Hello. Sorry to bother you again. Where are you? How's her wrist?"

"Her wrist is okay. It will be fine in no time."

"Thank God!"

"But I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry about the baby!"

Chapter 17

I looked for the nearest chair as my knees weren't able to support my weight. Even after I sat down, I felt like I was sinking into the ground, and into despondency. Grief is more overwhelming when it's laced with guilt. The phone was still in my hand, and I checked the call log and the last call was there. I hoped that it was a hallucination. I would've been glad if I'd woken up to see that it was all a bad dream, including my new job at HomeGo.

But it was real.

Blinded with pride and arrogance, I only acted parochially lately, where my vision was distorted by my vanity. And our biggest mistakes are usually made when we're being arrogant. For a while, I believed I was the pivot of the universe.

Now I wonder how Mr. Walters is considered blind but I am not.

The water started boiling, and vapor reached the roof promptly, moving in every direction looking for an exit. The sound of the boiling water became louder. And the vapor started condensing on the roof, not finding an exit, like the torrent of

thoughts that were trapped in my mind. There was no escape. And no solution.

The next day I called Molly on my way to work, but she didn't answer. I pondered the idea of calling Amanda in order to know where Claire was. Amanda must have known what happened already. But I thought that if she hadn't called me, then she didn't want to talk to me.

I wasn't sure I could talk to either Amanda or Claire.

When I was close to the company I remembered Mr. Walters and how I used to help him cross the road. But now I need someone to guide me. Someone not necessarily with eyes, but with vision. Despite the fact that I helped Mr. Walters every working day, I never really felt what he was going through. I know he got used to it. But will I ever get used to being blinded by arrogance? Even if I was so for a brief period of time, the results are everlasting. It's like someone walking in the dark and they fall and break their leg. When the light comes, they're able to see again, but their leg is still broken. But when someone's blindness is that of the heart, the soul breaks. And one can't apply a cast on the soul.

Chapter 18

The floor felt like quicksand. I floundered to my office, and on the way, I tried to avoid looking anyone in the eye. I just couldn't. I couldn't even look in the mirror that morning. However, at the door, as if he was waiting for me, Dean saw me.

"Good morning," I started.

"Is it good?"

I kept silent. He asked,

"Is it better?"

I shook my head no. I didn't tell him about the baby. How could I? How could anybody talk about how they're the reason their offspring is dead? He nodded once and told me I could speak with him if I felt like it. I thanked him and went into the office.

There were three stacks of files on my desk, and I had to move them to clearly see Lisa, whom I told what happened between Claire and me but didn't tell her about Claire's miscarriage. Lisa wasn't looking directly at me when she started,

"I'm sorry about this. I never meant to..."

It wasn't fair that she blamed herself for what happened to my marriage. And I believe the unfairness added to her emotional damage. I wanted to tell her she didn't do anything, but I guess she would've apologized anyway. She continued, in a more formal tone,

"I have gathered so many interesting notes from you. I appreciate this opportunity you've given me."

"I didn't give it to you. You deserved it "

I said that not wanting to argue with her about how interviewing me wasn't a big deal. But maybe it was for her. At least as the first story for a newly-graduate writer. And if I said it wasn't a big deal, it might make her feel like she wasn't doing something of importance.

"I'm lucky to have known you. I wish that the people who would read the story would know how a great businessman... a great person you are."

It came to me that she said that as a way to sell her stories. I guess that no one would like to read a story about a despicable character. But in truth, I think she truly believed I was a good man.

"You look tired," she added. "Do you want to eat? We can go to my house."

"You're going to be a great journalist, Ms. Sullivan."

She nodded and adjusted the position of her purse beside her. I didn't say anything, but I moved the stacks of files on my desk. She got the hint that I needed some time to work. Or to be more accurate, I needed some time alone.

She stood up and said, not looking in my eyes, "Again, I'm sorry."

I was the one who had to apologize for involving her in this. I was about to but couldn't get the words out as I watched her leave the office. And I just stayed in my chair, feeling like there were clasps that held me to it.

I thought that progress in my career would imply a higher value of myself, which would make me happier. But It didn't. Nonetheless, I indulged myself in work as a distraction from everything.

I didn't try to call Claire. Regardless, Molly used to text me with updates and asked me not to reply to her texts. I believe that Claire wouldn't have liked the idea of Molly telling me what was happening with Claire if she knew about it.

At noon, I got a message from Molly saying that Claire was leaving for Ontario International Airport in less than an hour from Molly's house.

There was a meeting with the board in ten minutes. And if I had attended the meeting I wouldn't have been able to get to Molly's house in time.

I was about to get in my car when I saw Dean's Jaguar stop. He got his head out of the window and asked,

"What are you doing?"

I was filled with contrition which I wasn't sure there was anything that could totally fix. However, I said while getting into my car, "Trying to make amends."

Dean didn't say anything. He just parked his car and nodded at me with a smile when he got out.

Molly lived on the other side of the city. And I had to drive fast to get there before it was too late. The cars looked blurry as I drove past them. I concentrated on the road, and that didn't give me the clarity to think of something to say, that if Claire agreed to listen to me in the first place.

The tires of the car skidded for several yards before it stopped. I didn't see Claire's car in front of Molly's house, so I thought she had already left.

As I was in front of the door, I remembered when Dean said I was in his company by choice, not chance. I started breathing hurriedly when I realized that the series of my choices led me to be apart from Claire.

I finally knocked on the door, and I was afraid of both possibilities: that she didn't answer, and that if she did. The seconds I stood in front of the closed door seemed too long. My throat felt tight. I heard Claire's footsteps approaching. And while she was walking she shouted from behind the door, "It must be the driver!"

A part of me felt happy as she sounded thrilled shouting that. As if she was looking for a bright future. But there was also a part that felt sad for her because she would never be the same as she was before her miscarriage. For that, I thought that she might have been looking for a way to escape the past few weeks. I wondered if I had a place in her future.

She opened the door and got her travel bag out, her eyes weren't looking in my direction. But when she noticed it was I, and not the driver, she stopped. Her left hand was on the handle of her rolling travel bag. Her right hand was still on the doorknob.

"I'm sorry," I started. "For this. For the baby. And everything I've done lately. But I swear I didn't cheat on you."

She didn't say anything, and I saw that both Amanda and Molly came to the door. Both of them said hi to me, and Molly asked Claire how she was. Claire said everything was fine. Both Molly and Amanda went away, leaving us to speak, even though Claire didn't say much. I added, "There's nothing I could do that would make it up for you."

"No. It's been going on for a while. When I knew I was pregnant I didn't know how to tell you. You became different."

The realization that I didn't know my wife was pregnant until it was too late hurt even more. If I had known it would have been different. I begged, "But if you take me back, I promise you—"

And before I finished a taxi stopped in front of the door. Claire looked at it over my shoulder and headed to it. I held her from her right hand and then immediately released it as if I was electrocuted, realizing that I could hurt her wrist. She then stopped again and looked at me. She said, raising her right wrist in front of her face, "This doesn't hurt." Then she put her palm on her chest and added, "But it does here." Tears started to well up in her eyes.

Molly and Amanda came again to the door, and Molly spoke to the driver.

"Don't leave," I said, almost begging, noticing that some tears fell down her cheeks. I added, "Please!"

"I'm not your special one anymore," she replied while brushing off some hairs that were sticking to her face.

"But you are. You've always been!"

I noticed that Amanda went to where Molly and the driver were.

Claire stayed silent.

"Okay, go," I said, and her eyes widened.

I added, "If you wanna go, then go. But I'll come with you. I'll run after you if I have to. I did it once and I'll be glad to do it again. Because you're worth it."

"That's the problem, Jake. I don't want you to be running after me. I just wanted you to be beside me. Whenever I wanted to talk and you weren't there, it hurt. It hurts when your voice isn't heard. I've been feeling lonely lately with you even though I wasn't alone. But I was unable to communicate. Sometimes we're busy. I get that. And we can tolerate it. But not being perpetually busy. Busy being with someone else."

She grabbed her travel bag and headed to the taxi. The driver opened the trunk and put Claire's luggage there.

Seconds later the taxi was driving away.

Chapter 19

It was the night of Claire's performance in London. I wanted to call her since she went there, but I didn't want to distract her from preparing well for the event.

I'd received the latest edition of *Biznis Blaze Magazine* earlier that day, where the article on me was entitled "Gray, a young flare." I was in the living room. The TV was on. And the magazine was on the table in front of me.

It had been a while since I had worn my father's watch, as I used to wear it on some occasions, mostly at Claire's performances. And I haven't been going to those lately. I only imagined what the performance in London was like. I wondered if she looked at the area where I usually took a seat as she had always done. Look at me sitting there and smile. That was enough to make the event worthwhile.

I finally decided to read what Lisa had written. Maybe not because it was about me, but because she worked hard. And not reading it would be disrespectful to the effort she put in. She wrote,

"Jake Gray is an ordinary man. I believe that the people who say he started from scratch are wrong. During the weeks

I've come to know him, I've learned that he didn't start from scratch. No one does. Gray, a man of devotion, passion, and dedication, could never be just a scratch. And Gray had himself, which was enough to leave a mark. He knew that the biggest investment was investing in oneself."

I stopped reading for a minute. I also turned the TV off. I looked beside me to where Claire used to sit when we were seeing a film. I missed it. I even missed when she cleaned her violins in the living room, although it would smell of vinegar afterward.

I continued reading, "While most people relate success to careers, the discussions with Mr. Gray reminded me of something important. I was reminded that through good planning and hard work fortunes could be made. But for the things that are more precious than fortunes, they're found. And if lost, it's almost impossible to find again."

I put the magazine on the table and looked around the living room, which felt dead then. It was silent. The silence was deafening.

The end

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