

When Love Finds Home

By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to anyone who has ever felt invisible and everyone who has ever wondered if they mattered. I hope this book reminds you that you matter and your story is worth telling.

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PRELUDE

That day, under the blazing sun and the watchful gaze of a boy who seemed to see straight through me, something shifted. It was the beginning of a story I never saw coming.

This book is that story: a story about love, friendship, and the messy, beautiful chaos of growing up. It's about the moments that change everything: the first glance, the first laugh, the first heartbreak. It's about finding yourself in the middle of losing everything you thought you knew. It's about the people who walk into your life and leave footprints on your heart, whether they stay or go.

So, dear reader, as you turn these pages, I invite you to step into my world and feel the sun's warmth on your skin, the flutter of a first crush, the ache of disappointment, and the joy of triumph.

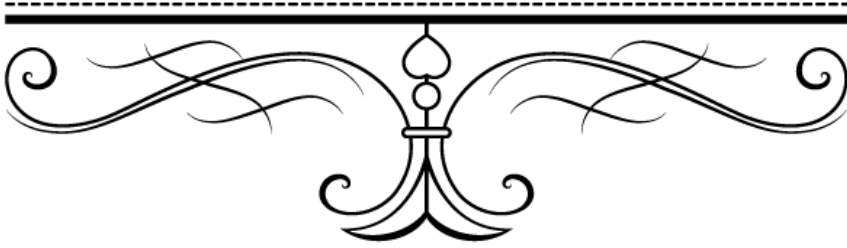
This is my story, but it's also yours because we all have moments that define us and remind us we're alive, human, and capable of so much more than we can ever imagine.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for letting me share this piece of my heart with you. And remember, no matter

Carry Me Home

where you are in your journey, you are writing your story,
one unfolding moment at a time.

CHAPTER 1: EYES ON ME



Imara

Ten years earlier



The sun beat down on the pavement, and undergraduates, sophomores, and juniors piled out of the door as the school bell rang. I straightened my spine and tilted my head as I looked out for my best friend.

I rechecked my phone. It had been twenty minutes since our class was supposed to end, and we were supposed to walk home together.

Where was she?

My feet impatiently tapped against the pavement, and I tucked a lock of hair behind my ears, gnawing on my bottom lip. We had choir later that day, and before, we had to go over a few bio notes. I couldn't afford to be behind on time.

Tania finally piled out of the school, and I sighed loudly. But she didn't come out alone.

She walked out with a guy, laughing loudly at something he'd said and touching his chest, looking up at him like he was her knight in shining armor. I watched the exchange, confusion washing over my face.

Tania didn't have a boyfriend, and she hadn't mentioned one recently. And even if she did, this wasn't the time for this. Another guy followed behind them, and he leaned over to ask Tania a question. She gave the place a quick once-over before lighting up and pointing at me. His eyes followed her gaze, and his brown orbs stared at me, making my stomach coil with discomfort.

I frowned and straightened up, waving hesitantly at the trio.

What the hell was she thinking?

Tania rushed over to me, her arms swinging at her sides as she made a beeline for me, pulling along the boy she had been talking to and clearly flirting with.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, girl," she said breathlessly, seeking shade next to me underneath the mahogany tree. "This is Jace -- and Derek. They need help with bio homework."

I raised an eyebrow, tightening my arms around my body. My eyes hesitantly washed over the two boys, who looked like they couldn't care less about anything going on around them.

"They... need help? Or do they want us to do it for them?"

Brown eyes raised an eyebrow at me, tilting his head, and Tania sighed loudly.

"Don't be like that, Imara. It won't take long; they just need to compare answers."

Truth is, I shouldn't be all that surprised because Tania usually did this. If it wasn't the quiet girl sitting at the back of the glass, it was the boy who skipped eighty percent of our classes. The only thing that was different this time was that she seemed to be a little touchier with this... *Jace*.

I blinked a few times before clearing my throat. "We don't have a lot of time –"

"We'll go over to Bruxby's Cafe, quickly go through everything, and then be on our way."

"Tania, if you guys don't have the time, that's fine. We can catch up later," Jace smiled down softly at her, and I watched as disappointment seeped into her gaze.

"It's really fine; Imara doesn't mind that much, right?"

She looked up at me, an appalling desperation in her eyes, and I continued to look at the two boys, especially the one with his hands shoved in his pocket, his piercing gaze washing over me. My shoulders dropped.

"Fine," I grumbled, and Tania let out a loud cheer. But she knew she'd have to fill me in with what the heck was going on later.

"Come on then."

She linked her arm through mine, dragging me across the busy street towards the cafe. I glanced back at the two boys, and Brown's eyes followed my every move, his gaze never leaving me.

We got to the cafe, and the scent of coffee, freshly baked pain-au-chocolat, and grilled sandwiches filled my lungs. My stomach grumbled. I slipped into the booth, and Derek slipped right next to me, forcing the air from my lungs.

His cologne, soap, aftershave, or something close filled my nose, and there was nothing I could do to shield myself from it. The varsity jacket he wore fit his muscles perfectly from beside me... not that I noticed. He stretched out, one arm behind the seat of our booth, pressing into my back.

I inched away, flustered, clearing my throat as Tania grinned at me.

I pulled out my books, setting them out in front of us.

"So..." Tania said, clearing her throat and pulling her book closer to her. "What exactly were you guys hoping to get clarity on?"

Derek leaned over, his arm brushing against mine as he asked Tania a few questions. I stared at him curiously, watching his assignment and how it was actually all filled out. He really was just confirming his answers, making sure that he got it right.

Carry Me Home

"Are the four of you okay?" The waitress said as she came over with a notepad and a warm smile; her southern accent immediately made me feel at ease.

"Oh yeah, we're fine; thank you for checking," I said warmly.

The waitress nodded, her smile widening.

"What can I get y'all?"

"Oh," I looked around the table, laughing nervously. "We're actually not staying"

"Um, two ice teas, please," Tania spoke up, and I frowned in her direction.

The waitress scribbled down our order and then tucked the pen into the top of her apron.

"Two iced teas coming right up -- and for the boys?"

Brown eyes -- Derek shrugged. "We'll have the same as them."

It was the first time I'd heard him speak. His deep and silky voice sent a shiver down my spine. I swallowed hard, my eyes falling back onto the table.

The waitress nodded, leaving our table.

"Okay," Tania sighed, closing her books. She laid a hand on mine. I promise we're leaving soon; let's just get our ice teas."

"What's the hurry?" Derek asked, shoving his books back into his bag. "Our company can't be that bad."

Tania giggled.

"Of course not. But Imara has something important to do, and we're already running late."

"We both have something important to do," I murmured, sliding the book off the table and into my bag. "Tonight is choir practice, and we can't miss that."

"Ahh," Derek swung his arm over my side of the bench, raising an eyebrow with a small smirk. "Church girls, huh?"

"Something like that," Tania quickly added, giving me a pointed look. "We more or less just really like -- singing."

I snickered under my breath, huddling in my little corner of the booth.

Derek, however, leaned in a little closer than I'd like, the corner of his lips lifting.

"I think it's cool that you're a church girl, Imara. Belief is cool."

My lips parted in surprise, words completely leaving my brain. Instead, my cheeks flushed, and I looked down at the table, my fingers toying with the ends of my hair.

"If you're being serious, then thanks." I finally managed out.

I could feel his eyes on me, and that sent a flash of heat through my body. My eyes quickly darted to his, and I sank back into the booth, my heart drumming loudly in my chest.

The waitress came over with our drinks and placed the glasses in the middle of the table.

"Alrighty, here are your iced teas, and will there be anything else for you, lovely young folk?"

"No, thank you," Tania shook her head, grabbing one of the glasses.

The waitress nodded and left. Tania slid the other glass towards me, and I muttered a thank you.

"So, Imara," Derek leaned in a little closer, and I looked up. "Why haven't I seen you around? Either of you, really, but... especially you."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know."

"I've seen her around," Jace said, and I looked back at him. He had an uninterested expression on his face. "You're just blind, man."

I snickered quietly, and I couldn't help the tiny smile that tugged on my lips. Derek's eyes lit up, and he chuckled.

"Maybe so. Anyone would have to be blind not to notice someone as beautiful as you."

The words slipped from his tongue like he'd been waiting to say them, and it's the way he looked at me when he said it. His eyes softened, and I swear, the world froze. I was not ugly, far from it. But I didn't hit the beauty standard in high school. I didn't wear push-up bras or makeup. And I usually had my hair thrown up into a messy bun.

Hearing that from him shouldn't have made me feel any way, let alone a type of way, but it did.

"T-thank you," I muttered, the tips of my ears burning.

He smirked, obviously enjoying the effect he had on me.

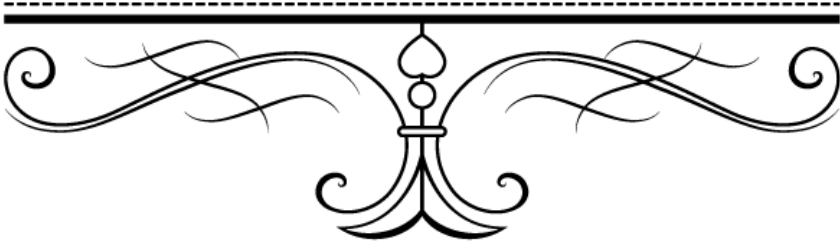
"I hope you won't mind if I come see you in action tonight. How far is this church?"

"What? No. It's just practice I --"

"That's a great idea!" Tania squealed, turning over to invite Jace.

And that's how I ended up singing in front of Derek James and how we became inseparable. He showed up with his cousin to every single practice, and I felt his eyes on me the whole time, every time. I knew from them that Derek would be mine, and I would be his. And so, it was said, so it was done.

CHAPTER 2: A MORNING OF FIRSTS



10 years later



The sea of blackcaps and gowns around me felt surreal, like a dream from which I never wanted to wake. As I waited for the dean of studies to call out my name, the cool air of the auditorium brushed against my skin, causing a shiver to ripple through me despite the heat of the packed space.

My heels clicked against the hardwood as I stepped forward, each tap echoing the beat of my racing heart. I gave the audience one last glance, a thread of anticipation and disappointment weaving through my body, but he was not there.

“Imara Harris!”

The fabric of my gown swished around my legs, a soft whisper against the harsh scrape of my shoes, and the cheers lit up the auditorium. I felt like passing out. My hands trembled, barely noticeable under the flow of my sleeves, as I reached out to take the diploma. I paused only for a moment, my heart palpitating in my chest, to pose for their quick picture.

As I made my way down the stage, a wave of relief, tinged with a thrill that made my knees weak, washed over me.

I did it!

“Awe, Imara, honey,” my mother's voice reached me before I even saw her. Her dark skin glowed under the afternoon sun, her hands clasped together and pressed to her mouth, and her eyes, the same warm brown as mine, glistened with unshed tears.

“Look at you—oh, I’m about to melt.”

“That white coat fits you so well I could swear someone designed it specifically for you, honey,” My father chimed in. He stood tall and proud, his closely cropped grey hair shimmering slightly in the light, the lines around his eyes crinkling with joy. Although my lungs felt stuck in my

throat, I did a little twirl for his pleasure. Their faces, bright and excited, mirror exactly how I felt.

When I walked into this place five years ago, I felt like I wouldn't have left. I felt like I would've spent ages being a student, never getting to the finish line.

Time passes by so quickly sometimes that you don't even notice it's going by until you're standing in your favorite pair of heels with your diploma in your hands.

I stood slightly apart, scanning the crowd for Derek's familiar face, but he was nowhere to be seen. A small knot of disappointment tightened in my chest, though I quickly tried to mask it with a smile as friends and classmates came over to offer congratulations.

"Hey, superstar," he said behind me, his voice light as he held out flowers to me. "Sorry, I missed the actual walk. Traffic was hell." He placed a kiss on my cheek, and I took the flowers with a hesitant smile.

My parents squeezed my shoulders with smiles before moving off to give us some space. They joined other parents in admiring the decorations and the lively scene.

“I was looking for you in the crowd... what time did you leave home?”

Derek's expression shifted, his eyes narrowing slightly. "I'm here now, aren't I? Let's not dwell on the negatives. I know these roses don't compare to how stunning you look in that white coat, but it's something, no?"

“I... yes... but – “

“Imara, come on, I'm making it up to you right now. Can't we just enjoy the evening?”

His easy dismissal stung, and for a moment, I faltered, my hands tightening around the bouquet. He sighed, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “I just want you to be happy, my love, and I already feel so bad about missing something so important to you.”

I nod, “Thank you for the flowers.”

“Of course. Congratulations again, babe.”

I didn't know what to say first. A shaky breath escaped me before anything else as I looked around at the other graduates. Some of them I knew, and others I didn't, but they were all so proudly wearing their gowns. This was the

beginning of our new lives, and I couldn't wait to see what the future held for us. I immediately resolved to focus on the positive.



The best part about nursing school is that the internships actually help you get ahead. If you do your best the first time around, you may just secure a job after university.

That's how I did it, at least.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Derek's FaceTime call. With a smile, I answered, greeted by his familiar face on the screen.

"Good morning; it's nice to see that you can actually get up early in the morning."

Derek groaned. "Don't push it. I set an alarm just so I could get to see you go. Let me see you in your scrubs."

I giggled, propping the phone against a bottle of lotion on the dresser to give him a full view. "You look like my favorite

Teletubby,” he teased back, and I gasped, feigning offense before we both dissolved into laughter.

Dressed in my freshly pressed scrubs on a Monday morning, water bottle in hand, I contemplated whether I should wear my Dr. Sholls or my cushioned boots. I couldn’t believe this was a life I was about to get used to.

“You look like my favorite Teletubby,” he cooed into the phone, and I gasped, snatching it up again.

“Rude.” I stuck out my tongue at him as we both laughed; then I heard my mother coming up the stairs.

"Imara, you haven't had breakfast yet! It's time to go! Tell Derek hello for me."

"I will, Mama, give me a moment!"

I ran my hand over my pixie cut again, blowing out a breath before looking back at my boyfriend, his eyes scanning my face closely.

"Have a good day, and don't forget to wear a scarf out of the hospital. Your skin gets cold easily," he reminded me.

"But I hate feeling like a mummy when I'm supposed to be fabulous," I protested lightly, though his concern warmed me.

Derek smirked. "Either that or become a vampire. Your choice."

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed my purse just as my mom's voice chimed in again. "You heard her: go have a nice day and drive safely."

"Bye babe, talk later."

In the end, I chose Dr. Sholls, then headed downstairs, where I found my mother preparing breakfast for me. I kissed her cheek and said good morning.

I sighed loudly, placing a hand on top of the dining seat. "Mom, I love you, but I'm no longer fifteen. You don't have to get up at five to make me breakfast."

She frowned, placing a hand on her hip. "You think because you've graduated, you're no longer my baby? Sit down and eat these eggs."

I snickered, rolling my eyes as I pulled out a chair and took a seat at the table. My mother was still getting used to the fact that I wasn't a student anymore.

She had gotten up every day for the past five years, making sure that my lunch was ready and packed and my tea was always freshly made. I'd always appreciated it, but like my dad, she was getting older. Now was her time to rest.

"Now, I don't want you to be intimidated by anyone there," she began, sitting across from me in her bonnet and robe. "I don't care if they're a doctor or a surgeon; you've worked hard for this. And I'm so proud of you."

I smiled, taking a sip of orange juice. "Yes, mama bear," I teased. She rolled her eyes, taking a bite of her eggs.

"I'm serious. You have a lot of talent, and if people don't recognize that, well, then that's their loss."

I nodded, reaching across the table to give her hand a gentle squeeze. "Thank you. I'll be okay, Mom."

She nodded. "I know. And just remember, there will be some patients who will give you trouble. Just stay strong and remember who you are and why you're there. If someone gives you a hard time, don't take it to heart."

"Okay, I will," I assured her, taking a final bite of my eggs before glancing over at the clock. "I better get going."

"Do you need a ride, or are you driving?" She asks.

"No, I got it. Tell Dad good morning for me when he wakes."

"I will, honey."

I kissed her cheek goodbye before grabbing my lunch and keys and heading out the door. The sun was slowly rising, and the cool summer breeze felt amazing against my skin. Admittedly, I was a little nervous about starting this new job. There really wasn't any room for mistakes, and there wasn't a drawing board I could go back to.

I wished the drive was longer because then I would probably have the time to get rid of the pit in my stomach. But nope, I was there within ten minutes, staring at the huge, baby blue and white building, watching some other staff roll on.

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel for a moment as I stepped out, heading into the hospital with a confidence I didn't exactly feel.

Pulling out a scarf, I wrapped it around my neck and let out a sigh.

There wasn't anyone I recognized. The lights were a little dimmer, the area almost freezing cold, and the machines beeping in sync with all the indistinct conversation.

My footsteps faltered as I got to the receptionist. She looked up at me, tilting her head downward so that she could see over her glasses.

I pushed myself toward her.

"Good morning," I said breathlessly, plastering a small smile on my face. "I'm Imara Harris. I'm supposed to be starting today."

She didn't say anything! Instead, she grabbed a clipboard while she chewed her gum and hunched over the table.

"Mm," she nodded, tapping her finger against it. "Yeah, I see you here, Senior Nurse Harris. All newcomers are to report to HR's office. It's right down the hall."

"Thank you," I replied, clutching my bag a little tighter.

I hugged my bag to my side, glancing at the different hints around: the patients, the machine, and the people who had already started their shifts. I drew in my bottom lip as I reached the big door that said HR.

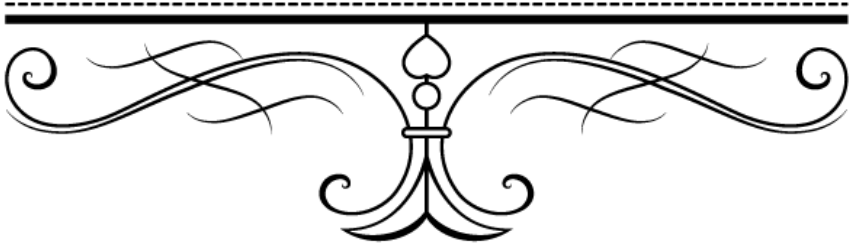
Bracing myself, I pushed through, and a bunch of faces turned to stare at me, including Tania's. Relief flooded my body, and I scurried towards her.

"Hey," she said softly, nudging my shoulder.

I chuckled under my breath, nodding at her. A sense of calm washed over me as I figured everything was going to be all right. This was everything we'd ever hoped for and more.

"Hey." I nudged back.

CHAPTER 3: BLOOD ON MY HANDS



It took me a few days to fall into a familiar groove, but by the second week, I was much more comfortable.

Mom hadn't stopped making me breakfast nor stopped with her motivational speeches in the morning. Honestly, I didn't mind it, especially because the moment I stepped in this morning, Mrs. Matthew, the senior nurse who always wore scrubs two sizes down and drunk at least five cups of black coffee every morning, barged toward me with a clipboard in her hand.

"Nurse Harris, I trust you had a restful night because we have a demanding schedule ahead of us."

I didn't even get time to put down my bag.

She pointed at the first thing on her clipboard.

"You are tasked with overseeing several managerial responsibilities before attending to patients within the age ranges of 10 to 25. It's imperative to have their medication administered before noon."

That sounded simple enough.

"Also, we need a nurse to just speak to some of the elderly today. Some of them are undergoing relocation to a new nursing facility, and they will require reassurance and guidance. I thought your personality would be perfect for that. They tend to trust nurses who can keep a positive demeanor while being professional at the same time. And, you also have to take the blood of the patients between the ages of 40-55."

I nodded, feeling a bit overwhelmed but not wanting to show it. Instead, my hands tightened on the strap of my bag, and I dug my heel into the tiles.

"Also, I heard from a little birdie that you make a mean cup of coffee. So, if you could get started on that, I'll get a list of the patients you'll be meeting with."

I blinked rapidly, my cheeks warming. "Um... yes, ma'am. I can start on the coffee right now."

She gave me a curt nod before walking off, and I breathed deeply, letting it out slowly. "It's alright. I can do this. I can do... all of it. This is what I wanted. I made it." I reassured myself.

My hands shook a little as I placed the pot on the burner, turning the dial for it to start boiling.

She had called more things than I remembered, but I assumed I'd have something to go off of. I was reaching for the coffee packet when a loud bang resonated through the hospital, and loud voices echoed through the halls. My feet moved on their own volition out of the cafeteria, and I immediately heard someone call my name.

"Harris!" Mrs. Matthew called, guiding a stretcher into the halls. Her voice was frantic. We need you out here."

I dropped everything and pushed the sleeves of my lab coat up before running toward the front entrance. I didn't know what to expect, but my stomach sank, and the sight before me almost knocked the wind out of me. A woman lay on the stretcher, unable to stay still, blood soaking through her shirt.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Harris, but she sustained a gunshot wound near the shoulder. We need to stabilize her immediately."

My eyes widened. Bullet?

I immediately got to work. I could hear the sounds of sirens outside, but my focus was on the woman. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be murmuring something, her voice a whisper.

"Please, please... God... please."

The words came out of her mouth repeatedly as I tried to stop the bleeding by pressing hard against the wound. I could feel the blood seep through my fingers and the way the woman shook under my touch. Her breathing was rapid, and she seemed to be in immense pain. I wanted to help her, to ease her pain, but I wasn't sure if I could do much.

"I know, I know it hurts. But you have to hold on, okay?"

Her eyes were open, their green color as vibrant as green emeralds. They stared up at me, and I was unable to look away.

"You're going to be okay."

I didn't know how I was being so calm and professional. It felt like I was on autopilot as we wheeled her to the nearest trauma room. She was losing blood and fast.

"Her pulse is dropping!" I yelled.

"Damnit!" The paramedics cursed. "She's not holding on for much longer. We need a transfusion."

"I'll go get it."

I rushed out of the room, only to run into someone. They crashed into the wall, nearly dropping all the pills in their trolley.

"Hey!"

"Oh, my God. I'm sorry!" I stuttered, quickly grabbing the blood and rushing back into the room. Mrs. Matthew took it from me, a smile on her face as she nodded.

"Good job, Nurse Harris. We'll take it from here."

"Of course."

They disappeared into the trauma room, and I took a step back, blood on my hands, remembering those green eyes.

My heart beat rapidly in my chest, the thought that she might actually... die on us.

"Is everything alright, Miss?"

I turned and saw a tall man in a blue shirt and slacks looking worriedly at me.

"Are you the woman's family?"

He shook his head. "I was a witness to the shooting. She was just coming back from work when it happened."

"I'm sure she'll be alright. Just... maybe don't leave. I'm sure the police will be here any second and will want to talk to you."

I backed away with a smile, desperately needing to wash the blood off. Practice was one thing, but this? This is the real deal. And my stomach was in knots.



"She's going to make it."

Mrs. Matthew stepped into the room I was waiting in for the elderly group, my points in hand as I thought about what I was about to say to them. A wave of relief washed over me as she told me the woman with the gunshot wound was in recovery.

"You handled the situation admirably, Nurse Harris. It's because of your quick thinking and moving that we were able to get some extra time with her. I think you'll make an excellent addition to this hospital."

"Thank you, Mrs. Matthew. I... I'm so relieved."

She nodded, patting me on the back. "So am I. You're an asset. Just keep up the good work, and everything will run smoothly over here. You should be proud."

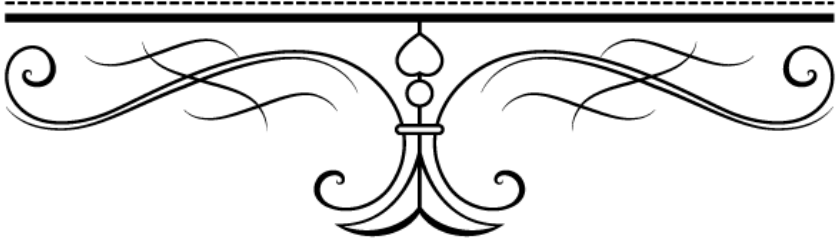
I smiled widely, watching her walk away before sighing.

This was why I became a nurse: to save lives and make a difference. I was going to help this hospital be the best it could be.

My mind wandered to those green eyes, and my stomach fluttered. I didn't know the woman, but someone shooting her in cold blood sent chills down my spine.

I was glad she was alright, and that I was able to save her.

CHAPTER 4: DISTANT CONNECTIONS



When I finally got home, the house was quiet, the kind of silence that amplified the smallest sounds and made the ticking of the kitchen clock feel like a loud thud.

My parents weren't home, but they were probably down at the market with their friend Maggie, a fresh produce seller. I couldn't smell anything cooking, but since my father's cologne still lingered in the air, I knew they'd definitely been out for some time.

Feeling the grit and grime of my long day clinging to my skin, I headed straight for the shower and let my body relax under the hot water. By the time I wrapped myself in a soft towel, I felt ready to sleep for at least two days.

I threw myself onto the bed, happily groaning as it took away all my aches, pains, and tension. I reached for my phone and dialed Derek's number, my stomach fluttering slightly at the thought of seeing my love.

The phone rang out a few times before he finally answered in the dim light of his cluttered room, music booming in the background.

"Hey," I called softly, and a little confused. "What's going on over there?"

"Roommates are throwing a party," he sighed frustratedly, turning on the lights in his room. He sat against the wall, his stack of textbooks towering next to him. "I was trying to get some sleep, but that's not happening tonight."

As he spoke, a shadow momentarily crossed behind him. It was not quite discernible, a fleeting shape that could be anything: a person, a trick of light, or simply a passerby. He seemed oblivious to it, focused, and a bit annoyed.

"Why is your roommate having a party on a Monday?" I raised an eyebrow, my eyes still lingering on the area where the shadow passed, and he groaned.

"It's his last semester, I guess. I don't know, and I didn't ask," His gaze drifted momentarily, raising his voice as someone nearby let out a boisterous whoop. He shifted uncomfortably, glancing over his shoulder as if to assure himself that his door remained closed.

"Tell me about your day. How was it?" His voice smoothed over, trying to shift the focus from his less-than-ideal situation to my experiences.

A smile spread across my face, and I fell back on the bed. "It was amazing... we had our first emergency trauma incident today. Someone shot a woman."

Derek's brow furrowed, his confusion evident. "And that's... amazing?"

I laughed, realizing how it sounded. "Not the shooting, of course. But being part of the action and helping save someone was a shot of adrenaline I've never felt. For a few moments, I was the nurse in charge, pressing down on wounds and making split-second decisions. It was like being a hero."

"But you're not a hero; you're a nurse," he remarked somewhat flatly.

“A hero is a hero, no matter their occupation,” I scoffed, a bit stung by his comment. “We saved her, Derek. That’s what matters.”

The sound of someone banging on a door momentarily interrupted us, followed by a muffled shout: “Derek, come on out, man!”

He rolled his eyes, pressing a finger to his ear to hear me better. “Sorry about that. You were saying?”

“I pressed down her wound to keep her from bleeding out, and I could feel the warmth off —”

Derek grimaced slightly. “I hate to cut you off, babe, but that’s a bit much, even for me.”

“Oh,” I murmured, a blush creeping up my cheeks. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m glad you’re finding your stride. That makes one of us,” he tried to smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“How’s school?” I found myself asking out of routine.

The truth is that the moment he started talking about computers and codes, my mind sank back to that earlier moment in the ER. How I was able to handle myself, to

those green orbs I helped save. I felt a little guilty when I came back, but he was still talking either way.

"And then, she gave us the wrong assignment and then blamed us for not realizing it was incorrect. Like, what the hell? I thought the professor was smart, but damn. If she wasn't so old, I would have called her out on her nonsense."

"Well, hopefully, it'll get better; don't dwell on it for too long." I yawned, feeling my eyes droop a little. The day had been exhausting, and the warmth of the blanket threatened to lull me into a peaceful sleep. I was ready to face tomorrow, ready to see what it brought. A few screams erupted outside, and laughter quickly followed.

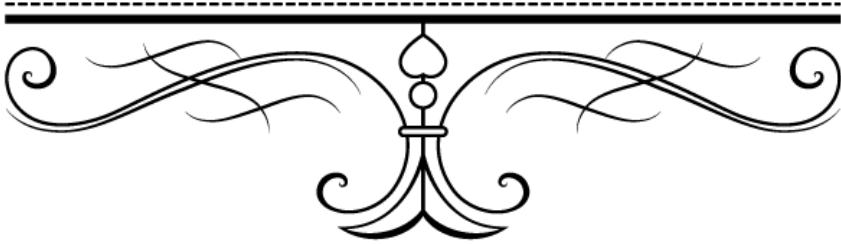
"Sounds like a rough night over there," I mentioned casually, giving him an opening if there was more he wanted to explain about the party or the mysterious shadow.

"Yeah, it's a mess. But hey, that's college life for you. I'll manage." He managed a tired smile. "You better get some rest, though. Sounds like you had a full day."

"Will do, goodnight. Love you."

"Love you too," he said, and the screen went dark.

CHAPTER 5: INTO THE UNKNOWN



"Nurse Harris, HR would like to speak with you."

As I entered the common area, Mrs. Matthew walked past me, carrying a patient's file in her hand, an unusually stern look on her face.

It was a different look than usual, one that caused my stomach to twist uncomfortably. I slowly walked to the cubicles, placed my bag in, and switched out my Dr. Souls for Crocs.

With a growing sense of unease, I headed to the locker area. I swapped my outdoor shoes for the sterile reliability of hospital-issued Crocs, the rubber soles squeaking slightly against the linoleum as I made my way to my cubicle.

Tania caught my eye from across the room, and I gave her a reassuring smile before focusing on the task at hand. The

door creaked open, and I glanced up to see Mr. Peters, accompanied by an older woman I didn't recognize.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"Nurse Harris, please, have a seat," Mr. Peters gestured to a chair across from his cluttered desk as we entered the small, window-lined office that felt even more confined with the addition of the unknown woman.

I obeyed, sliding into the chair, my scrubs rustling softly in the too-quiet room. The older woman stood to the side, her arms folded, observing me with a keen gaze that seemed to see right through me.

"Nurse Harris, do you know why we called you in here today?" He asked, his tone almost grave.

"No, Sir."

Mr. Peters sighed, his eyes briefly meeting mine before drifting to gaze out of the window behind him. "In the twenty-five years I've been here, I've never had a student, in only her second week, jump to the rescue of a patient the way you did. I've reviewed the surveillance tape. You were... remarkable out there."

My eyebrows raised, and my eyes widened as I stared at him, his face melting a bit warmer and the woman next to him nodding in agreement.

"I... Thank you... I was just... well, it's my job."

"Yes, well, not everyone holds it to the same standard as you do," he continued, his tone softening further. "Many believe that because they're new, they don't need to face the hardships, and because their seniors are more experienced, they should carry the burden. But you... you're different. We see that."

Dumbfounded, I blinked back my surprise as Mr. Peters reached into his desk drawer.

"Kleenview Hospital has a travel nurse program designed for nurses who want to work briefly at one hospital before transferring to another. We believe you'd be an excellent candidate for this program, Nurse Harris. The world needs more nurses like you."

My jaw dropped, my eyes widened, and my mouth went dry.

"A-are you serious? Believe me, this is unbelievable, but don't you think it's too soon?"

He tilted his head, a slight smile playing on his lips. "You don't trust your abilities? You didn't go through nursing school to doubt yourself at the first real opportunity, did you?"

"No, Sir, of course not."

"Good. The first thing you need in life next to a degree is confidence. Even if you don't feel it, you never pass up opportunities. This comes with a pay raise and the opportunity to see different places across the states. You're the first young nurse I'm banking on like this, Nurse Harris. And I've had a good experience with it so far. What do you say?"

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe this was happening.

"Y-yes," I breathed out. "Yes. Of course, thank you, Sir."

"Glad to hear it. Now, we're starting you off with a four-week stint at a hospital in Texas, Austin, to be exact. After that, we'll be reassigning you. You'll still be in contact with your superiors here, and we'll still be able to reach you. We shall email all the other information to you, so be on the lookout for that."

He handed me a folder, and I took it, feeling the weight in my hands. This was really happening.

"T-thank you again," I looked between him and the woman. "You won't regret it."

He chuckled, a sound that filled the small office with warmth. "I'd hope not. Have a nice day, Harris."

I walked out of the room, my body trembling. Tania was the first to find me, her worried eyes searching mine.

"What happened there?"

"I... I think I was just... promoted?"

"Holy crap," Tania screamed, hugging me tightly. "Congratulations, Imara. This is like our third week here."

"I know... I still can't believe it," I mumbled into her shoulder, hugging her back. "I can't."

"Is it like a higher position in the hospital or –"

"A travel nurse program," I said, pulling away to show her the folder, my smile as wide as it had ever been. "It's four weeks, but I'll be traveling, seeing new places... I'm excited, Tania."

“Hell yeah,” she grinned, though a small frown quickly replaced her excitement. “You know, it’s going to be great for you to get out there. We’ll miss you, but it’s time to spread those wings.”

“You think so?”

“Of course,” Tania agreed, her gaze briefly flitting away, “And don’t worry about us; we’ll be here, keeping things running and waiting to hear all about your adventures.”

“I’ll call every night, promise,” I assured her, feeling a pang of sadness at the thought of leaving her behind.

“You better,” she jabbed my arm playfully, throwing her arm around my shoulder as we walked back to the staff area, the buzz of the hospital enveloping us once more. My phone rang, and I saw my mother’s number flash across the screen.

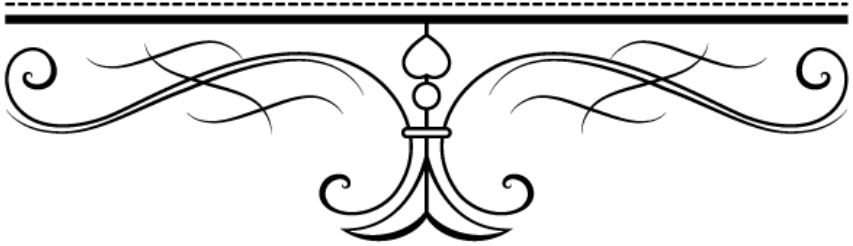
"Imara honey, I don't mean to disturb you. I'm at the market picking up a few things – is Derek still coming over – and what is it he doesn't eat again?"

"Yes, Mom, we're still on for dinner -- and it's collard greens and any other provision." I contemplated telling her about the promotion, my excitement bubbling in my chest, but I decided to surprise them all at dinner tonight instead.

"Got it. See you later, honey."

"Bye, mom."

CHAPTER 6: LOVE IN THE BALANCE



As the savory aroma of garlic bread filled the cozy kitchen, I stole a glance at Derek, whose easy smile warmed my heart. My mother bustled out of the kitchen with her apron cinched snugly around her waist.

"Derek, I know that you don't like provisions, so I hope pasta will do for tonight."

"Pasta's fine, Mrs. Harris," Derek smiled warmly.

"Good, Imara dear, can you help me with the garlic bread?"

"Of course," I replied, unable to resist planting a quick kiss on Derek's cheek before making my way to the kitchen to assist her.

"How was work?" she whispered, almost excitedly. I think it's because I can hardly hide anything, and my emotions are always written all over my face. But like everyone else, she'd

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have to wait. I smiled, shrugging lightly, not giving anything away.

"It was good, you know, the usual. Tending to patients and whatnot," I replied, careful to keep my tone neutral.

"Anything exciting happened?" I removed the foil from over the pan, pursing my lips together and looking around as if thinking.

"Not that I can think of right now, no."

I escaped before she could ask anything else, settling next to Derek as my father scanned the newspaper. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, his touch sending shivers down my spine.

"Hair's getting a little longer, no?" He whispered, his breath fanning against my neck, and I couldn't help but giggle. "Are we growing it out?"

"We are not," I teased, tapping his nose. "We just haven't gotten the chance to go to the barbershop."

"Prices are going up again," he grumbled, shaking his head. "Do you know they raised the gas bill? They're trying to kill people out there."

"That's just how life goes, Mr. H. Many have gone through it before, and many will continue," Derek chimed in, taking a sip out of his water. My father glanced at him from over the newspaper.

My father, however, responded with a pointed look over the top of his newspaper, his expression unreadable as he studied Derek for a moment before speaking again.

Here we go.

"You're telling me like I haven't been living for longer than you; it was never as bad as it is now."

"Harold, it's dinner time," my mother lightly smacked his arm. "Don't bring that negativity over here to the table. Let's all say grace and dive in."

My father's gaze lingered on Derek, and I had to tap his foot lightly underneath the table to make him stop.

"Close your eyes," I mouthed, and his lips beat together as he grumbled to himself, closing his eyes, nevertheless.

My mother led us in grace, and the entire time, my eyes remained closed, my legs bouncing against the floors.

Derek glanced at me a few times with furrowed eyebrows, but thankfully, he didn't call it out.

"I didn't get to see you much before you were taken away, darling. I'm glad we got to sit down. How's it going," my father chimed first, shoving a forkful of lettuce into his mouth.

"Dad, I moved out; I didn't get taken away. And it's been...good," I murmured with a smile. "Better than I really expected, especially since I'm just starting out."

"Imara saved a life," my mother beamed from beside him, and I quickly corrected her as my father turned to me with wide eyes.

"No, no, no -- mom, I helped. The doctors did most of the saving."

"Yes, well, you bought them extra time, as they said. You were the true star, always is."

I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as my mother continued to heap praise upon me.

"Well, I'll be," my father shook his head, his chest vibrating with laughter. "This is what you were made for, honey; keep going."

I could only nod at him, looking down. I didn't know if I could take any more of their love-bombing without breaking.

"You know, technically, she's right," Derek chimed in, holding up his fork.

His comment sent a wave of tension rippling through the air. My father's expression tightened ever so slightly, "Technically?"

Derek shrugged, seemingly oblivious to the shift in the atmosphere. "I mean, she didn't exactly save a life. She just did what nurses are supposed to do, right?"

The room fell silent, and not even I knew what to say. My mother let out a strained laugh, and I joined in, but my father didn't find any of it funny.

"What about you then, Derek? You've been in school for almost four years now; how's that going?"

Derek's jaw tightened, a flicker of irritation crossing his features. "It's going fine. The only thing is my roommates can be a real... pain in the backend. I'm honestly getting sick of it," Derek took a sip of his drink.

I reached out, placing a calming hand on Derek's arm, silently urging him to stay composed.

"Aw, babe," I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just bear with it; you'll be okay."

He didn't reply. I knew he wasn't in the best situation over there, but he was receiving financial aid from the state only because he was unemployed and depended on them for housing. I was already using up my savings to take care of his tuition, something my parents did NOT know.

They would undoubtedly be concerned, maybe even upset, if they knew the extent of our financial struggles.

As we continued to eat, the clinking of cutlery against plates filled the air. My parents seemed engrossed in their meal, but I knew they were aware of the strained atmosphere hovering around us.

I did not doubt that when Derek graduated, he would pay me back in every way possible, but that didn't change the

fact that I was doing everything I could to ensure his dream did not stop before it could start.

He needs to just... push through.

Speaking about dreams, I turned back to my parents, glancing at Derek briefly.

"I have something to tell you guys."

They stopped chewing and glanced at each other, and my mother put her fork down.

"Is everything alright, Imara? You didn't get into trouble, did you?"

"Oh no, no," I chuckled lightly, fidgeting with my napkin. "It's actually some...really good news."

"I knew it," she clapped, leaning forward on the table as Derek studied me carefully. "Well, come on out with it already; I can barely wait!"

"Okay, okay, uh — I got... promoted."

"What? But it's only your third week!" My father chimed, his tone laced with disbelief, and my mother placed her hand flat on her chest.

"I know I was even surprised, but they said that I really did a good job with the shooting incident. They want me to join their travel nurse program."

"Travel?" Derek said as my parents practically howled. I looked over at him, expecting a surprised grin, maybe even a smile, but definitely not a glare.

My eyebrows knit together.

"Is something wrong, babe?"

He glanced at me for a few more seconds before pushing his chair back and storming out. My parent's joy instantly died down, turning to stare at me as I watched his retreating form.

"What's gotten into him?" my father asked, but I had no idea what to say. "I don't know."

I stood, excusing myself, and rushed after him, leaving behind a very confused and worried family.

"Derek," I called as he walked out onto the lawn. I raced down the stairs. "What's wrong with you?"

"A travel nurse, Imara?" He asked again, turning around to pin me with a glare. "How are we supposed to continue our relationship if you're frolicking all over?"

I sighed, stepping forward to touch his arm, but he moved away.

"I'm not going to go all over. I'll just be a few states away most times when I'm on assignments, and then I'll be back here... with you."

He scoffed, "Well then, you've got it all figured out, huh? There is no need to discuss it with your boyfriend, who found out at the same time as your parents. I thought we were partners."

"Derek, we are," I reached for him, but again, he stepped back.

"I'm just trying to figure out where I stand in this relationship, Imara because I can't tell."

I sighed deeply, closing my eyes for a moment. "I think... I think that you may be blowing this out of proportion just a little bit. I'm still going to be around Derek. We can call and text like we usually do, and when I'm back in town, things will continue as normal."

"Yeah, well, normal for you, maybe," he muttered, and I blinked.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," he stepped forward, "I just don't see how this is going to work. I never envisioned myself with someone long distance, and you didn't even give me the chance to think about it."

"What are you saying?" My voice trembled a bit. If he was asking me to choose, then I wouldn't even know what to do.

"I'm saying it might be better if we take some space while you go do what you want to do," he said softly, his gaze searching mine, "unless..."

"Unless?" I prompt, stepping forward, my breath catching in my throat.

"We move in together."

I blinked, completely taken aback.

"What?"

"That way, when you come back, we're even closer. We can catch up, be around each other —"

“Derek... I... I hate to remind you, but I’m the only one working on this relationship. I’m paying for your tuition— I just don’t know if this will be a smart move for me.”

“I get it, Imara. I’m a financial burden.”

I sighed, looking up at the sky.

"I didn't say that." I protested, feeling a pang of guilt at his words.

"I can read between the lines. I get it."

"I just don’t know if I can handle all of this— this strain. Dad was just saying how everything’s gone up.”

“I promised you that after I graduated, I’d pay you back tenfold, I’d marry you, I’d take care of you. These are just the years that you need to invest in us.”

I looked up at him, pursing my lips together. He’s begging me; I could see it in his eyes. He had promised he’d live up to his promises, and I trusted him, too.

I trusted him.

“Where would we even go?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

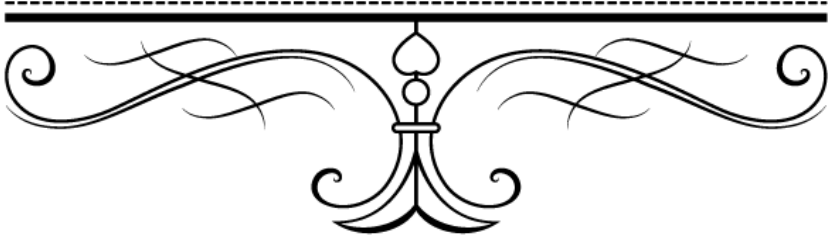
"Anywhere you want. As long as we're together, nothing else matters."

I hesitated. It would be great to spend all this time with Derek—being around him, having him. And he was right; being across different states for sometimes months at a time could really drag a relationship. We'd been together since high school. All relationships come with their ups and downs, right?

I can do this.

"Okay," I finally nodded, and he broke into a grin. "Okay, let's do it. Let's... let's move in together."

CHAPTER 7: THE WEIGHT OF COMMITMENT



“He said what?” Tania looked at me as if I’d lost my mind, and her crackers paused mid-air. “Imara, that’s ridiculous. The man isn’t even taking care of himself!”

“Hey, don’t bash him,” I murmured, swirling the tea bag in my cup. “We all struggled at first. He’s just... taking a bit more time.”

“And that’s fine, but he should be supportive of the woman who has his back. Not adding any more burdens or bashing her for making a decision that literally helps her take care of him.”

“He wasn’t criticizing me,” I defended quickly, a little too quickly. “He just... he wished I would’ve discussed it with him first.”

Tania deadpans.

"Discuss it? Imara, you're a grown, UNMARRIED woman. He's not a husband, which is yet another reason why moving out of your parent's house and in with this man is the worst idea ever."

I sighed, setting my teacup down with a gentle clink. "What was I supposed to say, Tania? No?"

"That's a very good start, actually," she nodded, her tone dripping with sarcasm as she pointed a cracker at me like a teacher would with a ruler. "What else?"

"It's really not that easy," I mumbled. "We've been together for a long time, and he's right. We need to find ways to stay close to each other."

"Then visit more often," she said incredulously. "I'm sorry. I guess I just don't understand how moving in together, especially with you carrying all the financial burden, is the best idea."

"It's just for now, and when he's done with school and gets a job, he'll be able to care for me."

“Is that his promise?” Tania asked, “Or are you assuming he’ll step up?”

"Tania," I strained, and she sighed heavily.

"Forgive me, but we may not be related by blood, but we're still sisters. I'll always look out for you."

"And I love you for it, but you need to trust me. I'm going to be fine. If it's really that bad, and we can't find anything affordable, then I'll leave it alone."

She nodded reluctantly but then added, “Just think about it, okay? Sometimes, we get so caught up in making it work that we don’t see other... opportunities. Opportunities that might be better for us in the long run.”

She sighed again, resigned, returning her attention to her half-eaten food. “When are the two of you going to look at the apartments?”

"Today – at lunch," I admitted quietly, chewing on my lower lip as she groaned loudly.

"You're killing me here, Imara."

"I know, I know, but just – I'll be fine. I promise."

"I hope so," she replied, "Because, remember, I'm here if things don't work out."

Breaktime died down, and we're back at work.

I dealt with a few patients on the floor. Some just needed a quick check-up, while others needed admission for different things. By the time lunchtime came around, Derek had arrived right on time, a grin on his face as he opened my door from the inside.

"How was class?" I asked him.

"It was good," he said, glancing over at me. "Although I must admit I spent most of my time thinking about this moment. Isn't it exciting that we're actually going to be living together?"

I laughed nervously.

"Yea, yes, of course."

Derek pulled out of the driveway and continued talking, but I tuned him out. Apparently, he knew the perfect place: a nice neighborhood and affordable. It better be. I was the one paying for it. We arrived moments later at an apartment complex, and my heart immediately started to sink. It

wasn't that there was anything wrong with it; it was beautiful. Too beautiful.

"This... looks a little out of our range."

"You haven't even looked inside yet," Derek replied dismissively, his hand pressing against the ornate gate. It swung open with a silent grace that seemed at odds with my churning stomach. We stepped into the hallway, and it was as if we'd stepped into the freaking Hudson's. It was as if we'd stepped into a scene from a luxury magazine.

The hallway was impeccably clean, with polished floors that gleamed under the soft lighting.

A subtle floral scent infused the air, and the plush rug beneath our feet muted our footsteps as we made our way to the reception desk. It was clear that this building was a far cry from the dingy apartment complexes I'd been expecting.

"Good afternoon," Derek leaned against the counter. Now, why did this place have a receptionist? "I'm supposed to meet with Jennifer Bloom?"

The receptionist eyed us up and down, scrunching her nose a bit. "For apartment A?"

Derek nodded.

"Just take the elevator to the top floor."

Despite the grandeur of our surroundings, I felt a sense of apprehension gnawing at me. While Derek seemed enchanted by the luxury of it all, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were out of place here.

When the elevator opened, it opened up to exactly what I expected: Tania and I would always imagine places like this as children. But that's the thing: it was a part of our imagination for a reason, but Derek and I were definitely not in a place to afford it.

"Hello, Ms Bloom," he greeted, reaching to shake her hand. She shook it for a few moments before turning to me, but it only lasted a second.

"Lovely to meet the both of you. Follow me; let me show you the rest of this gorgeous place."

For the most part, I managed to keep my mouth shut. I said a few things here and there, only because my silence had suddenly become much too loud.

The walls were a soft white color. Everything matched: a beautiful large bed and huge in-suite bathrooms with tubs so big we'd have to order pizza after one swim. The bedroom had sliding doors that went out onto the porch with a scenic view of the whole neighborhood.

"And last but certainly not least, your kitchen and entertainment area," Ms. Bloom announced, gesturing broadly to the space that indeed lacked only a personal chef to complete the picture. The only thing missing was a swimming pool!

"Uh... it's very... lovely, Ms. Bloom. Very," I managed, my voice faltering as I added, "I imagine it doesn't come at little cost. How much are we thinking for a place like this?"

She hesitated, eyeing us carefully. I didn't blame her. I mean, a two-bedroom luxury apartment? I could barely imagine the price, not with it being so close to the hospital as well.

What was Derek thinking?

"It's a bit on the pricey side -- yes, but the amenities are endless, and I see that you're in scrubs. You're not too far from work, are you? The price is \$2,500 a month."

My mouth dropped open, and I choked on my spit.

"A month?"

I didn't know it was possible, but her face contorted even further.

"Yes," she confirmed, her face tightening at my reaction.
"Again, this is a luxury apartment, Ms—"

"Yes, yes, I get it," I closed my eyes for a moment, turning to Derek. "We can't afford it."

"Imara —"

"We can't, Derek; there's no way I'll be able to handle that expense every single month." I eyed her before bringing my voice down a bit. "Need I remind you that I am also handling other expenses?"

"No need for a reminder," he quipped. "But this is only for a time. I've checked the other apartments, and you would absolutely hate them. This is a little above our budget, but isn't that why you took that travel program?"

"Exactly. That is exactly why I took the traveling program: to add extra money. How am I going to do that when we go

and pay three thousand dollars every single month on one rent? No matter how nice the place is --"

"Imara, you have savings; I know you do. You can fall back on it if anything, and besides, like I always say, this is only temporary until I'm done with school, and I'll take care of you and everything else."

I shook my head, running a hand through my hair. It was a beautiful place, but at that cost? I just don't wasn't sure. Tania's warnings rang in my head, and I tried to push them away. Maybe this can work, I thought as I looked into his pleading eyes. I'll be earning more, and he has just a year left at uni.

I looked at Miss. Bloom. "I'll... sleep on it. Give me a few days, and I'll give you a call --"

"With all due respect, there are a lot of people lined up for this apartment. Some may well take it today. I can't promise you a call," she warned briskly.

I rubbed the top of my forehead.

"Think about all the music videos you can pretend you're in on the patio," Derek said, a light attempt to sway me.

I glared at him, but it softened. I rubbed the top of my forehead before nodding, albeit very reluctantly.

"Okay, okay, we'll do it. We'll um," my tongue went over my lips. We'll take it. How much do I need to deposit?"

"The same amount as rent. You can wire it to this account, or we take cash or check."

"We... we'll do check."



I returned to work later that day, a pool of dread constantly sitting at the bottom of my stomach. I really didn't want to hear Tania say I told you so, so I hid in the breakroom for some quiet before stepping out.

"Nurse Harris, Mr. Peters has been asking for you."

I furrowed my eyebrows together as I made my way over to HR. Mr. Peters waved me in quickly.

"You leave for your first assignment in less than ten days—are you ready?" he asked with an encouraging smile.

Carry Me Home

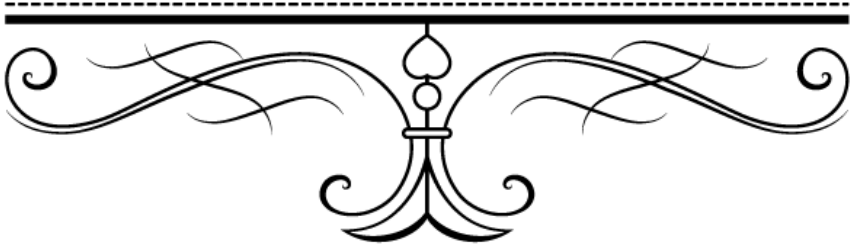
"Yes," I lied, forgetting for a moment the date of my departure. "I can't wait."

"Great. I hope you're not too nervous, Nurse Harris. You'll do great, and I'm sure you'll save many, many patients."

I let out a soft laugh and offered her a nod.

"I wish I was the one being saved right now," I thought to myself, dread nagging my subconscious.

CHAPTER 8: LEAVING THE NEST



"Those boxes are for the kitchen – no – Imara, those are for our bedroom," I let out a sigh of frustration as Derek complained about yet another pair of boxes. There was amusement in his tone, but I don't find it funny. I was tired. He gave me a look, holding the door open. "I told you not to mix them."

"Yeah, well, I asked you to label them," I sighed deeply, feeling the irritation creeping up my spine. There are so many of them, and you didn't label them."

"Home Depot boxes go in the kitchen, Walmart goes in the bedroom. It's not that hard, my love," he replied, a small chuckle leaving his lips.

He moved past me, opened them, and I clenched my jaw. Let's just say it had been a long day for the both of us, and we both desperately needed rest.

I quickly wiped the sweat off my forehead, pushing the Home Depot box onto the counter. I should have been packing and excitedly planning my trip, but instead, I was decorating an apartment whose expenses still filled my stomach with dread.

When I told my parents I was moving out, they nearly had simultaneous heart attacks, and even on the day I moved, their wish was for me to reconsider.

But I'd already signed a lease, and Derek had been looking forward to this. I admitted that a small part of me was a little excited to be taking this step with him. But there's always a voice at the back of my head telling me that this isn't how it was supposed to be. At least not yet.

"You know what, it's fine," Derek knocked me out of my thoughts. "I can see how stressed you are, my love, so I'll bring up the rest... maybe even run you a bath."

"Oh my," I sighed. "That would be lovely."

"For now, just try to find your things and pack up."

He walked over to me, pressed a kiss on my forehead, and rubbed my shoulders. I closed my eyes, took a deep break, and tried to relax into his presence.

“Thank you,” I murmured, my heart swelling as some of the tension left my system.

He hummed in acknowledgment, giving me one last squeeze before heading outside.

I walked over to our new bedroom and plopped onto the large bed. The TV stared back at me, and an episode of *Friends* was playing, but I couldn’t focus on it.

The white walls did nothing but remind me of how far I was from home, where the walls were the softest shade of coral, and on them were frames of me and my parents.

Gosh, I needed to stop sounding so bitter. There was so much to be grateful for. I was a grown-up now, and it was time for me to leave the nest anyway, right?

I sighed loudly, my shoulders sagging as I grabbed my phone. The empty room vibrated with silence, and my stomach fluttered with nerves as I dialed my mother’s number.

She answered on the first ring.

“My love,” she breathed heavily into the phone as if she ran toward it. “Is everything alright? Do you need help with anything?”

I smiled softly, my heart panting with hurt as I listened to the wave in her voice.

“Everything’s fine, Mom, we’re... we’re unpacking now.”

“Oh...” she said quietly. “We miss you already, Mara. Can you believe it?”

My mother chuckled, but it was shaky. It broke my heart.

“I miss you guys too,” I looked down at my lap.

It had only been a few hours since I left, but the thought of not going back and not sleeping in my room made things all the way heavier. But I wouldn’t worry them.

“But I’ll be okay. I would’ve had to move out eventually and —”

“But so soon, honey?” She whispered as if she could no longer speak loudly, and I closed my eyes. “Even if you wanted to spend your entire life at home, Imara, we would have loved it.”

"I know, I know, Mom, but —"

"And your dad is always talking about how *hard* things are getting, with inflation and all. I... I don't want you to struggle."

A pang of dread pooled in my stomach, and I glanced at the door, clenching my teeth.

"I-it's fine, Mom. I... with my promotion, I'll be making a bit more," I cleared my throat, shutting my eyes tightly. "And of course, Derek, he's also helping out, so it's not like everything is on me."

Lie.

She sighed loudly. "Your father is so beside himself that he didn't even eat his lunch. I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty or anything... but I just want you to know that we love you, dear. We love you, and we want you to visit often."

"Of course," I choked, placing a hand against my chest. I cleared my throat again. "Of course, Mom, I'll... I'll come visit you guys all the time."

The call ended after another minute of her reminding me how much she loved me. All I could do was sit in silence, feeling a dull ache in my chest as tears welled in my eyes.

I let out a shaky breath as I sank onto the floor next to my suitcase and began trying to pile my life into it.

"I think I'm done downstairs," Derek yelled.

"Do you think you can help me out then? I felt like I had things all over the place.

His footsteps echoed closer until he popped his head in. He took one look around before his eyes widened, and he raised his hand to scratch the back of his neck.

"Mm, sorry – I wish I could, babe, but I need to get started on some assignments. I'm running late."

I held in a sigh, deciding instead to focus my energy on getting everything packed.

It took me all but two hours, and I expected Derek to pop in now and then to offer his help or a snack or -- something, but he didn't.

And no bath either.

I tried not to mind it.

Tomorrow, I would be on a plane to Austin, ready to do what brought me the most peace. I would have a break, a moment to think of everything, a moment to recuperate.



I had to force Derek awake so he could drop me off at the airport, and the entire way there, he grumbled.

“I’m just wondering why you chose a flight for five in the morning.”

“What do you mean?” I scrunched my nose. “I didn’t choose my own flights, Derek. And besides, most flights are early. I would’ve driven myself if you had your own car.”

He scoffed, shaking his head.

“When all else fails, feel free to belittle me.”

“I’m not —” Realizing that my voice was getting a few octaves higher, I blew out a breath. “I’m not belittling you; I’m just saying.”

The airport came into view, and I rolled my eyes, relief clouding my senses. He said nothing else, and as we parked, he was the first out, grabbing my suitcase.

“Someone’s still not a morning person,” I thought to myself.

“Honey!”

My eyes widened as my mother ran towards me; well, a little jog, her years showing through her movements, and my dad followed behind.

My eyes widened, and my heart swelled in my chest as I jogged to meet them. They enveloped me in a warm hug, and I had to keep a sob from racking through my body.

“I can’t believe you guys came; I would’ve called.”

“You’re leaving the state for the first time; of course, Mama Bear needed to be here.”

I chuckled, turning to my father. He rolled his lips into his mouth, looking up at the ceiling. It took me a moment to realize that he was trying not to cry.

“Oh, Dad.”

I wrapped my arms around him, and he laid his chin on my head.

“Thought I had at least a couple more years,” he croaked.
“But time really does fly right past you.”

“I’m still here, Dad... and I told Mom I’ll still visit all the time.”

He pulled away, holding onto my shoulders.

“You know I’m so proud of you, Imara. Everything you said you wanted to do, you went out there and did it... my daughter.”

My mother lay a hand on his shoulder, nodding with tears in her eyes.

“Oh gosh, y’all are going to make me cry.”

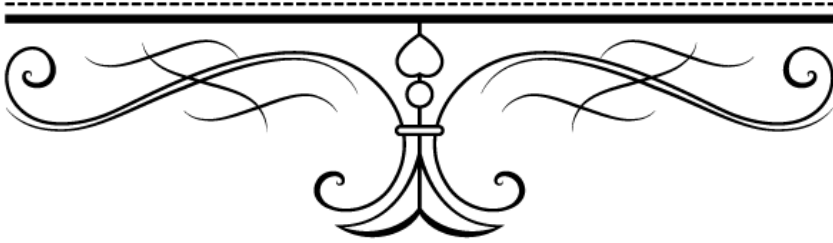
We all laughed, wiping the remaining tears away.

“Go out there and be great, my child. You have the world right in your hands.”

“I hate to break this up, but you’re going to miss your flight,” Derek’s monotone voice broke through our warmth, and I pursed my lips together, turning to him.

His touch lingered on my forehead, his lips pressing softly against my skin. I turned to him, feeling a pang of reluctance at the thought of leaving his side. “Be safe — and just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

CHAPTER 9: MISSING YOU



The following weeks in Texas passed in a blur. I couldn't count how many barbecues I'd been to, really, or how many country phrases I'd learned. I thought for a brief moment on the plane ride there that it would've been difficult for me to fit in – and somehow, I'd managed to convince myself that everyone would despise me.

But that wasn't the case. I made so many friends in a short time, and they took me everywhere with them.

The hospital prepared everything for me: transportation, housing, everything. It was... nice to be the one being treated for once, to be the one on the receiving end and not have to worry about anything else besides doing my job and getting home.

Missy, her auburn hair cascading in loose curls around her shoulders, slipped her arms over my shoulders as she slid

into her seat. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she suggested, “How do we feel about doing a day and night at the McDonald’s Observatory this Saturday?”

Marco leaned against the counter, his dark hair falling effortlessly over his forehead as he cradled his precious yogurt.

Missy’s learned the hard way one too many times not to touch his stash. And that included a laxative and about ten trips to the bathroom in one day.

“Aw,” I groaned, frowning at her. “I wish I could, but I’m heading back home on Thursday.”

“What?” Missy and Marco replied simultaneously, Marco’s yogurt falling out of his mouth and onto his scrubs. “This Thursday? That’s like two days away?”

“It’s on the calendar,” I defended quickly. “I’m sorry guys, I was only sent here for a week... and then I’m onto the next.”

Missy slouched in her seat, her lips pursed together. “Who the hell are we supposed to go sightseeing with now?”

“You never invite Mr. James –”

“Mr. James would rather mop the ocean floor with an old kitchen rag,” Marco interrupted with a snort. I pouted at my new friends, sighing heavily.

“How will we get to do karaoke in that fancy apartment of yours?”

“I’ll visit on vacation,” I blurted, the idea suddenly so heartwarming. I now have out of state friends I can visit.

“Gosh, a nurse on vacation? So, in the next ten years?”

“Stop it, guys... I have a boyfriend back home who’s probably missing me as much as I miss him, and my parents, they acted as if it was my funeral at the airport.”

“We get it,” Marco chuckled with a sad smile. “We all have our own lives... I think we’re both just glad we got to be a part of yours.”

“And you *better* visit,” Missy warned.

I chuckled, even though my heart was in my throat, and we embraced each other in a quick hug.

“Well, let’s get back out there and use up the rest of our free help.”

“I’m glad you guys have found more than one purpose for me,” I said dryly. “I really am.”



On the way home, I found myself admiring Texas for what felt like the last time. I would miss this place. It's a long stretch of land, always kissed by the warm sand. The nature, hills, and tall, frail grasses had a way of making people feel like they were getting lost in it all.

The people themselves made you want to stay. Not all were very friendly, but every city has a few debbie-downers.

I sighed deeply, the a/c of my rental filling my lungs. My toes tingled against the gas pedal as I waited in traffic. Today, I didn't mind.

“Is this my life now?” I wondered.

The thought made my stomach flutter with nerves.

“Where will I be next month? Will I make friends? Will it feel the same?” My mind continued.

A small laugh escaped me, and I lifted a hand to cover my mouth. I sounded deranged alone in this car.

Pulling up to the apartment complex, I finally imagined the taste of the homemade sweet tea Missy had made for me as I entered my apartment. I kicked off my shoes in the silence, plopping my back on the leather couch and sauntering past the sixty-inch flat-screen TV.

I placed a bit of that leftover barbeque in the oven and took a shower, scrubbing off all the germs and letting the warm water soften my skin. The scent of lavender and eucalyptus immediately relaxed my nerves, and I blew out a breath, feeling every tension in my body melt away.

After slipping into my pajamas, I put my meal together, paired it with that sweet tea I'd been dreaming of and settled on the couch with an episode of Friends playing in the background. Peace.

As soon as I thought all was well, a pang of guilt nearly knocked me out of the couch.

Derek!

"Oh crap," I grabbed my phone, dialing his number. It's not that I didn't miss him; I did. But sometimes, I got so swept

up in my day and the shifts I immersed myself in every free second.

Derek answered on the fourth ring, a little breathless as he visibly collapsed on the bed. He raised an eyebrow at me as I nervously grinned.

“Nice to see that I still exist somewhere in that mind of yours.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” I chuckled, closing my eyes for a moment and wiping the bits of BBQ sauce I found in the reflection of my camera. “It’s been such a long day – but that’s no excuse, of course.”

“No, no, I get it,” he said, his voice slightly higher pitched as he lay back in our bed. I stared at him guiltily through the screen, rubbing the top of my eyebrows. “How’s everything going over there?”

“It’s great,” I replied honestly, running a hand over my hair. I needed a trim. “You remember Marco and Missy? They’re devastated that I’m leaving so soon. These three weeks feel like just a few days.”

Derek chuckled, his eyes darting across the room before returning to my gaze. “I guess it’s safe to say you’re not missing me much then?”

“I’m missing you a lot. I sometimes imagine you in the kitchen with me; I even hug my pillow, pretending it’s you. Texas is an interesting place, but I miss home.”

He smiled from across the state, his cheeks reaching his eyes as he merely blushed. I watched as he shyly looked away for a moment. “I miss you too. It’s just empty and cold here, and I keep thinking that I’m hearing noises.”

“Oh no,” we both exchanged a small laugh.

“I hoped that when we moved in together, we’d get to experience what it was like living as a couple.”

“And we will,” I said quickly. “I’ll be back for three weeks before my next assignment. I’m nervous and excited at the same time.”

Derek’s smile faltered a bit, but he nodded nevertheless.

“Well, I’m going to head to bed so Thursday can come a bit quicker. I love you.”

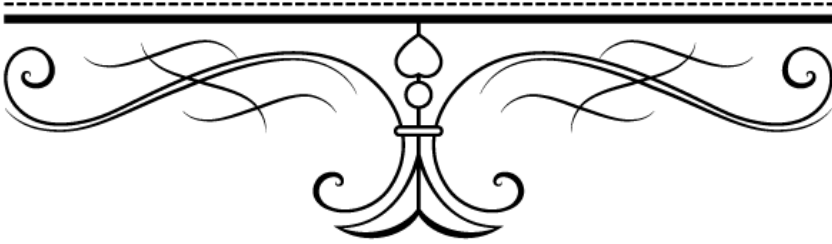
Carry Me Home

“I love you too,” I blew him a kiss, which he pretended to catch like the corniest man I’d ever met. But my heart melted, nevertheless. As we hung up, I leaned back on the couch, a small smile sitting on my face.

Everything is exactly as it should be.

Everything will work itself out.

CHAPTER 10: LITTLE CLUES



The moment I stepped off the plane, a few inches closer to home, a plethora of nerves coursed through me. I got through the entire process, and it felt like a blur, mostly because I was about to see Derek. I sat on the plane, feet bouncing as I thought about what we'd say to each other. Or what the distance would've done to us, even if it sounded like such little time.

But as I rolled down the escalator, I quickly realized that meeting Derek at the airport felt like seeing him for the first time after choir practice. The nerves, the excitement, all those feelings come rushing through me.

His grin caught my attention first, and the way his brown eyes lit up when they finally spotted me, sign in hand and all. We didn't leave on the best terms, but coming back to warmth like this made me feel ten times better.

“Excuse me – I’m looking for my girlfriend – Imara?”

I rolled my eyes, my cheeks hurting from smiling as I launched myself into his arms, dropping my suitcase at our feet. Derek enveloped me in the tightest embrace he’d ever given me, breathing in deeply, his big arms so strong and comforting. I hadn’t realized how much I missed it.

“Did you get a new cologne?” I breathed, inhaling deeply as we reluctantly pulled away. He nodded sheepishly, his hand rubbing the back of his neck.

“Don’t tell me the scent is making you nauseous like the first one.”

“No, no, I like this one; it even smells a little... familiar,” I replied. He took my suitcase, and together, we walked to the car. All I wanted to do was get home, lie under him, tell him everything I saw, and maybe order Chinese from down the street.

We spent the rest of the ride home discussing our plans for the coming days, talking about all the places we wanted to visit and the things we wanted to do together. I was eager to see Tania and tell her all about my trip, to share in the excitement of being back home with my best friend.

He pulled up into the parking lot, and for the first time, I was grateful to see this place. It may have been a bit fancier than I wanted, but after leaving my apartment in Texas, I had gotten used to the sweet life.

The thought had me chuckling internally.

“Don’t mind the mess,” Derek said as he pushed open the knob, and I waved him off. I shouldn’t have.

Usually, a mess is a few scattered magazines, a few pairs of boots out of place, or maybe even a few pillows tossed around. But I found myself coming to a screeching halt at the door, my eyes popping out of their sockets as I looked around. From the living room, I could see the piles of dishes, practically begging for a wash, a cloudy white substance over them accompanied by moldy green spots.

There were jeans all over the couch, a few shirts strewn about, and my vase was missing from the center table.

The floor was so dusty that I could practically feel my nose getting irritated—it was like he hadn’t lifted a single finger to tidy up the place in three weeks.

I turned to Derek as he walked past me, humming, dropped his keys on the table beside the door, and shifted things on the couch to get space to sit.

“Derek...” I tried saying calmly, my heart thumping in my chest. “*What happened?*”

He furrowed his eyebrows at me. “What do you mean? I told you not to mind the mess – I’ll clean it up later.”

“I – this is... why...” I swallowed hard, trying to find the right words and the right tone. “I don’t think I appreciate coming home to this. I mean... why didn’t you try to clean up –”

“Are you being serious?” He interrupted, squinting his eyebrows at me. My breath fell into shallow pants as he raised his voice. “You just got here, and the first thing you want to do is argue?”

“I’m not trying to argue,” I said, my voice slightly trembling as I held out my hands in a pleading gesture, taking a hesitant step forward.

This is not how I imagined this.

“It’s just that — I don’t know. I thought I’d be coming home to relax, and this is... a bit unsettling. I don’t know how to say any of this without it coming off wrong, but —”

“You’re right, only because it is wrong. You don’t get to leave to a whole other state and expect me to pick up all the slack; that’s not fair.”

My eyebrows knit together as I placed a hand on my hip. “The apartment was clean before I left. All of this is *your* mess.”

“But we’re supposed to be a team, Imara,” he stood, shooting daggers at me. I scoffed.

“Derek, I think you think I’m attacking you, but I’m not trying to,” my tone softened as I attempted to diffuse the tension. “All I’m saying is —”

“I’m a slob,” he interrupted, his voice dripping with bitterness as he rolled his eyes dismissively.

My heart sank at his harsh words, and I struggled to find the right response. “It’s not like that, I —”

Before I could finish, he brushed past me, snatching up the keys again with a decisive movement.

Panic surged through me as I tried to follow him, reaching out in a futile attempt to stop him from leaving.

“Where are you going?” I called out, but he swung the door open without even looking back.

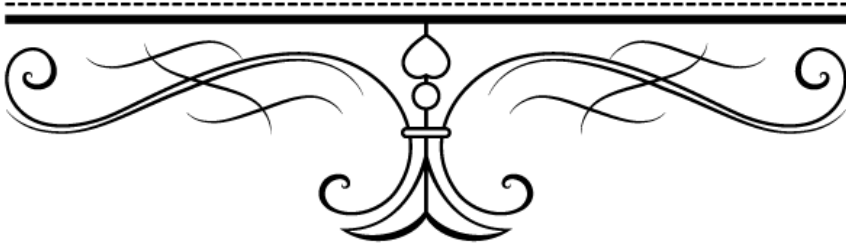
“I’m sorry that I’m so unworthy of you to be around, Imara. I bet none of your little friends in Texas were as horrible as I am. I’ll leave you to your perfect little space.”

“Derek!” I called out, my voice pitched with surprise and a bit of disbelief. He left, shutting the door in my face as I stared at it in confusion.

And still, guess who’s left with the mess?

Great.

CHAPTER 11: ACCEPTANCE



Bruxby's Panini press is always seasoned and still works to perfection. My crispy, moist, and so well-done bacon melt was a clear testament to that. It's why I didn't mind when Tania opted out of Chinese food and instead suggested that we plan our little day date there.

Her brown hair grazed the table as she leaned forward to avoid a mayonnaise and ketchup accident and looked up at me, embarrassed as it splattered on her cheek instead.

"Ten years later, and you still eat like a toddler."

She rolled her eyes, quickly chewing her food, no doubt so that she could retort.

"If you weren't eyeing down my food like a starved grave shift worker, it wouldn't have spilled."

A snort escaped my lips, and I quickly covered my mouth, throwing her a glare. "That was rude. I take offense to all honorary graveyard shift workers – including ourselves."

She groaned loudly. "I worked on a couple of those this week, and they're killers. I'm so glad I have a few days off. I don't know if I'd have made it through the rest of the week."

"I'm not looking forward," I sighed deeply, taking a sip out of my cola and wishing instead that it was Missy's sweet tea.

"Please, don't tell me you weren't enjoying yourself back in Texas. I've yet to know what it was like."

"It's a beautiful place," I admitted, smiling wistfully as memories of Texas flooded back to me. "The warmth, the hospitality, the vibrant culture, it was like stepping into a different world. And the people..." My voice trailed off, a soft sigh escaping my lips. "I made some incredible connections there. Friends who welcomed me with open arms, like I was one of their own."

"So that's why my calls wouldn't get answered? You were too busy with your new friends?"

I snorted, knowing that, if anything, I was the one blowing up her phone.

"Stop it, you know I wouldn't ignore your calls intentionally," I replied with a playful roll of my eyes. "Besides, you're the one who encouraged me to socialize more while I was there."

Tania raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I may have mentioned it once or twice, but I didn't expect you to become the social butterfly of Texas overnight."

"Either way, I feel like this is so exciting watching you live out your dreams. This is all you've ever talked about."

"I know," I said breathlessly, leaning forward. "I wonder if I'll ever get assignments out of the United States, but I don't want to push my luck."

"Since when did you stop aiming for the sky? You need to keep going... you can do anything that you want, Imara. And you know that."

I can, can't I?

But it's not just about me anymore.

My back ached from twisting and turning all night. Derek never came back, and I had to check in with his roommates to find out he'd crashed at their house.

I had to admit, it hurt, and it still did, to think that he preferred to stay in their company, which he once deposed, rather than coming home to me. I knew he needed space, and maybe I did, too, but part of me was hoping we'd just... talk it out.

My first day back and we were already at each other's throats.

"Why do you have that horrible frown on your face," Tania paused, narrowing her eyes at me. "Don't tell me you're thinking of your Texas friends and somehow replaced *me*."

"I couldn't dare – but it seems like you aren't the only one worried about the connections I made back in Texas," Tania handed me a knowing look before sitting back in the booth. "Derek?"

I nodded, taking another big gulp of my soda.

"What happened this time?"

Where do I even start? I didn't want him to look bad, so I tried to minimize what I really saw in our apartment, but I recounted everything he said, the hurt echoing through me as much as it did yesterday.

"Is he serious? Why would he say stuff like that to you?" Tania said a bit too loudly, which caused a few diners to glance over at us. I leaned forward to place my hand on hers, giving her a warning look. She pursed her lips at me.

"You know that this is ridiculous, Imara. Someone who *loves you* isn't going to let you come home to a dirty house and then gaslight you about it."

"He wasn't gaslighting me," I tilted my head at her. "It's – he felt attacked, and that's understandable –"

"He should've cleaned the freaking house," she snapped, taking an angry gulp out of her drink. "And then storming out and not coming home. How do you know he didn't get his roommates to lie for him?"

I scrunched my nose. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he's cheating."

The mere thought made my stomach drop to my feet, and I immediately shook my head. “Derek may be a lot of things in your book, but I promise he’s not a cheater. They sent me a picture of him passed out on the couch either way.”

She raised both hands. “All I’m saying is, he’s really starting to rub me the wrong way.”

“Relationships have their problems, Tania; we’ve been together for almost seven years.”

“And yet he hasn’t proposed. He hasn’t even spoken about it. Literally, all I’ve seen him do is judge you for every move you make towards your goal and try to hold you back. I mean, have you ever gone to see your parents yet?”

“Tania, enough, okay?”

She clenched her jaw, shaking her head.

“Derek and I just need to talk things out. He was a little bit right that I just came home after three weeks and immediately started nagging. I did just leave him behind; he was probably overwhelmed by everything.”

“By what?” Her eyes widened as she held out her hands.

“He doesn't do anything but use your money to put himself through school – I'm sorry, Imara, but you're my best friend; I'm never going to sugarcoat anything for you.”

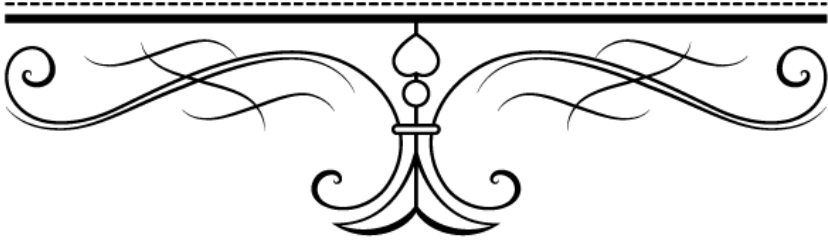
I decided to remain quiet, and she sighed. “I love you. And I'll *always* look out for you. Just remember you're not to blame for any of this.”

“I know,” I muttered. “I just... I want us to get through this. I love him, Tania; he's all I've known.”

I knew she wanted to say something else; it was on the tip of her tongue, but I appreciated that she swallowed it instead with a nod.

“I'm sure the two of you will figure it out.”

CHAPTER 12: DATE NIGHT



"Shoot, shoot, shoot," I raced over to the pot as the cover danced on top of it, bubbles sprouting from the sides.

The pasta was *definitely* overboiled.

I slumped, wiping the sweat off my forehead, and decided instead to salvage the sauce. I was making minced meat with onions and Derek's favorite purple onions.

Earlier, I had texted Derek to see if he was coming home, and his terse reply of "Yes" had left me feeling uncertain. I knew he was still upset, and the last thing I wanted was to spend the remainder of my home assignment locked in a silent resentment war. So, I pushed aside my frustration and focused on making things right.

I cleaned the place spotless, lit our favorite candles on the dinner table, and was now prepping pasta.

I guessed I was just learning when and where to place my battles, much to Tania's dismay.

The door creaked open, and my head immediately snapped up. My heart was in my throat as I wiped my hands on my apron and stepped out, hesitantly wrapping my body around the entry to the kitchen. Derek dumped his keys in his usual spot, his eyes finding mine.

We both remained put. Just staring at each other, but from his sagging shoulders, it was obvious that we were both carrying the weight of this argument.

"I'm sorry."

I thought the words had come out of my mouth, so I planned to say it first. But no, it came from him. His eyes were slightly downcast, and his lips rolled into his mouth. His hair sat like a bird nest, his shirt wrinkled.

It had also been a rough night for him.

I opened up my arms, and he slowly made his way to me, lowering himself until we were in each other's embrace. The touch was quiet and tender, just a moment that reminded us that it was not us against each other but against the world.

“I don’t like that we fight all the time like this...” he murmured. “I want to be here – with you. And I’m sorry that I reacted the way I did because you’re right. You should’ve come home to a clean house.”

He cupped my face, staring into my eyes as my lips parted. “I’d just missed you so much it was almost... depressing. I was overwhelmed; for the first time, I didn’t have you just a mere drive away; some days, we’d go hours and hours without speaking. I felt... homesick.”

My heart warmed up at his words, and I melted into his touch, holding back a purr.

“I understand, I do. I should’ve tried to be just a little more understanding.”

“No, don’t put this on you; you deserve better. I promise I’m going to work on it... I’ve had time to think.”

“Aw babe,” I wrapped my arms around him once more, the soft scent of Vanilla and musk making me pull away to sneeze. “Wow – your cologne is really strong today.”

“Probably because I haven’t showered and needed to cover up. Thank you for that polite reminder.”

We both laughed it up, and as he left to clean up, I set the table and got ready to bask in my boyfriend's presence. Hearing this from him just reminded me that sometimes I really have to go off my own understanding. Tania would've had me single in seconds if she could.

He returned downstairs moments later in a ratty tee and some comfy sweatpants. "This looks great – I can't say when last I had a home-cooked meal."

"I'll try to do those more often," I took a bite, nodding in content. "So, tell me, how are classes coming along?"

Derek grabbed his glass, took a sip, and shifted his head from side to side. "It's all right for now. I'm looking forward to the end of the semester; hopefully, then, I can actually get a part-time job to help out around here."

I would've said that would be lovely, but seeing that he was still so insecure about these things, I decided to smile instead.

"Any idea what you'd be into?"

He huffed, looking up at the ceiling as he chewed. "Probably something like construction or... mechanics."

I furrowed my eyebrows. “But you’re doing tech.”

“Exactly,” he deadpanned, a lazy grin sprawling across his face. “So, what else do you think I’d be into?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’d throw a spoonful of pasta at you right now.”

“I triple dare you. Let me see if my food-fighting skills are still up to par.”

He waved his fork around as if preparing for battle, and I couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled in my chest.

“While we’re on the topic of school, though, my next tuition payment is coming up...”

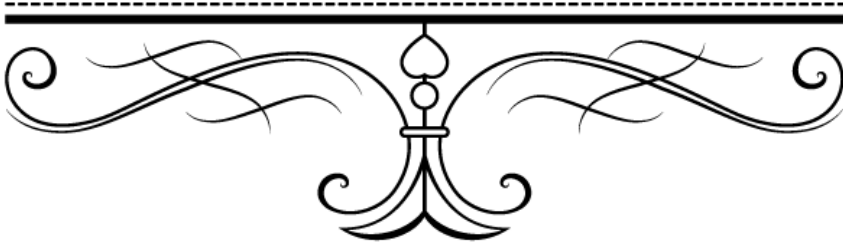
I knew; I received all the emails from them.

I tried not to make my smile drop too quickly as I shoved more food into my mouth, nodding. “Don’t worry about it.”

His hands reached across the table, taking mine. “You know I’ll live up to my promise, right? I will marry you, Imara Harris. And as soon as I can, I will take care of you. You won’t have to lift a single finger.”

“No pressure, my love,” I said quietly. “No pressure.”

CHAPTER 13: FEEBLE ATTEMPTS



The hospital seemed extra peaceful as I passed through the halls, glancing in a few of the rooms and finding patients resting quietly or families sitting near the beds of their loved ones with smiles on their faces.

With my bag clutched underneath my arms, a bottle of water in the other, I made my way to our cubicle room to set up for the day, replaying the previous night's discussion in my mind.

It felt good to know that Derek and I were now on the same page. Despite what had happened, we could get back to where we once were, and I was looking forward to smooth sailing from here on out.

But even then... my mind refused to just focus on the sunshine and rainbows.

I tried to ignore the irritation that crawled up my spine when he reminded me, yet again, about his tuition fees. Every time he brought it up, it was like a subtle reminder of the financial strain I was under. I knew he didn't mean it maliciously, but deep down, I wished he could graduate sooner and take the burden off my shoulders.

"Mm, last night must've gone really well if you're grinning at your cubicle. Should I even ask?" Tania said, jostling me out of my thoughts.

At least I didn't look like I was sulking over all our woes.

Tania stepped in, a sly smirk on her face as she settled next to me. I forced a smile onto my face.

"Nothing like that," I rolled my eyes at her childish ways. "We just... talked. He apologized – not me, and I didn't even have to ask. He also said that he'd be different from here on out so we're doing good. I must say."

"Well, maybe miracles really can happen. Not even I saw that coming."

"Okay, so stop doubting my man," I pointed at her playfully before heading out to start the day.

“Let’s not get too excited now. We have to see actions before we believe words,” Tania said with a gentle nudge as she went on her way to do her tasks, and I went to do mine.

I was pleased to find one of my favorite patients, Mrs. Paddington, at the very top of my list that morning. I almost skipped over to her room and knocked in a quick rhythm before popping my head in.

“Knock, knock,” I sang. Her eyes lit up once she saw me, her thin grey hair up in a loose bun, her brown eyes softening completely. Sometimes, she reminded me of my mother.

I really needed to call my parents.

“Nurse Harris,” she called gently, smiling as I approached, and I returned her gaze.

“How are we doing today?”

“Very well,” she nodded, glancing at her arm. “I’ve just come to get the usual – but I’ve been feeling much better.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I snapped on my gloves. Mrs. Paddington had always been proactive about her health. It’s how she caught breast cancer before it could do any real harm. Every three weeks, she would come in religiously to

get her blood drawn so we could run tests and ensure everything was as it should be. If ‘Patient of the Month’ was a thing, I’d nominate her in a heartbeat.

“Okay, so you know the drill,” I began, rubbing the cotton pad with alcohol over the skin where I was about to puncture. “Stay still for me, lean back, and most importantly, relax.”

Mrs. Paddington nodded, sitting back and looking up at the light. I waited for her shoulders to slouch before carefully selecting the vein right over her inner elbow. With a steady hand, I narrowed my eyes slightly as I inserted the needle into her veins, gently pulling and collecting the required amount of blood.

Once done, I quickly applied a bit of pressure with another cotton ball to minimize any bleeding and glanced up at Mrs. Paddington, who had her eyes closed.

“All done,” I told her softly, labeling the collection tubes and storing them for transportation. “You were great. And now, all you’ve got to do is wait another three weeks.”

She blew out a breath, throwing me a smile. “Will you call me if anything comes up?”

“Of course – but nothing will. You’re as healthy as can be. Look at you; I can’t tell if you’re 81 or 18.”

Mrs. Paddington rolled her eyes, waving me off as she threw her legs over. “You flatter me, but really, you should be receiving all the praise. You’re beautiful, Imara. Absolutely glowing.”

Her compliment caught me off-guard for a bit, and I couldn’t help but grin, hiding my blush as I threw my gloves over in the bin.

“You’re not going to get free blood draws for being untruthful,” I joked, and she chortled.

“I’m being serious. You’re gorgeous – and that pixie cut will always be your look; don’t you ever change it.”

“Well, I appreciate that from a woman as spectacular as yourself, Mrs. Paddington.”

She stared at me for a few more moments. “But there’s a sadness in your eyes as well, Imara... a loneliness that even I know too well.”

With a pang, I found myself sitting upright. My stomach pooled with discomfort, and I nervously laughed it off.

"I'm fine," I assured her, and she gave me a knowing look. "I'm just – I'm tired. With all the late nights and everything."

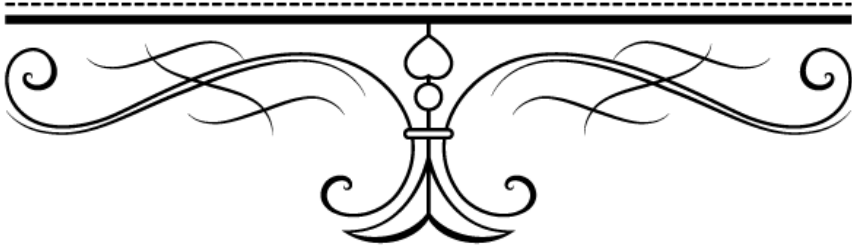
"I'm not blind, dear. I've been on this Earth long enough to tell when something just isn't right."

"It's nothing, *really*," I shook my head, and she sighed.

But Mrs. Paddington wasn't easy to sway; her gaze pierced through my feeble attempt at deflection. She reached for a bag from the side table, her movements deliberate yet gentle.

"Just remember that life is both too short and too long to do anything that *doesn't* make you happy."

CHAPTER 14: REAL LOVE



“They didn’t have those steamed veggies you like – I got a bit of pumpkin, though.”

Rebecca’s husband dwelled by the front door, handing her a takeaway dish. She smiled at him, brushing her blonde hair out of her face.

“It’s fine, honey. Did you get the garlic sauce?”

“Only on the beans.”

She grinned excitedly while my nose scrunched at the thought of any type of sauce on beans. Still, I couldn’t help but glance at them, even while regulating the machine in front of me. The way they leaned in close, sharing moments of intimate laughter. The way she laughed with him was so carefree; he lingered, and so did she, and you could tell they didn’t want to leave each other.

Between them, the connection was so... natural, like a well-oiled machine.

They'd been together for almost twelve years, *twelve years*... yet their fire still seemed so abundant, so nurtured.

"Okay, okay, I've got to go," she said loudly, pressing a hand on his chest. He stole a quick kiss, running away like a child, leaving her smiling in his wake. She turned around again, and I quickly looked away, pretending the machine wasn't ready to go ten minutes earlier.

The exchange warmed my heart, but a pang of longing accompanied it. My eyebrows furrowed. Things between Derek and I were good, though, right?

We were not making out in public, but...we were making things work — for the betterment of our relationship.

As I turned around to move on to my next patient, the world seemed to blur around me, and a sudden dizziness swept over me like a dark wave. I must've spun too fast because my stomach lurched uncomfortably, a sickening sensation twisting deep within me.

I paused, instinctively placing a hand against my abdomen as a wave of nausea washed over me. My eyes widened in

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alarm as my mouth filled with the unpleasant taste of bile, and I stumbled forward, my feet slapping against the hospital tiles as I hurriedly pushed past nurses and limping patients.

I backed it in fast enough in time not to vomit all over the floor, but the force of the wave forced me to my knees against the toilet bowl, my breakfast pouring out of me in liquid form.

Tears sprung to my eyes, mingling with the sweat on my brow as my throat burned with each retch, my fingers clawing desperately at the thin material of my baby blue pants.

I lost track of time, lost in the agony of the moment, hunched over the disgusting toilet as the world spun around me. Eventually, I mustered the strength to stand, leaning heavily against the stall for support as I tried to steady my trembling limbs.

I'd eaten breakfast, and not too long ago, I had some coffee. Maybe that could be it: the coffee. It was a new kind that Senior Matthew had brought in, and perhaps my body simply wasn't agreeing with it.

With a heavy sigh, I rinsed out my mouth, trying to rid myself of the putrid taste that lingered there. Steeling myself, I forced my weary body to return to the break room.

As I entered, Caesar, an EMT worker, took one glance at me and frowned, concern etched into his features.

“Are you feeling alright, Imara?” His southern accent was thick, and I mustered a weak smile in response.

Before I could answer, my phone rang, and I pulled it out of my pocket to find my mother's name flashing on the screen.

Crap.

“Hey, Mom,” I greeted her, trying to keep the strain out of my voice.

“I mean, really, Imara, this is ridiculous,” I pinched the bridge of my nose at the tone of her voice, knowing she was probably standing behind the sink, staring outside the kitchen window with a glare. It was her favorite place to be when she was upset. “You called once to let us know you were back, and we never heard from you again.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose again, the headache throbbing insistently behind my eyes. “I know, but we

planned lunch tomorrow — I just thought I'd see you guys then."

"Are you okay? You even sound unwell, and I haven't seen you. Your father doesn't like this at all. We still want to be a part of your life."

"And you are," I assured her, biting down on my bottom lip. "I just get so caught up with work — with managing everything at home —"

"You don't have to do it alone," and I felt a pang of guilt claw at my chest. "If you need help at home, you can call your mother. Just don't — don't shut us out, honey. That's my worst fear."

"I know," I sigh deeply. "But we're still on for tomorrow, same time. I'll see you guys then."

"Okay, just a heads up, you're gonna get the same lecture from your father."

"I figured that much."

As the call ended, I slumped back in my chair, the exhaustion threatening to overwhelm me. My head pulsed

with each heartbeat, and I could feel the telltale signs of nausea creeping in.

I wondered if maybe I needed to eat again.

I groaned, dropping my head in my hands.

“Everything good over there, Harris?”

Nurse Matthew popped her head into the doorway, her forehead wrinkled.

“Yes,” I lied. “I’m just about to head back out there.”

She raised an eyebrow at me before offering a half smile, one that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Okay, good. Don’t work *too* hard.”



By the time my shift ended, I’d eaten lunch and still stopped for food, and I was feeling just a tad bit better.

I arrived home to the dim glow of the living room, Derek lounging on the couch, eyes fixed on the TV as a familiar sitcom played animatedly.

“Honey, I’m home!” I blurted jokingly, and he chortled.

“Welcome, sweet girl. How was your day?”

I walked over to him and gently plopped down beside him as he scooted aside to give me some space. When he laid his hands over my shoulders, I melted into him, eager to lean on *someone*.

“It was hectic — as usual. Very tiring, and I was so hungry I felt sick.”

He glanced down at me, his gaze soft as worried creases settled around his eyes.

“Sick?”

I nodded. “I threw up a few times, and my head kept spinning. It was only until I had a heavier lunch that I started feeling better, really.”

“Maybe you’re just not eating on time, babe,” he said, a warning in his tone. “You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of other people.”

“I absolutely get that, but sometimes I really can’t just pull away. If someone rushes in, panicking, and it’s lunchtime, what am I to do? Turn them away because I need to have my

salad?” I pursed my lips together, shrugging my shoulders. “That’s just the reality of my world sometimes.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like the fact that you’re neglecting yourself for it. I think in all ways you should put yourself first.”

Really.

This surprised me a bit. I shifted a little uncomfortably because his point brought up something else, something that I needed to talk about.

Derek continued talking, letting me know how important it was to him, and my stomach filled with knots. I nodded a few times, but my mind was now plagued with apprehension, dreading his reaction when I would remind him that I would be leaving again soon.

“But I mean, he *is* saying that I should put myself first, right?” I questioned myself.

“Okay, babe,” I blurted as he paused. “I will... definitely start eating on time.”

He nodded and pulled me closer, pleased with my response.

“Especially since I’ll be on my next assignment soon — I should develop better habits now.” I continued.

I tried to laugh it off, hoping he would just agree with me and return to watching the TV. However, Derek froze from underneath me. I kept my head forward, pretending I didn’t feel his gaze turn on me, awkwardly scratching underneath my eye.

“What do you mean, soon?”

I glanced at him, pretending to be surprised or nonchalant.

“I’m being assigned to Kansas next. I told you before that I’d only spend about three weeks here —”

“Yeah, but it feels like you just came back,” he said, pushing back onto the couch and removing his arms from me. I instantly missed the warmth and comfort it brought. I knew an argument was on the horizon, and honestly, I was just so *tired*.

“*Derek*, this is my job. I don’t choose when I go —”

“Then you need to let them know you have responsibilities at home, so they need to give you a little more grace,” he pointed a finger at me, his lips pursed in a thin line. “We

hardly have the time to even go out because you're always working –"

"I try, Derek, to make time for us, but let's not pretend you don't have your faults too."

"So, we're busy passing blame now? Is that what we do?"

"But you're sitting here judging me like my job isn't the one paying all the bills!"

He stood, heading for the door. My heart dropped as I followed him.

"Don't go, Derek. Don't *run*. We should just try and solve this once and –"

"I'm going to bed," he grumbled, walking away from me.

My lips trembled as I placed both hands on my hip, shaking my head.

"Derek –"

As the door slammed shut and my shoulders sagged, the silence grew more and more deafening by the second, punctuated only by the sound of my own ragged breaths.

"Here we go again." I thought silently.

My mind drifted to Rebecca and her husband, and I couldn't help but think about how they would discuss something like this.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to comfort myself, but it did nothing to ward off the chill that settled over me.

Would he have been more tender? Would he have listened to her and supported her dreams without hesitation?

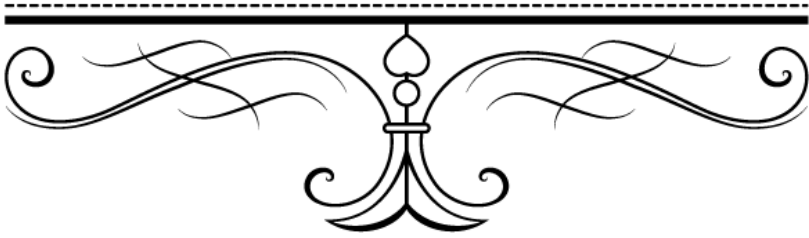
Would I ever.... Would Derek ever be willing to do the same?

The questions lingered in the air, unanswered and unspoken. I shook my head, trying to push away the thoughts that threatened to consume me.

At this moment, there were no easy answers, no quick fixes to mend the fractures in our relationship.

With a heavy heart, I turned away from the closed door, desperate to ease the disappointment and longing ache that settled in my chest.

CHAPTER 15: THE LETDOWN



Imara

For a moment, I thought I was falling off the bed because it felt like it dipped so low that my eyes popped open, and I jerked, hoping I could catch myself before I faceplanted into the floor.

But that wasn't the case. I was curled perfectly into my pillow, a cool breeze flowing over my skin from the ceiling fan. I furrowed my eyebrows, looking over as the movement had stopped, and found Derek frozen halfway off the bed.

"Babe?"

My mouth deepened into a frown as I slowly stretched, completely turning around to face him as he stood to his full height. I had to squint slightly, the sun just peeking through the windows.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m going grocery shopping.”

“I...” I looked around, glancing at the clock that indicated it was just a little after eight. “Why so early –”

“You said that we have lunch with your parents today, no?” He asked, his voice hoarse from sleep, but not even that could cover up the hostility in his tone.

“You asked me to go grocery shopping before they came, and that’s what I’m doing. Why am I being pestered about it now?”

I slowly pursed my lips, sagging against the headboard. He’s right. Gosh, I’m always nagging, aren’t I?

“Thanks, babe,” I smiled instead, but he didn’t turn around to see it. Instead, he threw a shirt over his head as the knot in my chest tightened. “I really do appreciate it.”

“Sure,” he muttered, going into the bathroom and brushing his teeth while I pulled my legs to my chest. I rattled my brain for something to say, but it just seemed too early for anything else other than our usual kiss and cuddle.

This morning, I felt a sudden chill, and I didn't know how to keep myself warm.

When Derek returned, I sat up. My mouth opened to say *something*, but nothing came out. So, I swallowed hard instead, silently watching him take his keys and turn toward the door. My stomach churned as he reached the doorway. I was still sitting in bed, hoping that he wouldn't let this be the start of our morning.

He paused, and my heart lurched in my chest as I watched him turn around. I held my breath as he leaned over and slowly pressed a kiss on my forehead. I let out a breath, not audible, just flowing through my shoulders, and I closed my eyes.

When he pulled away, I took his hand, squeezed it gently, and offered another smile in the silence, hoping we were okay. He returned it, squeezing back.

"I'll be back," he said, and I nodded.

"See you soon."

After he'd left, I lay around for five more minutes before the surge of tingles through my body sent me running. After a quick shower, I was downstairs with my favorite show as

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background noise and some sparkling water as a companion in the kitchen.

If Derek made it back on time, I would manage to have almost everything prepped before my parents arrived. So, I chopped the vegetables left in the fridge and prepared the seasoning, soaked the rice, spun dry salad leaves, and even made different sauces out of the few ingredients we already had. That took less than two hours, but as I leaned against the counter, glancing at my phone, I figured Derek should be back by now.

I decided to ring him. “Maybe there's a long line at the store or traffic,” I thought. He didn't pick up. I sent him a text, just checking in. In the meantime, I busied myself with cleaning up, dusting and disinfecting the couch, wiping down surfaces, sweating and paying a little extra attention to the bathroom. My father can sometimes be a neat freak when it comes to his bathroom time.

But even after all that and thirty minutes of laying upside down on the couch, watching friends, I hadn't heard a word from Derek.

I furrowed my eyebrows and dialed his number once again. It rang and rang, but he didn't pick up. At this point, That

worried me a bit, and I started flipping through the TV channel to the news as if expecting to see our Honda there.

I sent him a few messages, even a voicemail, asking him to let me know that everything was alright. He'd left at eight, and it was not two. No groceries, no him, and my parents were about to arrive. I paced the living room for a moment, the phone hot in my sweaty palms.

Every time I heard the elevator ding, I paused, waiting for the footsteps, but they never stopped at our door. I rang him just a few more times for good measure, and at this point, I was moments away from calling the police.

My phone pinged. It was a text message from Derek: "Just need some space."

My heart dropped all the way to my foot. I held one hand out, rereading the text a hundred times before I set the phone face down. A lump formed in the back of my throat, and I ran a hand through my hair, realizing that this morning was nothing but a show.

I could feel the moisture in the corner of my eyes as I looked around the apartment room and everything I'd put together.

I had made every effort to make sure that today would be perfect, that it would be all about support and family.

And then to the prep in the kitchen, and everything that was missing while my parents were on their... a knock disrupted my train of thought.

Knock knock.

I jumped at the sound of knuckles and wood, and I raced to the door, expecting to see Derek. I nearly screeched when I found my parents; their smiley faces were the exact opposite of how I felt at that moment.

My mother picked it up immediately.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” She asked, genuine concern radiating from her voice.

“Should we have come earlier? I told your mother to crosscheck the time –”

“No,” I squeaked, stepping aside quickly. My father furrowed his eyebrows, and my mother leaned forward as if trying to get a better look. “You guys are right on time. I just – Derek’s not back with the groceries yet, so I haven’t... I haven’t started cooking.”

My mother stepped in, looking around the place. “But it’s almost two thirty – what time did he leave? And have you eaten anything?”

I scratched the back of my neck, placing a hand on my hip as I shook my head. “He’s been gone – for quite some time. He got caught up, so he won’t be joining us actually, and I haven’t –”

My father’s lips were moving deeper downward by the millisecond. I tried to avoid his squinted eyes. From the corner of my eyes, I could see him fold his arms.

“Oh... okay, well, that’s no reason to look so blue,” Mom ran a hand down my arm, offering me one of her warm smiles as she lifted her big tote bag. “We actually brought over some dishes ourselves. Since it’s just the three of us, we can have a little family dinner.”

“I like the sound of that *much better*,” my father perked before I could say anything else, tightening his lips right after. I sighed.

“Mom, Dad, you guys are lifesavers.”

I couldn't stop the small smile that crossed my lips, even with the tension in his voice. The idea of being here with my parents, even if it was just for the day, was relieving.

My chest fluttered with relief as I walked over to them, letting them fully engulf me in their arms.

"Now, let's eat. I need to know how on earth you found such a gorgeous place," My mother tapped my arm as she began setting the table, and Dad and I helped her.

"Honestly, Imara, we were worried that you were living in some rundown, beat-up apartment with no hot water. It's glad to see that you and Derek are really making this thing work."

My father's eyes were on me as I pulled out my chair. "Oh yeah, it's been — it's been a lot easier with Derek here to help. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"Aw," she cooed, placing a hand on my father's. "That boy really is a heaven-sent. Just imagine what he'll do when he is out of college with that degree if he's doing all of this already."

I smiled the best I could, nodding in agreement. I reached for the scalloped potatoes in hopes that she'd just drop the

conversation. My father didn't offer anything, and I'd say it was mostly because Derek just didn't hit the nail on the head for him, even more so now that he was missing lunch when we had all agreed to be here.

"So," I drawled, leaning back in the chair. "How have you guys been since the nests are empty?"

They immediately looked at each other, warmth filling up their eyes, and my mother practically glowed.

"We miss you, darling. But it's been great as well. Your father and I are taking salsa classes, and I just love it. I also learned how to cook Cuban food, which is why we're having my famous Tres Leches cake for dessert tonight."

"Oh wow, you guys are really getting out there," I swooned, ignoring the way my heart sagged at the empty chair next to me, wishing it was us, "here I was, thinking that you couldn't live without me."

"Oh, stop it. You know we'd love to have you right there with us. Your father has been so helpful," she said, grabbing his hand, looking over and into his eyes as he rubbed the top of her hand. "After you left, I felt like there was nothing left for me. Like my purpose was over, I'm almost ashamed to

admit... but he's really been understanding when I'm trying to figure out what to do with myself."

My heart swelled as I watched them. My mom had always been the most hardworking, independent woman I'd ever met, and when she decided to stop working because her body couldn't take it anymore, my dad supported her fully. They didn't fall out of love... or argue constantly. They made it work.

"I really am happy for you guys..." I said quietly, trying to shake the heaviness from my voice. My parents were celebrating their love, and here I was, whining in my head. "Feel free to invite me to the Salsa class. Maybe you can teach me how to dance."

"I think we can arrange that, my dear." My mother winked, and my father chuckled.

"I have a feeling you'll be a natural," he chimed in. "Your mother is the one sweeping me off my feet every Thursday night."

"Now, now, what happens in 'El baile de tu vida' stays in 'El Baile de tu vida.' She tapped his nose, a forkful of greens midair.

I couldn't help the smile that crossed my face, but it felt a little forced.

"Enough about us, sweetie. We came here because we missed you. How has work been, and how's traveling?"

"Work has been pretty good. I guess that's what it feels like when you enjoy your job. People can yell at you every day, and you'll still want to be there the next. Or maybe I'm just not burnt out yet."

"Don't let it get to that point," my father warned, tipping back his glass filled with the amber liquid. Being a nurse isn't easy. I know a few people who quit their jobs and became full-time smokers."

I rolled my eyes playfully, tilting my head at him. I'm sure he had. Always with the theatrics.

"As for traveling, it's been pretty great. You guys know I've hardly ever been out of the country, but I absolutely love going on these trips and exploring new things. I've even made some friends -- we keep in touch."

"It must all be very exciting, but you must miss Derek a lot when you're gone."

"I do... and so does he, but we... we make it work."

My father raised an eyebrow at my clipped tone, and I avoided his eye contact, taking another sip of my wine.

"Why is he not here again?" My mother asked genuinely, tilting her head.

"Oh -- he's just -- something came up, and he couldn't make it in time."

"You know, your mother and I have been together for almost 30 years, and when both of our parents were alive, we never missed a single lunch, dinner, or breakfast with them," my father stated, his fork scraping on the plate.

"Oh, hush up," she scoffed, placing her napkin on her lap. "Things happen. I'm sure he would've loved to be here."

I nodded and took a deep breath.

"You know, Mom, I'm actually dying to try that Tres leches cake. Where is it?"

She smirked and got up, picking up a cake dome in one hand, the other resting on my father's shoulder as she kissed his cheek, making her way to the kitchen.

"You're trying to change the subject," he said, still not looking up with his matter-of-fact face. "Why's he really not here?"

"He's just busy, Dad. We both have lives outside of the relationship." I crossed my arms and leaned back, staring out the window.

My father chuckled, no humor in his tone.

"That may be true, but we also need to make time for things important to said relationship, no? I mean, how often does he see us?"

"Dad..." I warned, feeling the frustration rise in my chest. "Derek and I are fine."

"I'm not saying you're not, but I know you better than anyone. You can't tell me you're fine, and it's fine, and everything's because we all know that's not the case. Or else you wouldn't have moved out on a whim, you wouldn't have forgotten to call us, and he'd be sitting here right now removing all the doubts I've had about the relationship."

I opened my mouth to respond, but my mother came back in, setting the cake down with a flourish.

"Here we are! This is my secret ingredient: coconut milk," she laughed a bit nervously. "Give it a try, you two, be honest."

We took our forks, and I gave my father a sideways look as I cut into the cake. He was not backing down, but I, for one, was done with the conversation. I slipped the cake into my mouth with the hopes that it would just shut me up, but it did more than that.

Heaven seeped down my throat, and I closed my eyes, savoring the taste of the sponge, the cream, and the hints of coconut. It was moist and delectable, and the way the coconut and sugar mixed with the sweet and tangy leches was simply a perfect combination.

"You... made this?" I asked, my eyes opening in awe.

"I told you, dear," she said, a twinkle in her eye as she practically bounced in place. "Those Cuban classes are like magic. You should try my empanadas!"

"I'll be over a lot more often if that's the case, I promised," I beamed, not bothering to look at my father, who was still eating his cake silently.

"Harold? What do you think?"

"It's very good. Delicious," he responded, his tone clipped.

I frowned at my stubborn father, but my mother didn't even notice, clapping her hand excitedly.

"I wish Derek were here; he would've loved it," my mom quipped.

My father and I glanced at each other at the sound of his name, and I quickly looked away.

The door unlocked before any of us could say anything else, and I smiled, relief flooding my body. He actually came. I stood, giving my father a triumphant look — only for the door to bang so hard on the wall I was afraid it left a mark.

I flinched, my eyes wide as Derek wobbled in, left to right, hardly able to keep himself upright.

"Derek...what in the world is going on?" I was immediately up, reaching for his hand, but he quickly pulled it away.

"Don't touch me," he snapped, his eyes landing on mine as he took his jacket off and tossed it onto the table. "Don't... f-freaking touch me."

My parents were silent, their eyebrows raised as they stared at the two of us.

"My parents are here," I said, hoping that would sober him up, but he burped loudly and tumbled around the room.

"Did you cook? Where's the food?"

"You were supposed to bring the grocer --"

He bee-lined to the kitchen., bumping into my father's chair, and I quickly followed behind him. I was embarrassed. My hands balled into fists as I took a deep breath.

He started ravaging the cupboards.

"Are you okay?" I whispered. "What happened today?"

"You left me," he hissed, slamming cupboards, his eyes a little glassy. "You always leave me."

"Derek --"

"No!" he screamed, making me jump. "Don't try to baby me now. It's what you do. You get into my head and make me think what you're doing is okay. Make me think you going across states away from me -- is normal!"

"I-it's my job!" I shot back in disbelief, making sure that my tone was still low.

"Is everything alright between you two?" My mother's voice came in, her tone wavering a little.

"Yes," I breathed, forcing a smile on my face as I walked over to her. "Dereks just stressed — with school and work, you know it can get uh — hard to manage."

"Oh no," my mother frowned. "I can't imagine; my heart is breaking for him."

I gave her a sad smile.

"I'm sorry, mom, I think... I think we may need a second."

"No, no, don't worry about it. We can reschedule, be there for your future hubby girl!"

She winked, but I felt nothing as I watched her and my father gather their things. My father looked up at me, and I could see the disappointment written all over his face. His entire body hesitated; every move was reluctant as he held out his hand. I expected a warning, a reminder -- something.

"Don't forget that we love you, dear," he said.

"I know," I sighed, pulling him into a hug.

"You'll have a home with us; you can always come back," he whispered, leaning his head on mine.

"I know," I whispered back, trying to hold back the tears. He looked at me, searching my eyes. "I'm okay."

He nodded, kissing the top of my head, and left. My mother hugged me as well.

I shut the door behind them and leaned against it for a moment, all the banging and clicking in the kitchen making my head throb.

I walked over to him, my veins still on fire. Part of me was furious, thinking of what my parents may have thought of him wobbling in here like some drunk, and the other part was worried. This isn't like him.

"Have you completely lost your mind, Derek? You left at eight am -

"Oh yeah, it's always my fault, my fault, my fault. Hey, look at Miss Perfect over here -- with the fancy job that takes her all over the country and her holier-than-thou attitude," he scoffed. "Give me a break."

"What's gotten into you?" I yelled, feeling the anger bubbling in me. "It feels like the closer we are, the less I know you. Why are you so mad at me, Derek?"

"It's hard, Imara. You don't get it, and you never do."

He reached for the wine bottle, but I snatched it first, placing a hand on my chest, pleading.

"Then talk to me, help me understand."

He breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling, shoulders shaking. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"It hasn't been easy with you gone, Imara. I'm overthinking myself into a grave. I wonder about your safety. I wonder if you've eaten, who you're with, and if they're safe. I'm stuck here in the apartment, just awaiting your return. It's hard."

I frowned.

"I... I know it's an adjustment and not an easy one, Derek... I don't know how I'd cope if the shoe was on the other foot, but... I'm here now, and I can be there for you if you'd let me. If you'd stop pushing me away."

He shook his head, looking me dead in the eye.

"You're not here, Imara. As long as you have those travel assignments, you'll always have one foot here and the other out the door. How can I trust that you won't just get up and move to another country -- and leave me here?"

I stared at him in disbelief. "I would never do that to you, Derek. You are the love of my life—you are it for me. I don't know how else to show you that."

"You can just go back to being a regular nurse," he suggested quickly, too quickly. "That would make everything so much easier --on both of us. We can build our relationship so that we're ready for marriage as soon as I finish school and --"

"I can't... stop doing what pays for the bills, Derek. What pays for this apartment."

His eyes darkened. Derek's jawline went taut.

"Babe, please," I took a hesitant step forward, grabbing his hands. "Until you're able to take over, I have to do this. It's how we're going to survive. Just try to understand where I'm coming from. I'm trying to make this work."

He squeezed my hands tightly, his eyes searching mine.

"So am I," he replied. "But I can't be the only one here, warming up this empty apartment for whenever you return like some housewife."

I tried to remain calm, knowing that adding fuel to the fire right now was not in my best interest.

"I'm sorry you feel that way... and maybe... maybe we should work on our relationship a bit more. I have to leave for another assignment soon --"

"Here we go."

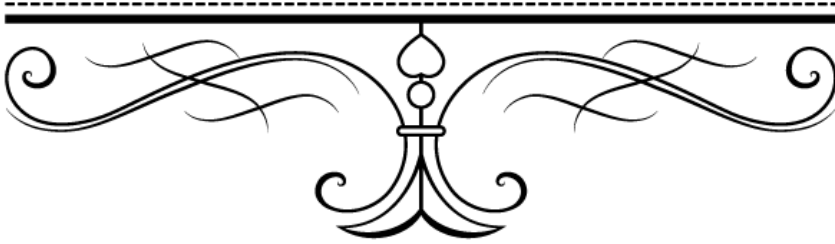
"But I'm committed to making this work. We'll call every day and, in that timeframe, come up with some things we can do that'll help. How does that sound?"

I'm not sure if he was even listening, but he shrugged his shoulders, grabbing crackers from the counter.

"If that's what works for you, Imara. Go for it."

Derek left me in the kitchen, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the mess he'd made, as usual.

CHAPTER 16: QUIET COMFORT



A week later



I pulled up to the apartment, this time all on its own. So, it was more like a house.

Cute little plants hung from the porch, swaying gently in the breeze, and a small garden with tomatoes grew beautifully, beckoning me to taste its fruits.

It wasn't the Hampton's, but as I pulled my suitcase from the trunk, I knew I'd absolutely love it here. The neighborhood was quiet and secluded, and the street felt almost untouched by time.

I made my way to the door, smiling as I realized I didn't have to knock.

I opened the door and walked in, the smell of almond essence and lavender greeting me. The living room was open with a fireplace, and the large window behind it showcased the beautiful, darkening sky. The walls were a deep blue, and the couches were covered in floral blankets, so soft and inviting.

"I can get used to this," I murmured to myself, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

What drew me to it the most was how much it looked like my parents' house and how homey it felt. The walls weren't white and bare; they were a warmer color, and they held little pictures of history. The bookshelf was packed to the brim, and when I took a peek, I couldn't help but smile. There were some books I'd never read and some that were the only books I'd read my entire life, like *D-I-Y for Dummies*.

I made my way to the bedroom, and the queen-sized bed beckoned me, while the burgundy comforter and pillowcases made me want to run my fingers over the material.

"Yeah," I nodded quietly, a sense of contentment settling deep within my soul. "This will do."



I loved my gals and pals back in Texas, but if I had to choose, I'd come right back here instead. The people were so friendly, and the weather was so warm and lovely.

I was only two weeks in, and I had patients who brought me coffee—on a not-so-creepy level—at every visit.

I found myself relaxed here, enjoying the sun at times, and definitely eating more than I should, but I didn't feel guilty about it.

"Good morning, Imara," a familiar voice called out, and I turned to see Emily, my favorite nursing student, her blonde locks cascading over her shoulders.

"At your service whenever you're ready," she added with a playful grin.

"Do you ever just come to work and think... hey, maybe I can have some coffee before I start slaving away," we both chuckled as I got up, chucking the rest of my digestives in the fridge.

“My mom makes me breakfast at home, so luckily for me, I don’t have to drink the 99c coffee this place offers.”

“Ugh, lucky you. My mom used to do the same.”

“Aw,” she glanced at me, a small smile lingering on her face.

“Did she stop?”

“No,” I pursed my lips sadly. “I moved out.”

“Ouch.” As we walked, I caught sight of Dr. Patel sipping on a cup of coffee with a weariness evident in his eyes. I offered him a sympathetic smile, and he nodded, letting out a sigh.

We’ve all been there.

“I don’t know if I’d ever want to move out alone, especially in this economy.” Emily continued.

“I mean, I’m not alone for the most part. I live with my boyfriend.”

“Really,” Emily’s eyes widened. “And how do you find that?”

I tilted my head thoughtfully, my gaze shifting to Macy, the receptionist, who handed me the clipboard with a warm smile. “It’s definitely an experience,” I replied, the echo of

footsteps and distant chatter falling behind us as we entered the room where we did patient updates.

"Living together, you get to see every side of your person: the good and the bad. If anything, it's preparing us for marriage, so I'm a bit excited about that."

"That sounds really wonderful," Emily responded, her voice soft with admiration. "My boyfriend and I don't live together or anything, and honestly, I don't think we'll get to that stage anytime soon, but being with him is wonderful."

As I furrowed my eyebrows in curiosity, I glanced around the hospital lobby, noticing the steady stream of patients who were waiting and wondering if everyone had come in. The soft hum of conversation filled the air, mingling with the rhythmic tapping of keyboards as colleagues updated medical records.

"How long have the two of you been together?" I inquired, my attention returning to Emily.

"High school sweethearts, actually," she beamed. "Almost five years now."

My heart skipped a beat at her words, and I couldn't help but grin at her. Thoughts of Derek immediately flooded my mind, followed by the warmth covering my cheeks.

There was a tightness in my chest, the sudden urge to call him – to wish that at the end of the day, I'd be going home to him.

I sighed, suddenly craving my lunch more as I'd be able to give him a ring. "We're high school sweethearts as well, and it's been almost eight years."

She gasped, taking her sunflower necklace in her hand. "I absolutely love that. It's not often that people get to find someone who *truly* loves them. Relationships these days hardly last three months; everything is so superficial. It's why I admire him in so many ways. He's incredibly supportive, always there for me when I need him most. And you know what? Even when we don't see eye to eye on things, I make sure to listen to him, and he does the same for me. It's a level of understanding and respect that I cherish deeply."

I nodded along, my own smile faltering slightly. I tried to push away the jealousy that seemed to stir inside me and the confusion it brought. My gaze flickered away, avoiding

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Emily's knowing eyes as I struggled to push aside the nagging doubts that threatened to overwhelm me.

"I'm no saint, and I've had to do *a lot of work* to reverse everything done by past relationships that were just *horrible*. But right now, I can honestly say this is honestly the healthiest relationship I've ever been in."

I paused, my fingers hovering over the keyboard as I took in her words.

"What were your other relationships like?"

"Very problematic. No one listened to each other, and we always yelled. There's one in particular where we couldn't get three words out without interrupting each other or completely shutting down. It took me a while to realize and accept that wasn't how it should be."

I glance at her. "And... it just never got better?"

"It can't get any better," Emily chuckled wryly, her words cutting through the air like a knife. "For it to do so, he would've had to see that he wasn't being a good partner and actually want to change. He didn't."

"Take it from me – if you ever get to that point, just leave. It's only going to go downhill from there. Toxic relationships are a waste of our youth."

My mouth ran dry, and the sound of doors slamming, Derek disappearing, and speaking over me suddenly overwhelmed me – suddenly, I was standing frozen in the hallway.

Emily noticed, leaned toward me from where she sat, and offered me a confused smile.

"Is everything okay?"

I can't... I'm not in a toxic relationship -- and neither is Derek a bad person. We've been together since high school, much longer than Emily and her mate. I'm sure they just haven't gotten to this rocky stage yet.

But then... there were those moments when I felt so empty. My mind immediately recalled waking up the morning after lunch with my parents feeling so desperate for his affection and then desperate enough to beg him to stay. And I couldn't help but wonder...

"Imara?" Emily was closer this time, her hand gently placed on my arm. "Are you sure you're okay?"

My gaze flickered to her, and I managed a faint smile as I nodded.

"Yeah, I'm... I'm fine, really," I tried to reassure her, but my voice was weak.

"Did I say something to upset you?"

"Not at all," I said quickly, this time placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"Of course," she nodded, not quite believing me but not pushing the subject further. We got up to move on to our next task, walking into our patient's office with bright smiles on our faces. I was grateful for her presence because, in reality, my mind was beyond scrambled.

"I'm not in a toxic relationship. I'm not." I kept telling myself. Even if the knot in my stomach refused to go away, I convinced myself that it was just nerves.

For the rest of the day, I was a mess, but I somehow managed to complete my shift and headed home.

I crawled into my bed, needing a moment just to lie down. But Emily's words replayed in my mind over and over. "Take it from me -- if you ever get to that point, just leave."

It's only going to go downhill from there. Toxic relationships are a waste of our youth."

Because it wasn't just the idea of being toxic; it was the idea of having to leave something at any point. Derek and I were all I'd ever known. It was... it was having wasted my years, my love, my... money. It was the aftermath of something that sounded like it would destroy everything. It was Derek and all he had ever been for me.

I rolled over onto my back, staring up at the ceiling. "But we're not toxic, right? We argue sometimes, but that's just... it's normal. And my dad may be suspicious of him, but my mom absolutely loves him. It's just his protective instinct. ...right? I questioned myself.

But even as I thought about it, it felt more and more like a lie. And I hated it. I hated the way the dread pooled in my stomach, the way it made me almost nauseous. I hated how heavy my chest felt and how my throat kept lodging with tears because the images of me sitting alone on the couch, sitting alone on the bed, pleading with Derek to hear me wouldn't stop rolling.

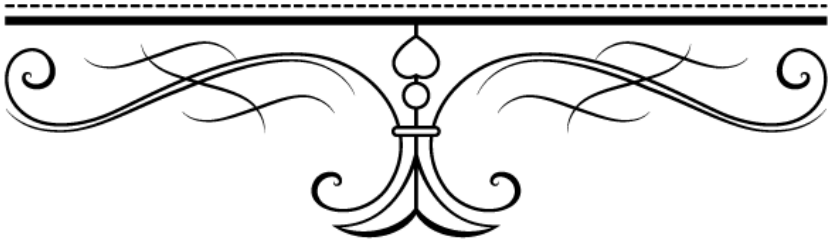
Tears pricked the back of my eyes, and I sighed exasperatedly. I hadn't cried in years, and now the dam was

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breaking. My hands shook, and my breathing grew shaky as I tried to push it all down.

We're not toxic. We just need to talk. I kept thinking

CHAPTER 17: OUT



The morning sun should come with the sound of birds singing gently outside my window while a cool breeze slipped underneath my sheets, reminding me that I didn't have to go to work this fine Saturday morning. I should have been smiling in my sleep, but the thought of ordering breakfast and finally making that harrowing call to Derek was the only tick on my to-do list.

I should be at peace-- somewhat.

But that wasn't the case. At eight o'clock sharp, my phone screeched with a call. I found myself flying up from bed, my hand grasping the device before it could ring a second time.

"W-what's the emergency? How much time do we have?"

I was already falling out of bed, one eye open, drool stuck to the side of my chin. On the other end of the phone, as I

headed to the bathroom, all I could hear was laughter. I paused, pulling the phone away from my ear only to see Emily's number.

"I am so sorry, Imara -- I thought you were already up," she giggled. "And no worries, no one is injured; I'm actually calling because I'm outside."

"Outside?" I repeated, glancing at the clock. "Outside of where?"

"Your house," she laughed, and my eyebrows furrowed together as I waddled out of the room, my hand pushing my hair from my eyes. Gosh, I needed another trim.

I pulled open my door, and there she was, as well as Jason, our Senior Nurse, Gordon, the general doctor, and Raine,

"Uh," I said unintelligently, my eyes widening, "What are you guys doing here?"

"We're here to show you everything 'Kansas,' " Raine said, gesturing to the car. "Did somebody say road trip?!"

"Yes, yes we did," Emily grinned, lifting her hands in a 'raise the roof' motion.

"I'm so confused," I laughed, looking over to the car and then to the rest of the group. "When did you guys plan this, and how am I only getting to know about it now?"

"Listen, woman, I've only had salted peanuts and water for breakfast, so if you could get ready, you'll have all your questions answered on the road."

I gasped at Gorden's rudeness, placing a hand defiantly on my hip.

"I didn't even agree," I raised an eyebrow.

"Either way," Emily glanced at her watch. "You don't have a choice. Now chop, chop. Don't let me come in and dress you myself!"

I sighed exasperatedly, as if fed up with them, but in reality, I couldn't have been any more excited. I rushed back into my room, getting ready as quickly as I could, excited to see the rest of this place. I didn't get out much back at home, and having friends who actually wanted me around was heartwarming.

It filled up something within me that I didn't even know needed filling.



"Okay, so now we're entering Wichita," Emily explained, pointing out the window. "It's the capital of Kansas, and the zoo we'll be visiting is there."

"Oh really?" My eyes widened, a thrill of excitement coursing through me. "You know, I've never actually been to one."

Raine deadpanned. "You're kidding. What did you do when you were a child?"

I laughed shyly, shrugging my shoulders. "I sang in the choir."

"Ah," Emily nodded in understanding, glancing at the others. "Yet we've never heard you sing. What's a road trip without a tune? What do you think, guys?"

My cheeks reddened, and I waved her off. "Oh, please. I'm no good."

"We'll be the judge of that," Raine grinned.

"Oh, I don't think so," I protested.

"Hey, don't pester the woman," Gorden said, raising a finger. We need good weather to make it through the day."

"That is seriously so rude, Gordon," I gave him a playful glare, rolling my eyes. "I'd beat you any day in Karaoke."

"I don't doubt it, but let's not choose today to find out. I need to update my parrot folder on my phone. All my photos are updated."

Raine shook her head at him, a confused look crossing her features. "Something's not right with you, Doctor Gorden. Something's not right."

I couldn't help but snort, leaning against the window, feeling at peace as I drowned them out just for a moment. Even in the scorching sun, people didn't hide from the rays. The city was alive with so many different colors, and it was amazing to see.

The thing with these places compared to home is that the people seemed to carry a certain warmth. Maybe I'd just grown accustomed to the grumpiness that settled back in

Minnesota, but every time I traveled, I found myself drawn to their energy.

We arrived at the zoo, and I was the first ahead, all the different sounds pulling me every which way at once. I felt like a kid in a candy store.

"I think you'd love the otters," Jason said, standing behind me. I turned to face him, his hands tucked in his khaki pockets. "They do this cute thing when they swim with each other, holding hands so that they don't drift away."

"You're kidding," I swooned, a big smile spreading across my lips. "Take me to them, please."

I was not sure where the others went, but I was too excited to care. Jason nodded in the opposite direction, and I followed beside him, letting him lead.

As we approached the pool, the sound of splashing water filled the air, and my heart sped up in my chest.

I caught my first glimpse of the otters. They darted and dived through the water with such grace and precision that my breath caught in my throat.

"Just give them a moment; if I remember correctly, the one with the white stripe is named Koda, and the other is Dackie. If we wait long enough, they'll get bored and go to sleep."

I chuckled more to myself as I glanced up at him.

"I take it you come here often?"

He shrugged, a smirk growing on his features. "Yeah, I do. Sometimes I'll come just to watch them. I need something to balance my brain -- can't just be blood and sores."

"Ugh," I groaned, leaning against the railing. "I know what you mean... but for me it's more --"

I caught myself. I'd almost said...

Jason looked down at me, seeing I'd gone quiet. "More what?"

"Um," I looked at the pool, the otters having drifted off to sleep, now holding hands. And it was cute, but right now, it felt like I'd swallowed my tongue. "You know, it's more life, and it's hardships."

"Ah," he nodded, rocking back on his heel. "I get that. It definitely isn't a bed of roses all the time. But as long as no one's making it any harder for you, then you'll be okay."

A pang of dread hit my stomach, and I swallowed back the lump in my throat.

"I... right."

It doesn't just stop there. My hand tightened around the railing as my head swooned; Jason's voice sounded far away. I tried trying to focus on anything but Derek, but all that was filling my head was a voice that sounded like him.

I closed my eyes for a moment, a wave of nausea flying over me.

What's happening?

Why can't I think straight?

"Imara?" Jason's voice, now sounding like a faint whisper, cut through my mental foggiess.

I hesitantly raised a shaky hand, placing it against my forehead, only to touch the sweat that was beginning to coat my skin.

"Hey," Jason's voice was closer now, and I slowly opened my eyes, blinking a few times to clear the blurriness. "You alright?"

I felt caught in a trance-like state. As if someone or something had trapped me inside my own body and made me unable to control the way my head spun.

"Imara?" This time, the voice was a bit higher pitched and laced with concern and worry.

I blinked again, shaking my head as if I was trying to wake up.

"I... I just..."

The world was spinning, and I was starting to feel very weak, all the strength in my legs draining away.

"Okay, we need to get her to sit down now."

I didn't know who was talking, and I was not sure how, but strong hands wrapped around me and suddenly lifted my body from the ground.

They were warm and safe, and I could feel the rise and fall of someone's chest against my ear. I tried to open my eyes, but my lids were too heavy.

"Easy now, just take deep breaths," Jason said.

I let out a sigh, focusing on the sound of his voice and the warmth of his hands. I'm not sure how long he carried me like this, but the dizziness slowly started ebbing away, replaced by a dull ache that pulsed through my head.

I blinked, trying to clear the fog from my mind, and gradually, the world came back into focus.

As my senses slowly returned, I found myself surrounded by concerned faces, their expressions a mix of relief and worry.

I looked around and found myself sitting underneath a kiddies' bench in the shade.

Emily placed a hand against her chest, "Jeez, Imara! You almost scared the crap out of us."

I groaned, placing a hand on my forehead. "It's so hot... I thought I was about to black out."

"Could've been on the verge of a heatstroke --"

"No, no, no," I waved Gordon off as he tried to analyze me.

"You're not a doctor today; we're all just friends. I just haven't eaten yet, and the sun isn't helping."

He sighed, "I understand that, but at the very least, we should get you some water."

"I'll get it," Raine said quickly, already on her feet.

"The animals are wonderful, but maybe it's time to get some food in our systems?"

I glance up to see Jason standing above me, a small grin spreading across his lips.

"Yeah," I laughed softly. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Emily waved me off. "I'm crazy about some greasy cheeseburgers and an extra large order of fries; who's with me?"

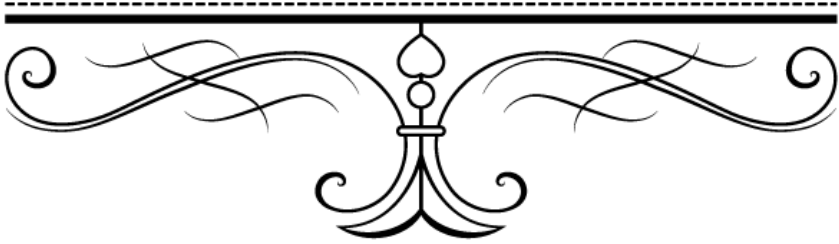
Gordon crossed his arms and shook his head disappointedly. "You're a nurse. You know the leading cause of death is a heart attack at the age of thirty."

"What can I say," she shrugged. "I like my fries. Who's with me?"

My mouth watered at the idea of food, and I sheepishly raised my hands. Jason raised his next.

"It's settled then!" Raine said, startling everyone. She held up the bottle in her hand. "Let's get some cheeseburgers!"

CHAPTER 18: BITTERSWEET



"So, our friend Imara here is also a high-school sweetheart warrior, just like me," Emily drawled with a mischievous grin, popping a golden fry in her mouth. Leaning toward Raine, she raised an eyebrow teasingly as she rolled her eyes.

The scent of sizzling burgers and the excited murmurs of Kansan filled the air of Billy's Burgers.

Men gathered around the TV screens, dressed in their team colors, their eyes glued to the football game, and among their cheers were Jason and Gordon, who left us the moment they saw the screen.

"Please tell me that's not actually true?" Raine's incredulous tone cut through the noise, drawing my attention away from the game.

Suppressing a smile, I reeled my head back dramatically. "Why do you say it like that? It is. Almost *nine years strong*."

"Wow," she breathed. "I can't imagine being married to someone right now."

A pause hung in the air. I cleared my throat, a nervous laugh bubbling up before I spoke. "Oh – I'm not married yet," I interjected, and both of them snapped their heads toward me.

"Wait, really?" Emily blinked slowly as if trying to process the information. "But it's... you'll have a decade under your belt soon."

I shrugged, a nervous smile tugging at the corners of my lips. As I gathered my thoughts, I nervously scratched the back of my neck, searching for the right words. "It's... we're just not there yet," I finally managed to say, my voice trailing off as I avoided their probing gazes. "With life and all its obligations, we're, you know, *taking our time*."

"Well, scratch that, I can't imagine being with someone that long regardless," Raine quipped, a playful glint in her eyes.

I relaxed my shoulders a bit as they moved on.

"Or with anyone at all; let's not forget that you're terribly afraid of love," Emily added, popping another fry into her mouth.

"No, I'm not. I'm just realistic."

"How so?" I asked curiously, and Emily sighed, her gaze shifting to Raine before returning to me.

"Raine here believes that no relationship will ever last. That somehow, all relationships are destined to end the same way."

I raised an eyebrow, the noise of the restaurant fading into the background. "Really?" My voice was barely audible above the din. "Does one person end up leaving the other? Or do both people just not care enough to make it work?"

"It's a combination of the two," Raine continued, taking a bite of her burger. "It's like, you get together, and it's perfect. You love each other, sure, but those years tick by, and suddenly, everything about that person is... boring. You're arguing nonstop, you can't seem to understand each other, and in the end, you're wondering, who did I get with?"

My smile faltered, and I looked down at my food; my appetite was suddenly gone. I needed to stop the thought before it even had a chance to enter my mind.

"Don't mind Raine. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she's had two bad breakups her entire life. She's just being a pessimist," Emily reassured me, taking my hand and giving it a firm squeeze.

"If you pour into your relationship, it'll pour into you. There's no greener grass because wherever you go, if you water that lawn, it'll grow."

I admit, for the first time, that Emily's words brought me relief, and I sagged in my chair, nodding.

"Said like a true poet," Raine interjected sarcastically, and Emily rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious," she insisted earnestly. "Keep going on dates, keep doing what you did in the beginning -- what made you feel young, like teenagers, and it'll never get old. We fall into a rut, especially as nurses, and all we do is take care of people, forgetting to take care of our homes and ourselves... We still have a life, and luckily, people who love us... who we get to go home to. We can't take that for granted."

As Emily spoke, I found myself nodding in agreement, my face lifting, hanging onto every syllable.

She's right—relationships require effort and attention to thrive, and perhaps I just haven't been giving mine enough.

It's not that we're 'toxic; Derek and I are just stuck in a routine -- burnt out, and we've forgotten why we got together in the first place. I let out a sigh, my shoulders dropping.

"That helped more than you'll ever realize, Em," I admitted, smiling at her. "Thank you."

The guys came piling back, dumping themselves in the seats beside us.

'What're we talking about? 'Gordon's eyes flickered between all of us, waiting expectantly.

"Love," Raine mocked, pretending to swoon and then gagging right after.

"My goodness, you're such a child," Emily slapped her hand, and I couldn't help but laugh at the face she made.

"Really," Jason glanced at me, and I tried to ignore the way his lips twitched. "What about it?"

"Oh, just that since Emily and I both have high school sweethearts, we need to keep our love alive and keep trying every day."

Jason raised his eyebrows.

"You're married?"

I shook my head. "No, not yet. Almost there, though."

"How long have the two of you been together?"

Why does everyone ask that? I wondered.

Suddenly, I felt a little shy, and I repeated, "Almost nine years."

Jason's eyes widened. "And he hasn't even proposed yet?"

"What's wrong with that?" Raine interjected, shrugging. "It's not a requirement nowadays to go through the whole proposal process."

"Exactly – we're just working out a few more kinks, and sooner or later, we'll get there. What's the rush?"

I grabbed my orange juice and took a sip, the cool liquid soothing my parched throat as I tried to ignore all the curious eyes on me.

"Well, any guy who's with you is pretty fortunate," Jason shifted slightly, his eyes flicking away for a moment before returning to meet mine. "You've got something special. Don't ever doubt that." His gaze held mine for a beat longer than usual before he looked away, a faint hint of disappointment flickering across his features.

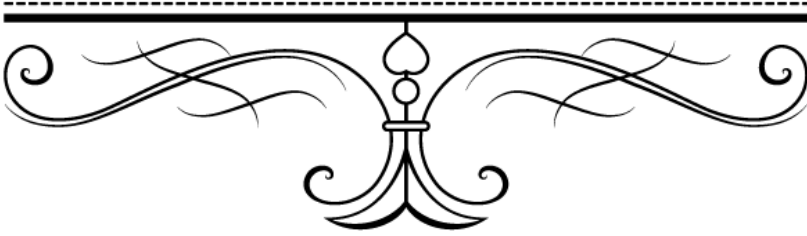
I offered Jason a warm smile, noticing the subtle shift in his demeanor. "Thank you, Jason. That means a lot coming from you."

"And I'm gonna miss you guys so much when I go back to Minnesota," I let out a small laugh, hoping to divert attention away from the moment.

"We'll come to visit, and hopefully, you don't forget us as you get lost all up in your soon-to-be fiancé."

I felt a smile tug at my lips despite the lingering tension, and I shook my head gently. "I don't think that'll ever happen," I replied, the corners of my mouth lifting as I met Raine's gaze, grateful for all the love and friendship I got to experience.

CHAPTER 19: CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION



“Are you sure we can afford this?”

Derek looked up from his menu, one eyebrow perched in my direction. I had to smile and nod, hoping he didn’t notice the way my fingers clenched together around the laminated paper.

I forced another smile, trying to shake off the tightness in my chest. “Let’s not worry about money tonight. This is a treat for us.” My fingers nervously twirled the stem of my wine glass, the crystal cool under my touch.

As the candle burned between us in the dimly lit room, Derek nodded, but his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. He leaned back in his chair, the soft light accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw.

“It’s just been a while since we did something nice, you know?”

“I know...” I murmur. “And I’ve missed it, honestly. Just us – having fun.”

The restaurant may as well have been a haven for intimacy. Its plush velvet chairs and tables were set far enough to give each couple their own little world, and the scent of rich sauces and fresh herbs only made everyone excited and happy to be there.

It had only been two days since I’d been back, but I knew how desperately we needed one of these nights. We needed to climb out of the routine we’d fallen into, or else I don’t know what would become of us.

I didn’t want to lose Derek, and I’m sure he felt the same. We just needed to start doing everything we used to when we were younger, starting with fun dates and funny conversations.

I missed when, instead of yelling, he’d make me laugh for hours on end till my stomach hurt and my cheeks ached.

“Imara, are you listening?”

My eyes refocused on the man in front of me, with his chocolate brown skin and perfectly manicured eyebrows.

I leaned forward, resting my chin on my hand and giving him a sultry smile to cover my lapse. “I am now.”

Derek pursed his lips together, something flashing in his eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. “I was just saying that graduation is drawing closer and closer. Less than a year left, really.”

“Already?” I furrowed my eyebrow. My heart fluttered in my chest as all of his promises came rushing back, but also at the thought of him walking across that stage himself.

“Time passes by, and you barely even notice it. I thought I’d never be done with this like it was a never-ending road,” Derek dived into his speech, and I nodded, but I was almost ashamed to admit that all I was thinking about was the new shared responsibilities.

“I can’t wait to start really living, you know? No more student budgets.” I could practically feel the load lifting off my shoulders and our issues figuring themselves out because we were not at each other’s throats all the time.

He stopped, taking a sip of his drink.

“It’s incredible — and we’re already out to celebrate.”

“Cheers to that.”

“Cheers,” I giggled, clinking my glass against his. The conversation came to a small halt as we waited for our food. I tucked a small strand of my pixie cut behind my ear. A nervous habit.

“You know Kansas is actually very beautiful... I hope you and I get to visit there again soon.”

Derek paused for a moment. “Soon? What’s so nice about it that you want to go back already?”

I shrugged my shoulders, a smile adorning my lips as I thought about my home, my friends, and even my patients. And I told him about all of it. About the big bed and its quilts, about my friends and their quirks, and the patients who called me ‘honey bun.’

“Sometimes home is amazing, but when you step out there into the world,” I took in a deep breath, my veins flowing with nostalgia. “It’s amazing. It was also helpful that Raine, Jason, Emily, and Gordon were the best people. They took me out —”

“Jason and Gordon?” Derek narrowed his eyes, his tone lower, but I didn’t miss the hiss in his voice.

“A nurse and doctor — two harmless men who made my life a bit easier over there,” a chuckle escaped my lips, but it was shaky and uncertain, and the way his eyes bore into mine didn’t help.

“Do you see what I mean now?” He clenched his jaw, his voice raising slightly. “How am I ever supposed to be okay with this when you’re constantly around other men, constantly flashing these new so-called friendships in my face? I don’t know what you’re doing with them.”

My lips parted, the air going from light-hearted to tense in less than a second. Only this time, I didn’t feel a rush to defend and protect Derek. This time, it felt like ‘e’d trampled on my heart, and I couldn’t help but get defensive.

“Don’t start this again, Derek. I’m allowed to make friends outside of you, and it’s ridiculous that you’d think otherwise. Besides, we’re in public.”

“Oh yeah, whatever you say, boss. Because that’s what you are. You pay all the bills, so I have no say in anything.”

I scrunched my face. “It’s not like that, and you know it. I thought you trusted me.”

Derek leaned forward, his voice lowering. “Imara, trust is hard, especially when you seem so eager to find company elsewhere.”

I scoffed, my mouth hanging open in disbelief.

“You don’t have to say it, Imara. It’s in the way you act, the things you do, the things you say; it’s ridiculous that I think you should know your place with men?”

“I do know my place,” I snapped, my voice rising a bit higher than I liked. A few people looked over at our table, and I dialed it down, narrowing my eyes at him. “Not here.”

He continued to stare at me head-on, his lips twitching, begging to embarrass the both of us right here, right now.

“Fine,” he muttered, looking away. “Where is the damn food?”

Relief flooded my entire body as I sagged against the seat, but it didn’t last very long, knowing that when we got home, there may be more hell to pay.

The waiter brought out our food, and Derek immediately dove in. The conversation had ruined our dinner date.

I didn't know what else to say, and Derek didn't really seem to want to hear anything else from me—

“When's your next assignment?”

I looked up from my food, afraid that I was not hearing things, but he was looking right at me, his face slightly relaxed. I was about to reply when a wave of nausea washed over me. I swallowed hard, forcing a smile as I responded to Derek's question, my hand instinctively going to my stomach, which felt oddly unsettled.

"I'm not sure yet," I said, my voice a bit shaky. "Once I'm back at work, they'll let me know."

I could see a flicker of concern in his eyes as he took note of my discomfort.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, just a little hungry, and I think it's creeping up to me,” I took up my fork.

He nodded. “Any guesses as to which state?”

Relieved that he was not dwelling on earlier tensions, I latched onto the conversation. “I... actually, I’m not sure, but I’m hoping it’s Nevada. I hear there’s a lot to see, and their hospitals are seriously lacking labor resources. I wanna see what good I can do around there.”

Derek nodded, a smile forming on his lips. “That’s what I love about you, Imara,” Derek said, his voice suddenly warm with affection. He dropped his fork and ran his hands over his face. “You’re so kind... so caring. I don’t deserve you.”

I wanted to ask what had changed his mind so abruptly, but I decided against it. Instead, I reached out and grabbed his hand.

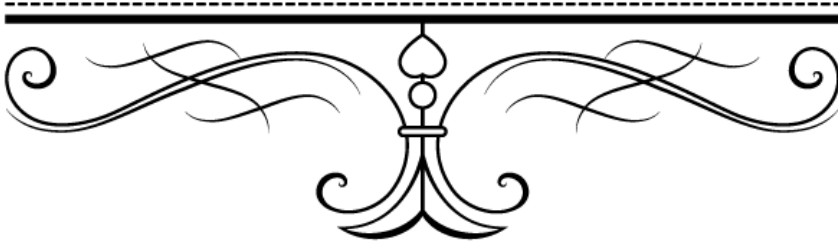
“Of course you do, my love... this is just ... a rough patch for now, but we’re figuring it out. We always do. I love you.”

Derek’s hands tightened around mine. “Do you actually mean that?”

“Of course. I’ll always love you, Derek.”

He rubbed a thumb over the top of my hand. “Good.”

CHAPTER 20: MORNING SICKNESS



“Okay, raise your hand for me – slowly, Peter. I’m not in a rush, and you shouldn’t be either.”

My first patient, Peter, shot me an apologetic smile, slowing his pace as he raised his hand. I placed fingers at different pressure points while carefully studying his face for any indications of pain.

“We’re doing much better. Is there any soreness? Discomfort?”

“Only when I lay on the side,” he croaked.

As I reached over to grab my clipboard, my stomach churned uncomfortably, and my throat constricted. My eyes widened as my mouth filled with saliva.

Not this again, not here.

I took a deep breath and attempted to quell the rising panic threatening to overwhelm me. This wasn't the first time I'd experienced this sensation, but it always seemed to strike at the most inconvenient moments.

I tried to straighten out, clearing my throat, only for it to come back tenfold. Loads of saliva gathered in my mouth, and I felt an overwhelming thickness in my throat.

“Are you okay, Miss?” Peter asked, his voice slightly strained.

I was afraid to open my mouth, fearing that I might traumatize this man, so I set the clipboard down and raised my hand, gesturing for him to give me a moment.

As soon as I was out of sight, I leaned against the wall, trying to regain my composure. The feeling of nausea gripped me tightly, refusing to relent. I closed my eyes, focusing on slow, steady breaths, willing the sensation to pass.

But it didn't. My body lurched forward, and right there in the hospital hallway, I found myself emptying my breakfast contents. Tania was the first to notice; she ran toward me at

rapid speed, her hands making their way to my back as she rubbed gently.

“Imara,” she called quietly, her eyes desperately searching for mine. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, my palms resting on my knees as my head spun.

“I don’t know – I... I don’t...” I managed to choke out a few words before I retched again, and more of my stomach’s content poured out until there was nothing but bile left. A few people stopped to watch, and a few of the other nurses came to check-in.

“This is embarrassing,” I thought as tears stung my eyelids.

Tania continued rubbing my back soothingly, “It’s okay, Imara,” she murmured, her voice filled with concern. “Just breathe. You’re going to be okay.”

I tried to focus on her words, drawing in slow, shuddering breaths as I leaned against the wall for support. The world swam hazily around me, and I felt utterly powerless to stop the waves of nausea crashing over me.

“Do you want me to call Derek?”

For the first time, that didn't sound like something I wanted to do. What would he do? As much as we were trying to make things work, things were still strained between us, and I couldn't find as much comfort in him as I normally did.

I shook my head no, and Tania didn't press further.

"Come on, babe. Let's get you checked in."

I wanted to protest, to tell her that I was okay and it was just a stomach bug. But I wasn't really sure. It felt as if everything was draining from me at that moment, and as the tears flowed from my eyes, all I wanted was my parents. My mother, at least.

Tania took charge, speaking to the receptionist in a calm, measured tone as she explained the situation. I stood by her side, feeling utterly lost and vulnerable.

Minutes later, I was lying in the hospital bed with drips attached to my arm while Tania took my vitals.

She busied herself, her movements steady and precise as she checked my temperature and blood pressure.

As Doctor Frampton himself entered the room, I couldn't help but sigh. He was our resident doctor, a kind man who would now and then bring in donuts for the staff.

"I knew sooner or later you'd run yourself down, Imara," he began, walking over to my side of the bed. "I've been telling you that you need to rest."

"I didn't feel tired, though," I defended. "I think – I just haven't been eating right."

"Have you been experiencing this nausea for a long time?"

"Off and on," I shrugged, and he nodded.

"Any other symptoms? Weakness? Fainting, Headaches?"

My mind flashed to my trip back to Kansas, and a frown settled on my lips.

"Fainting... dizziness, yes."

He continued to ask an array of questions, but the more I lay there on the bed, the more tired I got.

I did my best to answer, but my mind felt foggy and disconnected, making it difficult to articulate exactly what I was feeling.

Tania stepped in once she realized that I was falling through, providing additional details and observations that I may have missed in my confusion. Together, they discussed possible causes for my sudden illness and decided to run a series of tests to determine the underlying cause.

As they did the tests, I felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me, and my eyelids grew heavy with fatigue. All I wanted was to curl up and sleep until this nightmare was over.

“Is there anyone you’d like us to call, Imara?” Doctor Frampton asked as my eyes shut.

A familiar voice echoed in my mind, a desperate plea for comfort and reassurance. “Mom,” I whispered hoarsely, the word escaping my lips before I could stop it. “Please.”

I vaguely caught his nod before my eyes shut, and I wondered what was happening to me before I succumbed to the welcoming embrace of sleep.



“Oh my g - oh my goodness, what’s wrong with her?” The sound of a shrill voice pried my eyes open, but my tired body felt glued to the bed.

“Tell me what’s wrong with her!”

“Mrs. Harris, she's okay. She’s just a little exhausted.”

Mom?

Warm hands felt my cheek, and the smell of cocoa butter fanned against my face. It brought a smile to my lips.

“Imara, honey... Imara, it's mom.” Her voice was quiet, fragile, and shaky.

I blinked, trying to focus on the figure beside me. Her brown hair was in the messiest bun I’d ever seen her in, and I immediately knew that she’d probably run a couple of red lights heading over here.

"Mom," I whispered, my voice barely above a hoarse whisper. I closed my eyes for a moment before reopening.

Her hands tightened around mine, and her touch grounded me in reality. "It's okay, sweetheart. I’m right here," she murmured, her voice trembling with emotion. “What happened?”

I managed a weak smile, my heart swelling with relief at the sound of her comforting words. "I'm okay, Mom. Just tired," I assured her, my voice barely audible.

"The doctor said you haven't been taking care of yourself," she frowned, her eyes heavy with disappointment. "Where's Derek?"

"He's busy," I said quickly. "School and all of that – and work."

Her frown deepened, and I could tell that she wasn't pleased. Having Dad suspicious about him was enough; I didn't need my mom joining the hate train.

"If you need to come home for some time –"

"Mom, no," I reassured her. "I'll take some days off."

Before she could respond, the door opened, and Mr. Frampton re-entered the room. I felt a surge of anxiety ripple through me, not knowing what those tests would hold and knowing how dramatic my mother could get as well.

"Mrs. Harris, I have some good news," he said, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Your daughter is going to be just fine."

My mother's eyes widened in relief, and her hand tightened around mine. She rolled her eyes back into her head and let out a loud sigh. "Thank goodness," she breathed, her voice choked with emotion.

I couldn't deny it as well; it felt like someone had lifted a load off my shoulders. I know it didn't sound like much, but in that moment, the unpredictability of life really dawned on me: One day, you're living your best life, and the next day, you're being diagnosed with a chronic illness. I'd seen it a thousand times myself.

The doctor explained that I'd been suffering from dehydration and exhaustion, likely due to overworking myself. He assured us that with some rest and hydration, I would be back to my old self in no time.

"Thank you, Dr. Frampton; I'll definitely work on my self-care a bit more," I said.

I sat up, ready to peel the wires off of me, but he held up his hands.

"There's one more thing, Imara," he said, and I furrowed my eyebrows. "Turns out you're also pregnant."

"Oh crap," Tania blurted from behind him, blinking rapidly.

“...which could’ve amplified those symptoms and made your dehydration even worse. I’m glad we...”

I froze, the words echoing in my mind like a distant echo.

Pregnant?

It's impossible, unthinkable, and yet... the pieces began to fall into place, the symptoms suddenly making sense.

My mother released my hand for a moment to clap, covering her mouth excitedly. "Imara, honey, did you hear that?" she asked, her voice trembling with disbelief. "I'm going to be... a grandmother."

But I was too stunned to respond, too overwhelmed by the realization that my life was about to change in ways I could have never imagined.

The thought terrified and thrilled me at the same time.

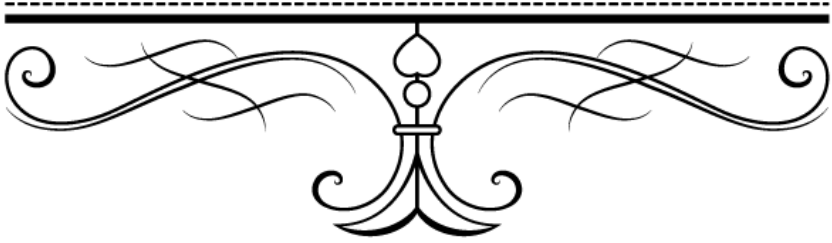
A mother. Me? It was not like being a mother was not a role I'd never envisioned for myself, but now that it was a reality, I couldn't help but feel another wave of nausea wash over me. I looked down at my stomach, my heart palpitating in my chest.

“I want this. Of course I do; I already feel a sense of... protectiveness for the new person growing inside me,” but in that moment, my rational brain couldn’t help but kick in.

“I’m the one carrying all the financial burden, and despite Derek graduating soon, who’s to say he’s guaranteed a job? I know people who have had to wait until five years after graduation before they finally joined the workforce.”

My mother continued to beam beside me, completely oblivious as she called my father, and Tania was the one to come around. With a knowing look on her face, she said, “You should probably call Derek. Right now.”

CHAPTER 21: TRUST



I did one better.

Right after the good doctor gave me a clean bill of health and dismissed me, I found myself in my car, heading home. The entire way there, at every stop, every pause, I looked down at my stomach, still flabbergasted that I had a living being inside of me.

I was out of breath by the time I reached my floor. When I pushed the key in, the door opened, and I found Derek lounging on the couch. He looked up at me, confusion sprawling over his features as he hastily sat up and brushed a few crumbs off his shirt.

He placed his phone face down, giving me all his attention as I frowned.

“Babe... what’re you doing home so early?” I didn’t know how to explain. It felt harder than it needed to be, especially since I couldn’t gauge his reaction. He just got so reactive sometimes that I wondered if it was easier not to tell him at all. “You didn’t get fired, did you?”

His lips parted in horror, and I shook my head, slowly making my way toward him and sinking on the couch.

“I... there’s something I need to tell you... please don’t get upset?”

His confusion deepened, only for his lips to press into a thin line, his eyes narrowing at me as he moved an entire cushion away.

“What did you do?”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly feeling dry. "Derek, I... I don't know how to say this," I began, my words stumbling over each other as I struggled to find the right way to break the news.

“Did you cheat on me?” he blurted, his voice trembling, and I stared at him in utter disbelief.

The accusation hit me like a slap in the face, and I recoiled slightly, hurt and confusion coursing through me. “*What? No!*”

He visibly relaxed at my denial, but the tension between us remained palpable. “Then what is it, Imara? Just spill it already; you’re making me anxious,” he demanded, his tone softer, but I don’t miss the suspicion in his voice.

I took a deep breath, gathering my courage as I met his gaze. “I’m... I’m pregnant,” I blurted out, the words tumbling from my lips in a rush.

For a moment, Derek was silent, his eyes widening in shock as he processed the news.

Then, slowly, a myriad of emotions flickered across his face: surprise, disbelief, even fear. I held my breath, not knowing how to comfort him when I needed it myself. His shoulders slumped, and he looked down at the carpet.

“Pregnant?” he repeated, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

Derek suddenly scooted forward, cupping my face in his hands and pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Imara,

this is amazing news. This is *perfect*," he said softly, his eyes shining. I furrowed my eyebrows, a breath leaving my lips.

"It is?"

"Of course, we're going to be parents. To be together, *forever*, no matter what."

His last words made my heart melt, just an inch of relief coursing through me as I leaned into his touch. His thumb wiped away the last of my tears.

"But Derek... What about... I mean, we're barely keeping our heads above water right now. How will we -"

"I know things are tough right now, Imara," he began, taking my hands and staring me right in the eye. "But we'll find a way through this. We'll tighten our belts, cut back on expenses where we can, and I'll – I'll start looking for a job."

A pang of confusion. I thought he was already looking for one. I decided not to ruin the moment, but I was not entirely convinced, honestly. I'd be able to maneuver if we didn't have this costly apartment; my job paid well enough but not well enough to handle everything on my own.

“What if we downsized?” I suggested giving the place a look around. “I’m sure we can find another two-bedroom that’s slightly cheaper; I mean, do we really need all of this?”

“Yes, we do,” he retorted, his hand loosening around mine. “I’m not raising my child in bad conditions; they’re going to get the best – always.”

“We should at least be practical, Derek. I can’t –”

“I’m going to try to help too, Imara,” he snapped, dropping my hand, and I coiled right back into my shell. I swallowed hard, looking away, and a sigh left his lips.

“I know you’re worried, my love, but I’ll take care of this... I promise. For now, I think what we need to focus on is stability for our baby, and not just financial.”

His hands rested on my thigh, and I warily looked up at him, his tone implying what I already knew.

“What do you mean then?”

“Well, how will we raise a child together if you’re leaving every few weeks to prance around in another state?”

My eyebrows knitted together. “Prance around? Derek, I’m work –”

“I get it, I do. But if we’re talking about practicality...”

I clenched my teeth together. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, he had a point. How would I raise a baby if I’m here, there, and everywhere taking care of anyone else? But still, I needed to save even more money now.

“I can’t stop traveling right now when we need the money more than ever...” I took a deep breath, disappointment weighing heavy in my heart as I continued. “But I can... I can after a few more months. I can revert to my standard contract.”

Derek smiled, and he reached out to brush a stray strand of hair from my face. "That may be best, my love. And maybe it's time to start thinking about other options. Maybe you can consider... a different career path, something that allows you to be more present for our family. Like a 9-5."

The idea sent a shiver down my spine, “I went to school for nursing, Derek. I’m not giving up on it – ever.”

It was ridiculous for him to think that let alone suggest it. He knew how much effort I’d put into this, how hard I’d worked, and that it was all I’d ever wanted. Anger surged

through my body at the mere thought of giving up what I loved and enjoyed doing the most.

Derek's gaze was steady as he met my eyes. "It's never too late to start something new, my love. And if it means being there for our child, I think it's worth considering."

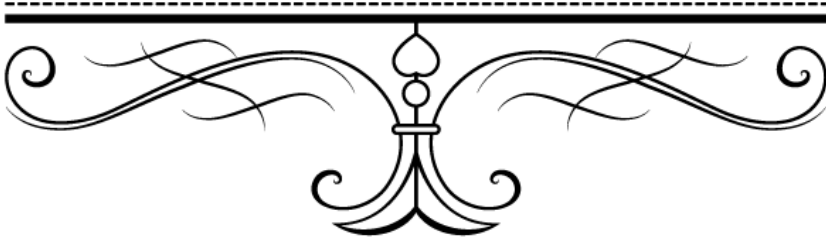
That's not fair; I wanted to continue. But I was tired. It was not a negotiation for me, and it would never be. He was just going to have to find that out the hard way.

"Do you trust me?" He asked suddenly, leaning in to meet my eyes.

With a baby on the way, it pained me to know that this was our dynamic right now. It pained me to think that I... may not have chosen the right person to create life with, and as he cuddled me into his chest, it was not comfort that surged through me; it was dread.

"I trust you."

CHAPTER 22: TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS



The hospital gave me two weeks of mandatory leave, and to say those two weeks were a struggle would be the understatement of the century. I was not used to being so idle, and my mom visited almost every day to bring us lunch and chat with me, but other than that, I'd really just been lounging around.

I missed eating lunch with Tania or gossiping with patients.

Derek also hadn't been the best host. He was either stuck on assignments or playing video games. The only time we got to spend time together was when we cuddled at night.

He claimed that I should be resting so that I didn't *hurt the baby*, but I was *barely* pregnant. The only thing keeping me

back was my newfound hatred for ketchup and fish. Not together, of course.

I walked down the stairs with a sigh, about to scour my kitchen for the tenth time today. My mother had brought me plush bunny slippers for my aching feet, and they were so quiet and comfy. They barely made any sound when I walked, and it felt like I was traveling on clouds.

Derek sat on the couch, his head bent toward his lap. I reached the last step and let out a loud sigh of relief, and he jumped, fully dropping his phone and turning toward me as if I'd been a burglar. A little laugh escaped me until he placed his phone face down on the coffee table again and ran a hand through his hair.

It might've been a little more reassuring if these occurrences didn't seem to be happening more and more.

I paused in front of Derek, studying his expression carefully. There was a tension in his shoulders, a slight furrow in his brow that wasn't there before.

“What's going on?”.

“Nothing really – Marcus just called to invite us to this pool party he's having. I think we should go.”

The invitation caught me off guard. Derek's friends had never been my favorite crowd, and I couldn't say I was thrilled at the prospect of spending an entire afternoon with them. But Derek's eyes were hopeful.

"You want to go to a pool party hosted by your old roommates? I thought... well, I thought you didn't really like them?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's not that, living together just – didn't work out for us. It would be nice to reconnect, though. I've been drowning in assignments for the longest time, and you've been complaining about feeling stuck here."

Despite my reservations, I found myself nodding along, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips. Maybe this was what we needed, I thought to myself: a chance to step outside of our routine and have some fun together.

"Sure, I'd love to go," I said, forcing a smile despite the nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. "It'll be nice to get out of the house for a bit."

Derek's face lit up at my response, and he reached out to take my hand in his. "Great, I'll let Marcus know we're coming. It'll be fun, I promise."

I nodded, trying to ignore the lingering doubts at the back of my mind. I couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for Derek as he rubbed his thumb over the top of my hand. Maybe I'd been too quick to jump to conclusions, too quick to doubt him. Maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay.

"I'm gonna start to get ready," he said, placing a kiss on my forehead.

But as I watched him walk away, his phone clutched tightly in his hand, I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. And no matter how hard I tried to push it aside, the sense of unease lingered, growing stronger with each passing moment.



The moment we arrived, my regret grew stronger.

The half-dressed women, the profanities playing through the speakers, beer, and alcohol – I was not sure what else I

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expected. Derek was out of the vehicle first, running up to his friends, who welcomed him with excited beer hugs.

Dressed in a pair of knee-length shorts and a tank top, I hesitantly flip-flopped my way over to them. Marcus caught my eye and threw his sunglasses into his hair with a wide smile.

“Yo! Imara, I didn’t think you’d *actually* come,” he nudged Derek, who gave him a sheepish smile in return.

I forced a polite smile in return, but inside, I felt a knot of unease tightening in my stomach.

“It’s nice to get out of the house sometimes,” I replied weakly.

The guys offered me nods and half-hearted greetings before returning their attention to the drinks and music. I felt like a fish out of water, surrounded by strangers and drowning in a sea of noise and chaos.

“Pool’s in the back. Make yourselves comfortable,” Derek said as he rested a hand on my shoulder before saying, “I’ll be right there with you; feel free to put your feet in and relax.”

“You’re making me go out there alone?” I asked quietly, and he pursed his lips together.

“Well, you can’t drink? Can you? Do you want to watch me?” The annoyance in his voice was clear, and I spun on my heels, making my way past all the women who looked at me as if I was some sort of social pariah.

I found a secluded corner of the backyard and sunk into a lounge chair, wrapping my arms around myself as I watched the party unfold before me. The laughter and music seemed to mock my solitude, reminding me of how out of place I felt in this environment.

These people were my age, but it was clear that we came from two different walks of life. I felt like the mother here, no pun intended.

I should’ve stayed home.

I wanted to be supportive of Derek, but it didn’t feel like he wanted to offer the same. I protectively wrapped a hand around my stomach, leaning back and hoping that this would be over before it started. Derek was still off in the kitchen, while I had no choice but to sit on the sidelines.

It felt like ages until he finally made his way out, and his friends, including Marcus, were in tow. He gave the place a quick look around and smiled when he spotted me. I returned the gesture weakly.

I expected him to come over, to spend time with me, or at least ease me into it, but he turned his back toward me instead, completely engrossed in a conversation with his friends. With a bottle of beer in his hands, he tipped his head back and took a large gulp.

“Are you from the Northern Society? I’ve never seen you around,” asked a woman dressed in a knitted cover-up as she plopped next to me. Her bright blue hair caught me by surprise, and she outstretched a can of beer to me, but I declined.

“Thank you. I’m not drinking today,” I told her kindly, and she nodded. “I’ve actually graduated from nursing school as well.”

Her eyes widened, and she nodded. “*Wow*, that’s impressive. You must be Derek’s girlfied, then?”

My eyebrows rose slightly, and a little smile threatened to form on my face. “He’s mentioned me?”

“Oh yeah,” she rolled her eyes playfully, “everyone knows about his gorgeous nurse girlfriend. The man adores you.”

I felt a pang of guilt – a moment lapse because I’d been giving him such a hard time.

“It... it’s actually very nice to hear that.”

“I can imagine,” she said, laying back on the chair and taking a sip out of her can. “I wonder, though, how someone like you, so smart and successful, ended up with Derek? How do the two of you make it work?”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“No offense, but look at him,” she chuckled, and my eyes followed hers to where Derek was, hoisting one of his friends, who clearly didn’t want to get into the pool, over his shoulder. The woman continued to talk, but my heart jolted in my chest due to the sheer terror on his friend’s face – and how dangerously close his head was to the edge.

I stood quickly. Derek’s friends were cheering him on, but this wasn’t funny.

“Derek, stop!” I screeched, but he couldn’t hear me as he inched closer and closer to the pool. I moved as fast as I

could and grabbed his arm just as he was about to throw him in. "Are you crazy? You don't do that. Put him down!"

Now startled, Derek placed his friend on the ground, who let out a sigh of relief, his face as red as a tomato.

"Imara, relax, we're just having fun –"

"Fun is consensual," I told him, a little quieter because we'd drawn a little scene. "If you'd dropped him and he banged his head on the edge, or if he couldn't swim and then he died, it would've been your fault. You need to be careful."

"Jeez," one of his friends murmured from behind him, "why'd he bring the buzzkill?"

"Actually, she's right," Blue hair chirped from behind me. "Did Frankie look like he wanted Derek to throw him in the pool? All fun isn't good fun, guys."

"Come on, lighten up. We were just messing around."

I shook my head, my heart still racing with adrenaline. "That's not messing around, Derek. You could have seriously hurt him."

His friend, now safe on solid ground, nodded in agreement, still catching his breath from the close call. "Yeah, man, that was a little too much," he added, his voice wavering slightly.

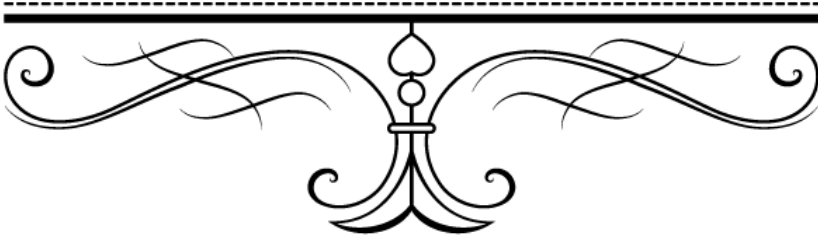
"Alright, alright," Marcus interjected, raising both hands. "We won't throw anyone else in the pool. Let it go."

He glanced at me up and down, obviously in displeasure, and Derek gritted his teeth. I knew he was irritated, and maybe I could've been a bit calmer, but I just... I panicked. It's the nurse in me.

I took a deep breath, "I'm just trying to look out for everyone's safety. I'm sorry I yelled," I said, my voice steadier now.

"I get it, okay? Let's just forget about it and enjoy the rest of the party."

CHAPTER 23: ULTIMATUM



It had been an hour since Derek said we'd head home.

I'd kept the blue-haired woman, Clair, as my company for a while, but even she grew tired of the men and left.

But every drink, chant, and everything else just seemed to make Derek want to stay *longer*. I was tired, and the day was long gone, replaced by a dark sky and a shiny moon.

There were fewer people now, just the small group sitting around the pool, making the most unfunny jokes and jabbing each other whenever they felt like it.

One of them, clearly intoxicated, slurred something about the "hot chicks" at the party, earning a round of raucous laughter from the group, including Derek.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Marcus, sensing my unease, shot me a sidelong glance.

"What's her problem anyway?" he muttered to Derek, loud enough for me to hear.

I bristled at his words, my cheeks flushing with anger. "Maybe if you treated women with a little more respect, I wouldn't have a problem."

Derek's eyes widened in surprise at my outburst, and for a moment, his expression towards me hardened. "Relax, Imara."

I glared at Derek, my frustration boiling over. "No, Derek, I won't relax. I've been here all day, and you guys have done nothing but talk about women as if they're objects and try to hurt each other. Is this really the company you keep?"

Marcus scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Oh, spare us the lecture, Nurse Nancy," he quipped, earning chuckles from the others. "Are you his girlfriend or his mother?"

I shook my head in disbelief, incredulous at their dismissive attitude. "It's not a lecture; it's called basic decency," I shot back, standing and brushing off my leg. "And I'm leaving. You can come with me or catch a ride back with one of them, your choice."

As I turned to leave, Derek hesitated for a moment, torn between staying with his friends and following me. I felt resolute for a moment, disappointment crawling up my spine at the thought of him staying.

I could see the conflict written on his face, but ultimately, he chose to stand up, stumbling slightly as he made his way over to me.

I raised my chin, relief coursing through me.

His friends erupted into laughter, mocking him as he walked away. "Looks like someone's bound by the ol' ball and chain. And they're not even married yet." one of them jeered, and Derek's face flushed with embarrassment and anger.

His jaw clenched, his fists balling at his sides, but he didn't say anything. As we stepped outside, I sighed. "Just don't bother yourself with them."

He yanked open my car door so roughly that I was afraid it'd fall off. I narrowed my eyes at him as we climbed in, but I didn't have a chance to get the word in.

"You had no right to embarrass me like that," he snapped, his words slurred from the alcohol.

"Embarrass you? Derek... they were disrespecting women, including me, and you just stood there and laughed it off! I was tired of it."

"Tired of it," He scoffed, shaking his head. "You always have to make a scene, don't you? Can't you just let things go for once?"

I felt a surge of anger, knowing that, of all things, he wouldn't even stand up for me. "I'm tired of being treated like I'm overreacting every time I try to stand up for myself!"

"You should've just stayed home!"

"Maybe I should've!" I yelled back, voice strained. "Do you think I wanted to sit there while you ignored me *all night* to entertain fully grown college students who act like teenagers?! I'm always trying to bend over backward to make you happy, and it seems like I can't get the same from you. *I'm tired.*"

Derek remained quiet, and that spoke volumes. His jaw clenched tight as he stared out the window, unwilling or unable to meet my gaze.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm raging within me. "I don't want to fight," I said, my voice softer now, the anger giving way to exhaustion. "But we can't keep ignoring these issues, Derek. We need to talk about the real issue and figure out how to move forward. I mean... we have a *baby* on the way."

Again, he remained silent, his expression unreadable, and I felt a pang of sadness deep in my chest. As we pulled up to our apartment building, I couldn't help but wonder if this was the beginning of the end for us and if there was really anything I could do to fix this or if there was *ever* anything I could've done.

As we took the elevator to our apartment, I stole glances at Derek, hoping for some sign of sadness or willingness to talk, but he remained stoic, his focus seemingly elsewhere.

Then, a ping from Derek's phone broke the silence, and my heart sank as I watched him quickly type out a response.

He wasn't willing to talk things out with me, but the moment he got a text, it completely consumed him. That stung.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, feeling the familiar sting of tears threatening to spill over. What was so urgent that it could command Derek's attention so much when I couldn't even get him to look at me?

I pushed my way into the apartment, just wanting to lie down and sleep. His hands found mine before I could do any of that. Surprisingly, despite my anger, my lips parted as he pulled me back to him.

"I'm sorry, my love... I'm sorry – I don't want to fight," he pleaded.

I furrowed my eyebrows.

"I didn't mean for things to escalate like that. I just... I don't want you to argue and hurt our baby with stress," he continued.

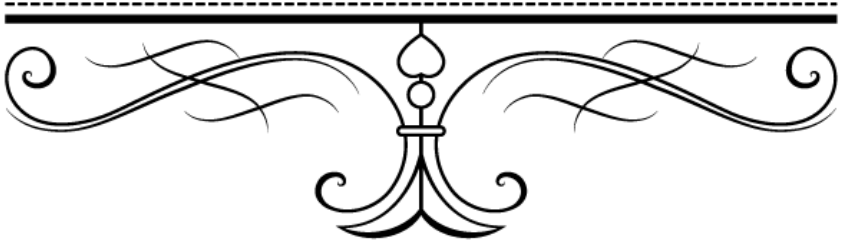
His apology washed over me, but instead of easing my concerns, it made me feel... nothing. I'd heard it all over and over again, sometimes with the promise of change, and nothing ever came from it.

"I've been... childish, I guess. But I want to be better for you and our baby. I want to be a man, someone you can rely on."

I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. His sudden calmness, his reassurance for me to relax—it all felt too rehearsed, too forced.

"It's okay," I replied softly, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. But deep down, I knew things between us were far from okay. I was just too tired to even think about it at that moment.

CHAPTER 24: GOING HOME



Three months later



“How are your feet today?” Derek asked while holding the freezer door open, ready to grab the ice tray if needed. I shook my head, and a small smile formed on my lips.

“They’re more than okay, thank you.” I reached up to plant a kiss on his lips. I then grabbed my jacket from its holder, ready to head out.

“And you’re sure you’ll be alright on your own?” He asked.

“Derek, I’m going to my mother’s house, not a battlefield,” I replied.

As the weeks passed, I noticed Derek sticking to his promise of staying in more often and spending quality time with me as we prepared for the arrival of our baby. It'd been comforting having him around, especially since pregnancy seemed to have it out for me.

Five months earlier, I could eat practically anything. Now, I had to avoid smelling too hard, or else I'd end up face-down in the toilet. And I won't even get started on the back pain.

I appreciated him trying, especially as he blew me a kiss while I left. I could honestly say that he'd been consistent, and I tried not to nag as much, wanting to give credit where credit was due.

But when he *went* out, he would disappear for hours on end, leaving me to wonder where he went and what he was doing. And despite my best efforts to ignore it, his secretive behavior with his phone continued to gnaw at the back of my mind.

Even then, I didn't entertain the thought that he was cheating, as Tania seemed to suggest. I refused to jump to those conclusions, believing Derek wouldn't do that to me.

When the time was right, he would tell me why he was so secretive with his phone – or I would ask.

Instead of worrying about all that, I focused on preparing our little apartment for our baby and eagerly awaited the new chapter of our lives together. And as my belly grew with each passing day, I hoped our love would see us through whatever challenges lay ahead. However, the mind has a mind of its own, and as each day passed, Derek's secretiveness plagued me every single day.



I pulled into my parents' driveway, excited to see my mom and dad. He wasn't the happiest when he found out I was pregnant. He explicitly said, 'It should've been with anyone else,' and I didn't talk to him for a week.

But I felt like he was softening up to it. His weekly gift baskets were a clear indicator.

The orange-honey-colored house stood tall as I walked up to it, my purple curtains still hanging from my window. I smiled softly, a bit of nostalgia coursing through me.

The daisies still swung with the breeze outside, and my father's rocking chair was in its exact place.

This is home, my mind sang subconsciously, and I straightened up.

I lifted my hand to knock, but the door swung open before it could. My father's grin met me, and I gave him a playful glare. A warm embrace tacitly reminded us how much we miss and love each other.

He pulled away, his lips parting to say something, but I noticed that his face faltered. He looked me over, taking a step away, and I tilted my head at him.

"What...?" I looked down at myself and my little bump and then back at him. "Don't tell me you're scared of a little weight."

"You look tired," he blurted, his eyes continuing to look me up and down. "Exhausted even – why are your under eyes so dark."

I blinked a few times. "It's just the pregnancy," I assured him, letting out a nervous laugh. "Growing a human is hard work, you know."

His gaze lingered on me, and I could tell he was not buying it. "Your mother didn't look that way.... You don't look okay," he observed bluntly, his brow furrowing in worry. "Have you been eating?"

I shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny, "I'm fine, Dad," I insisted. If I looked that way to him, then how did others see me? Do I really look that bad?

"Just learning to adapt with the pregnancy symptoms and all. And have you seen Mom? She's aging as fine as wine."

"Is it Derek?" he asked pointedly, not bothering to take into account what I'd just said.

My breath hitched in my throat. I wanted to tell him everything right then and there. I wanted to crawl into Daddy's arms like a little girl and have him reassure and remind me that this can't be what love is –

"Stop it, Imara. He's trying," said a voice buried somewhere deep inside my mind.

"Imara?" He called more sternly.

I felt backed into a wall. I wanted to take a step back, jump into my vehicle, and drive off, but I knew better: We'd probably end up in a high-speed chase.

But I didn't feel ready to tell him anything. I was not ready to have him say, 'I told you so' when he really couldn't understand.

"Honey, why don't we give Imara some space to breathe? She just got here," my mother said, popping in at the best time, resting a silent, reassuring hand on my father's shoulder.

I watched as he visibly relaxed, his eyes softening as he looked down at her.

"Isn't it pathetic? That I'm jealous of my parents?" I thought.

My mother gently guided him away from the door, allowing me to step in. As usual, her voice was soothing and calm. She poured him a glass of cold water as he settled back onto his couch.

"I mean well, bug," he said before he drank. "I really do."

"I know, dad," I replied warmly.

My fingers found the other, fidgeting over my thighs as I stood in the living room. Lying to my parents and not being upfront with them when all they've ever wanted was to look out for me made me feel like an imposter.

"Is this what adulthood is like?" I questioned myself.

My mother, dressed in her favorite baby blue doll dress, grabbed her purse from the door hanger and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. I followed her lead as she took me right back to the door.

"Are you kicking me out or taking me Salsa dancing again?"

She chuckled, tapping my cheek. "I was thinking that we take some time for ourselves today," she said softly, her voice filled with the kind of warmth I missed hearing. "How about a spa day? Just the two of us. We can get those chocolate buttercream muffins you like."

My ears perked excitedly at the sound of that, but I couldn't help but hesitate. Why? I'm not sure.

I had a lot going on, and somehow, wasting time getting my feet rubbed made me feel... guilty.

Not to mention that I wanted to save literally every penny I had. I'm not sure how practical that was, but I won't pretend that my anxiety wasn't through the roof.

"I won't accept any other answer but yet," she said. "I haven't had fun with my daughter since she left me to rot, and it's not fair."

"Okay, don't be too dramatic now," I said defensively.

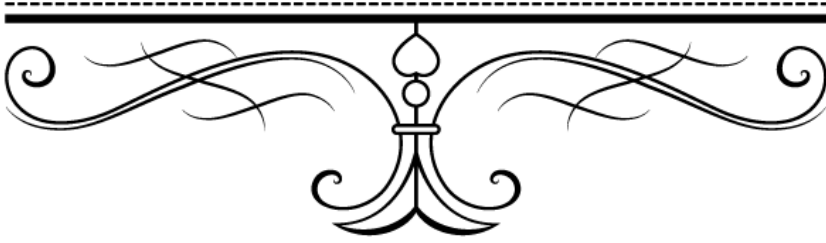
"I share the same sentiments!" My father chimed, not bothering to look away from the TV.

I bit my bottom lip. The thought of spending a day pampering myself with my mother by my side wasn't *too* daunting.

"How often do I really get to do this?" I questioned myself again!

"Fine, but only if we stop for the muffin first." She clapped excitedly before telling my father that she'd bring him lunch. A warmth sunk into my heart at the thought of spending time with my mother. And so, I let myself be guided by her comforting presence, allowing myself to believe, if only for a moment, that everything would be alright. That right now, I didn't have to worry.

CHAPTER 25: GIRL'S DAY OUT



“When was the last time you were here?” My mother giggled as she pushed open the door. The door to Daisy’s Nail Spa opened, and I happily breathed in the scent of the A/C and lavender. I paused for a moment, wondering if it would send me running toward the bathroom; it didn’t.

I breathed another sigh of relief.

Jasmine, the receptionist, walked us over to our stations. Since my mother had called in advance, everything was already going, and all we needed to do was sit back and relax.

As I sank into the plush chair and let the warm water envelop my feet, I could feel the tension melting away. The soft music playing in the background and the gentle hum of conversation around me created a serene atmosphere that I hadn’t experienced in far too long.

I groaned softly. “Way too long ago.”

“I remember being pregnant with you. Your father literally had to force me to slow down – there was drama with your grandmother, and my daddy didn’t want me to settle down either. We forget to take care of ourselves amidst all the chaos.”

“Why didn’t granddad want you to settle down?”

She shrugged her shoulders, folding her hands over her stomach as the water bubbled at her feet. “He didn’t think your daddy was the one. He hated him with all his guts.”

“Ouch,” I cringed, a little chuckle escaping both of our lips. “Hard to think someone didn’t like daddy. He’s so warm and kind.”

My mother snorted as if that was the farthest thing from the truth, and I couldn’t help but look at her.

“Child your daddy is calm now, but he was a real bad boy back then. Don’t let him fool you.”

My nose scrunched at the thought. I couldn’t imagine my father as anything else but a goody two shoes with glasses. Even as a teenager, the man would sometimes cry if I cried.

“Well... did Granddad ever get over it?”

“Not really,” she said, looking away and out of the glass windows. “I don’t think so. But he learned to tolerate him, especially when you came around. You brought out a different side of your father. He was always a loving man, which is why I married him, but you saved him. It’s why he’s so protective of you.”

She returned her gaze to mine, an adoring smile on her face.

“So protective of your light. He told me hundreds of times that he can’t believe he’s made someone as amazing as you, and the thought of someone taking that away...”

“But Derek won’t do that...”

“I almost hate to admit it, honey... but he’s right. You’re pregnant; you’re supposed to be *gaining* weight, not losing it. Your glow is dim, and it doesn’t look like you’ve been sleeping. What’s going on?”

I felt a lump form in my throat. It’s one thing to notice it yourself, but for my parents to bring it up – it made every problem in my life more real. I wished I could say that it was the long hours at the hospital or anything of that sort, but

the truth is that the hospital and my graveyard shifts were my solace, my safe space.

"Yeah... It's been a lot lately," I admitted, hesitating before continuing. The last thing I wanted to do was tarnish my mother's view of Derek, but maybe I didn't have to do that. "Derek and I are... Well, we're having a hard time adjusting. I don't know; some days feel harder than others."

My mother reached out to squeeze my hand reassuringly. "Are the two of you arguing?"

"A little," I said quietly. "It's nothing we can't handle, but sometimes it feels like I can't get through to him."

"I still haven't forgotten what happened at lunch. Maybe he's going through something, but I don't like what I saw. I didn't say anything because your father would jump for joy to have a hand at that boy if he knew I was also in disagreement."

"He's just stressed lately; please don't look at him any differently; he's trying his best, and lately, he's been a lot softer and attentive; he's even looking for a job."

The moment those words left my lips, I swear the both of us froze. My mother's eyes furrow together, and she removed her feet from the water to turn toward me.

"Looking for a job? What do you mean?"

"I...I just mean that since the baby is on its way, he's looking for something else. Something better than what his current job offers."

My mother narrowed her eyes; the only sound we could hear was that of distinct chatter and trickling water from the nearby aesthetic water fountains. I tightened the robe around my body.

"What'd you say he does again?"

"He's a tech...service guy. But it's mostly like customer service for now. With the experience, he can get something a bit more advanced in his field, and you know all that gadget stuff pays well, so... that's where he's at."

My mother seemed to relax a bit, and she gently rested her feet back into the water. "Oh... okay. Well, that's good, he should. A baby is a blessing, but it's also a big responsibility, and he needs to be ready for it."

“Of course, he’s... he’s more than ready,” I cleared my throat, desperately needing an out from this topic. I looked down at my growing belly, resting a hand against it. “Can you believe it though... me... a mother?”

“I can,” she answered as if there was no second thought. “You have so much love to give; besides nursing, this is the perfect role for you.”

“You don’t think it’s so soon?”

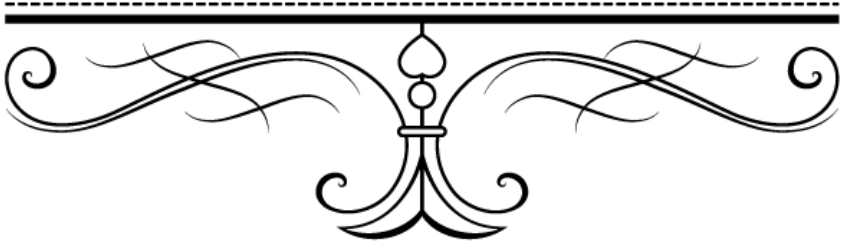
“I think everything happens as it should, and *almost* everything happens for a reason. You’ll be wonderful, my love, and for as long as I live and breathe, I’m going to make things easier for you.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief, not knowing how much I needed to hear that. “I just want things to be okay,” I whispered, feeling tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “I’m excited to be a mother, to bring life into this world and to raise a little one, but I just hope that I’m bringing my child into a great, healthy environment.”

My mother’s hand found mine, a sad smile adorning her face.

“No one can reassure you of that but you, honey. So, if there’s something that’s questioning that truth, you may need to look into it.”

CHAPTER 26: BATTLE SCARS



As much as I enjoyed rest from the hustle and bustle of being a traveling nurse, I've learned that I enjoy traveling more.

It was almost time to say goodbye to my assignments, and I was enjoying every bit of them before I left.

Three weeks ago, I had been in California, and three weeks before that, I was in Nevada, my dream place. Now I was back home after a longer trip to Idaho, and this time, I wouldn't be going anywhere else, at least not with work.

That feeling came with a bit of sadness. The people I'd met were irreplaceable, and I couldn't imagine the people I hadn't met just yet. But I had a family to grow here now, and that meant I had to make certain sacrifices.

I touched my belly at the thought of that, wheeling my suitcase into my apartment and finding Derek on the couch. For some reason, that sight irritated me.

“Welcome back, honey!” He grinned, standing to embrace me. I let it happen, forcing a smile on my face. “How was it?”

“It was great – very fun and insightful, as usual.” He popped a chip into his mouth, chewing loudly as he nodded, and I tried my best not to snap.

“Are you happy to be home now though? I’m sorry that all the traveling is over, but at least we’re so much closer to meeting our little one.”

His dismissive tone made my fist clench at my sides, and I forced a smile, clearing my throat.

“Have you been job hunting this week? Any luck?”

He straightened, wiping his finger on his pants.

“No luck just yet, but I’m sure somebody will call back.”

“Where’d you apply to?”

“Just a few places here and there, some around this neighborhood; I wanted to be close to the two of you.”

“Right,” I nodded, not believing a word he said. “Well, maybe I can look over some of the resumes you sent, just to make sure they’re up to date and really *selling* you.”

“I... actually think they’re fine,” he scratched the back of his neck, returning to the couch. “Marcus’s cousin actually has a little – uh – security firm; I might just do that.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Why haven’t I heard of this before?”

“He hasn’t needed anyone until now – you just came home, don’t you want to relax?”

“I can’t exactly relax when I’ve just completed my last assignment, and now I’ll be making less money. I need to know that you’re *actually* taking this seriously.”

“I am,” he defended quickly. “I’m trying my best, Imara; I don’t know what else you want me to do.”

“I want you not to make me feel like I’m in this alone,” I snapped, my shoulders rising and falling. “It’s one pm on a Tuesday, Derek. I’m sorry, but you should be at work.”

“Here we go,” he rolled his eyes.

“Not here we go; I’m tired of hearing myself too. But when I’m over here supporting you, supporting the household, and now about to support a baby – I’m stressed out all of the time, wondering how I’m going to make this work. I’m sorry, but *‘I’m trying’* isn’t going to cut it anymore.”

“What do you want me to do? Demand that they give me a job?”

“If that’s what you have to do, then yes,” I folded my arms.

“I can’t –”

“You, you, you!” He snapped suddenly, his face glaring daggers at me. “That’s all I ever hear about. What about me? Do you think I like sitting here and – and wasting my time listening to you all day?”

I shook my head, dragging my suitcase. “I don’t have time for this.”

“No,” he stood, his footsteps right behind me. He took my arm, and I turned to stare at him like he was crazy. “You’re always running your mouth, and I have to listen. You have to listen to me now.”

“Let me go.”

“If you want some perfect, wealthy –”

“Derek, let me go.”

“--son of a bastard, then go find one.” His hands tightened, and I winced. “I’m sick of hearing you complaining. I’m trying my best, and if that’s not good enough for you, then you can raise this baby on your own.”

That statement felt like a slap to the face, so much so that when he released me, I barely noticed. I stood there for the longest time, staring off into a void. When I regained composure, I slowly made my way into the room, crawled into bed, and cried myself to sleep.

I felt a light pressure in my stomach; people always say that your baby feels whatever you’re feeling. I held onto it and hoped that my baby understood that they were my light in all of this.

I would raise my baby on my own if I had to and make sure they got the best life. My family didn’t bring me into a home where they didn’t love each other enough to communicate, where I had to listen to them bicker and argue. Tears streamed down my face as I sobbed into the sheets. There

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and then, I vowed not to bring my baby into that either, even if that meant making the hardest decisions.



I'm not sure what time I woke up, but I woke up with a start, a sharp pain shooting through my abdomen, tearing me from the depths of sleep.

I shot up on the bed so quickly that it creaked under distress. My hand instinctively moved to my belly, feeling the pulsating pain, and the other shot out to grab Derek, but he was not there.

“Okay, okay,” I breathed, trying to create a mantra as I shifted my leg off the bed, but panic gripped me, rendering me almost crippled. I could feel the warmth between my legs. As it continued to pool and pour, a lump formed in my throat as I tried to waddle out of the room.

“ARGH!” I leaned against the wall and doubled over, frantic whispers of worry flooding my mind.

I knew that I needed to get to the hospital immediately!

Even with the room spinning around me, I pushed my way through. My eyes lingered for a split second on all the bloody handprints I left. My stomach sank.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s just cervical bleeding.” I repeated those words in my head over and over, screaming over the thought of something else. I made my way through the dimly lit hallway, my trembling fingers fumbling for the light switch.

The harsh glare of the overhead light pierced my eyes as I blinked away the tears that clouded my vision. The elevator was just up ahead.

But before I could make it, I found myself glancing at my body. At the crimson-stained nightgown I wore and all the blood on my hands. My teeth chattered as I shook my head.

“D-Derek,” I whispered, feeling another gush pour out of me, another sharp, excruciating pain. “Derek!”

My cry echoed through the silent house as I collapsed to the floor, the pain ripping through me in waves. I clutched at the emptiness where our child should have been, where *they are*, footsteps echoing toward me.

Derek's panicked voice pierced the fog of pain and despair. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but as his hands wrapped around me, lifting me to his chest, I felt a small slither of hope.

The rhythmic thud of his heartbeat echoing in my ears as he carried me served as a little reminder of life. It was a little reminder that things weren't over yet. That – that I would be okay, and so would my baby.

I'm not sure at what point we got into the vehicle; sweat beaded down my chest as I heaved, my body weak. Derek's hand was on my thigh, and I could feel the pressure, his panicked voice filling my ears.

“Imara – Imara, keep your eyes open. Baby, please.”

“But they're open,” I wanted to say, but I could hardly form the words.

He frantically navigated the streets, his knuckles white against the steering wheel.

I wouldn't be able to see if my eyes weren't open.

Each jolt and turn sent waves of pain coursing through me, and sooner than later, my cries echoed off the walls of the car.

By the time we arrived at the emergency room, I was gasping for air; my vision blurred with tears. The pain was excruciating, and although I was well acquainted with the possibilities, I refused to believe it myself.

“They’re going to take care of you – come on, can you hurry up? She’s a nurse, one of your own!”

Derek's arms wrapped around me, his touch fleeting as we stumbled through the automatic doors, greeted by the sterile scent of antiseptic. I could barely hold on, but with all the energy I could muster, I said, “Please, save my baby. *Please.*”

“Imara?” Tania ran toward me, her eyes wide, searching my body. The stretcher rolled out soon after, and the ER team raised me onto the bed.

“Imara... w-what happened?” Her eyes trembled as she pried open my eyes even wider.

“Save my baby, Tania,” I cried, lurching forward as I frantically gripped her hand. Her lips fell open; she walked

quickly as they wheeled me to the operating room. I watched as her eyes traveled down my gown slowly. As tears filled her eyes, she swallowed so hard that her neck moved.

I clung to her, my sobs echoing through the corridors as she guided the gurney.

“Imara,” she whispered, her voice low, a sudden crack, and I shook my head.

“Tania... Tania, please.” Her tears mingled with mine as she took another look at the blood-soaked sheets beneath me, her expression a silent confirmation of the nightmare unfolding before us.

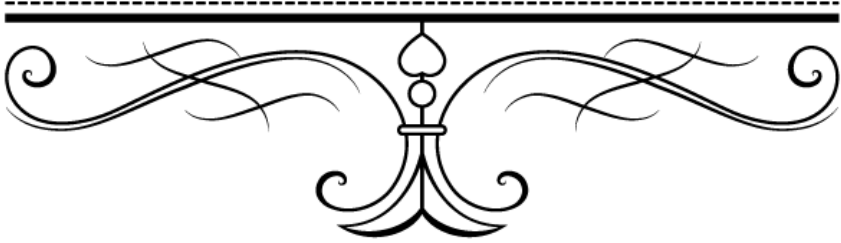
I couldn’t bring myself to ask the question that hang heavy in the air, but I already knew the answer.

The agony in Tania's eyes spoke volumes; her silent grief was a mirror of my own.

As the reality of the situation sank in, I released her hand, needing all the power I had left to let out a guttural cry that burned my throat like hot acid and bounced off the walls.

The pain of the loss of someone I didn't even know ripped through me like a knife to the heart.

CHAPTER 27: PICKING UP THE PIECES



Each sob wracked my body, and a gut-wrenching release of the pain and anguish threatened to consume me whole.

I clutched desperately at my elbow, fingers trembling as I pressed them against my lips in a feeble attempt to stifle the sound.

“I’m not quiet enough,” I told myself.

Against the tiled walls, I could hear the sounds of my grief, and I was sure others could also hear it.

My eyes burned as I forced them shut, begging for the last of my tears to be released, but more seemed to come.

It had been two weeks, but the pain didn’t seem to dissipate or go away.

It came around the same time: on every graveyard shift and maybe when I heard a baby cry down the hall in the nursing station.

I tried to calm myself, but every breath came out ragged, the bathroom door barely held together under my other trembling hand.

I needed to get out there. I needed to do my job. I needed to keep going despite the hollow, empty feeling in my chest.

I closed my eyes, this time softer, hoping my breathing would slow. When I finally mustered the courage, I all but staggered out of the stall, hoping that no one would come in and I could wash my face clean.

When I looked up, I could hardly recognize myself. My eyes were dull and sunken, dark circles etched beneath them like shadows.

The woman before me looked... lonely. She had exhaustion lines burned into her skin, and she looked worn down; there was nothing vibrant about her.

I wiped my hand, my heart sagging in my chest at the thought of going home. At least it wouldn't be for long. Then

Derek wouldn't have to stare at me with his disappointed eyes and just shake his head like he normally did.

He wouldn't have to sigh heavily whenever I walked into the room or avoid any physical contact as if my touch burned his skin. It had been weeks of this silent treatment, and I couldn't bear it any longer.

I pushed my way out of the bathroom, keeping my eyes down.

"Hey girl..." Tania's feet fell in line with mine, and I quickly straightened up, looking straight ahead with a small smile. "I was looking for you."

"I just wanted to grab something quick to eat – outside. It's been a long day."

"Right," she breathed, nodding a little too hard. I didn't miss the way her eyes looked for any indication that I'd been eating. "What time's your flight tonight?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's at 11, just another hour here, and I can rush home and get ready."

"Oh, I thought you'd take today off at least."

“No need,” I said quickly, pushing into the medicine room. “There’s work to do here before I go; I’d hate to fall behind.”

She stopped at the door, hesitating as I sorted through the medication.

“Right,” she said quietly. “Imara -”

“I’m okay, Tania,” I stressed, my tone clipped, but I still forced another smile on my face. “Promise.”

Tania nodded, her eyes lingering on me for a moment longer before she finally stepped back, giving me space to gather my thoughts.

“I’m here if you need anything – check in before you go?”

“Of course.”

I knew Tania meant well, but at that moment, I just needed to focus on getting through the rest of my shift and making it home in one piece.

As I made my way back to my station, I tried to bury all the overwhelming emotions in the back of my mind.

I needed to stay focused and keep my mind occupied with the tasks at hand. But with every passing moment, the ache

in my heart grew stronger, a constant reminder of the emptiness that now fills me.

Two weeks. Two weeks ago, it felt like I had something *stolen* from me, and there was nothing I could do about it. Two weeks later, all I'd managed to say was, "I'm fine," when really, it felt like I was losing my mind.

I leaned against the counter, closing my eyes.

I took solace in knowing that at least where I was going, I knew I'd find a little peace. It was not like Tania wasn't there for me, but she was also right there.

She was a constant reminder of that night: her face, her tears, *this place*, as much as it served as a distraction, was yet another reminder.

By the time my shift ended, I was ecstatic to get out of there. I checked in with Tania, and we hugged each other before I left.

When I got to my apartment, Derek was in the same spot, in the exact outfit he had two days ago.

I passed him, then quickly showered and changed into some comfy clothes before putting my last bit of toiletries in my carry-on.

With a heavy heart on my way out, I glanced over at Derek, hoping for some sign of acknowledgment, some indication that he *saw* me, but his gaze remained fixed on the TV screen, his expression unreadable.

I'd spent far too long tiptoeing around his emotions, sacrificing my own needs for the sake of his comfort. It was time to prioritize myself and take control of my happiness and well-being.

Without a word, I grabbed my carry-on bag and made my way towards the door, my footsteps echoing in the silence of the apartment. I could feel Derek's eyes on me as I went, but I refused to look back.

I'd made my decision, and he couldn't say or do anything to change that now!

"Thank you, Kansas, for calling me," was the last thought as I closed the door behind me.



I stepped out of the airport, the lights flashing all over. The place held so many good memories that it felt like I could actually *breathe*.

Outside, the air was alive with the sounds of laughter and chatter as locals and tourists alike mingled on the sidewalks and in the nearby cafes.

The faint sound of music drifted through the air, mingling with the distant hum of traffic to create a sound that called me.

As usual, there was a car waiting to take me to my destination.

It wasn't as cozy as my last place here; it was a little more... modern in a ... Victorian kind of way, but the place had an elegance that I couldn't help but feel drawn to. It was new, and I needed 'new.'

As I stepped inside, the warm glow of soft lamplight and the inviting scent of fresh lavender invited me.

I was half expecting a butler to walk in at any moment and say, “Welcome, madam. How can I be of service?” Alas, there was none. I laughed quietly to myself as I made my way up the stairs and plopped down on the bed.

I could just stay here and sleep forever. But that would mean I wouldn’t get to see the people I’d been dying to see. My heart jumped at the thought of seeing Gordon, Emily Raine, and Jason again, and suddenly, I couldn’t wait.

They didn’t know I was back here, so this would be a pleasant surprise.

My phone chimed as I connected to the Wi-Fi, but I didn’t check the message. I showered quickly, changed out of my travel clothes, and wore something a bit comfier. As I slid under the covers, my lips pursed together as Derek’s name showed up on the screen.

“Hey, Imara.” The message started.

“I hope you had a safe flight to Kansas. I know I’m probably the last person you want to talk to. I know that things have felt off between us lately, and I just wanted to ask...no beg, that you don’t give up on us. I know you’ve been through a lot recently, and I’m sorry I didn’t say

anything before you left for the airport. I didn't want to be a downer. I didn't want to make things harder for you, but I didn't know how to talk to you. I'm a coward for doing this over text, I know.

I've been thinking a lot about you, and I want you to know that I'm here for you. Your well-being is important to me, and I think it might be a good idea for you to take some time for yourself and focus on your mental and emotional health.

I miss you, and I want us to be okay. Let's talk when you're ready, okay?"

A scoff escaped my lips as I looked up at the ceiling, shaking my head. Of course, he does this over text when I've been in the house *yearning* for his attention, support, comfort, or *anything*.

He'd slept on the couch instead of next to me and shut himself down, but now that I was across the country, he suddenly wanted to talk. That didn't feel fair.

I couldn't help the anger that surged through me as I typed out my response. I knew I should sleep on it, but I couldn't. I had to get things off my chest immediately.

“It's frustrating to hear from you now after I've been feeling so alone and unsupported. It's like you only notice when I'm not right in front of you.

I've needed you here with me, and you've been distant. Sleeping on the couch instead of next to me, shutting me out. And now that I'm across the country, suddenly you want to talk?

I'm tired of feeling like I have to chase after you for your attention and support. I need more from you than just words. I furiously typed.

I knew I should wait for his response, but more words just kept piling and piling into my mind; my fingers continued to move across the screen, suddenly feeling liberated, a little lighter as I put my foot down.

“I'm not going to put my life on hold because you're feeling distant. I have my career and my own goals, and I'm going to pursue them with or without your support.

I need you to understand that I'm going to make my own decisions, especially when it comes to my career. I'm tired of feeling like I have to justify myself to you.

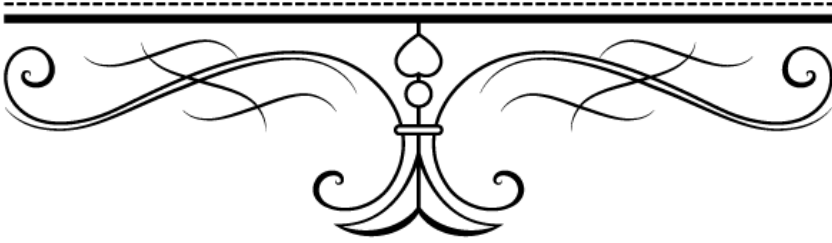
Let's talk when you're ready. Not me.”

Carry Me Home

I placed my phone on silent and turned away from it. I felt a small flutter in my stomach, and it felt good. I'd stood up for myself. And now, it was time for me to try and conquer the world.

Well, what's left of me?

CHAPTER 28: DEEP INHALE



Imara

It was an hour before the start of my shift, but I couldn't wait another second: the desire to see my friends drove me to the hospital.

"J-Jason... I think... I think I'm hallucinating," Said Raine.

With a wide grin, I opened my arms to her; she looked at me with wide eyes and a blanched face while my three other friends had their backs turned away from me.

The hospital had strategically placed the nursing stations on one end of the room – this happens to be opposite the door, so it was all perfect, really. I felt at home among the medical charts, computers, and everything else. But around me were friends who were yet to realize that I was standing right

behind them. Well, except for Raine, who looked like she was about to have a heart attack.

“That would make sense,” Jason snorted, a clipboard in his hands as he went through the nursing stations. “You never eat on time unless it’s those ungodly sweet snacks that make your tongue hurt. It’s catching up to you.”

I had to bite back my laugh, knowing he was talking about starbursts. Raine had a wrapper in her hands. She threw him a quick glare.

Emily snorted from beside him, helping Gordon with something, and Raine raised her hand to tap them lightly.

“Raine, we’re going to be here all day if you –”

“Hey guys!”

All three backs stiffened, and my heart raced in my chest.

“Oh boy... Raine shared those stupid snacks with us, and now we’re all experiencing shared psychosis,” said Emily.

“Yes, and I’m the epitome of all your nightmares,” I deadpanned, placing a hand on my hip.

They turned toward me in perfect sync, their eyebrows furrowed together. It was almost comical.

Jason's eyes widened, and he dropped his clipboard. He was the first to react as he crossed over in three large steps and engulfed me in a hug. I inhaled his musk and the slight smell of 'hospital,' a little guilt piercing through me for how much I enjoyed it.

"Imara?" Emily poked her head from behind. "Oh my gosh, what're you doing here?"

"She missed us," Gordon replied smoothly, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "After forgetting to call or text –"

"I know, I know," I groaned, stepping forward and extending my hand to him. "Things have been so crazy; I owe you all an explanation."

"Damn right," Gordon replied, crossing his arms over his chest. It seemed like out of all of them, he was the most hurt.

"I needed to settle in – they sent me back here for another assignment, so let's meet up after our shifts?"

“Let’s do it!” Jason yelled excitedly, and I couldn’t help but giggle. I walked over to all of them, welcoming the warm hugs and feeling my heart grow warm piece by piece.

“Oh, I’m so happy you’re here,” Emily whispered, and I let out a soft sigh. “So much has happened.”

“Me too, girl. Me too.”



No one was more excited than the five of us once all our shifts were over. We piled out of the hospital, Gordon even leaving his favorite cup behind and Raine nearly forgetting to change out of her scrubs.

When we stepped out, the deepest shade of blue consumed the sky, and it seemed excessively windy, but it didn’t make any difference. We’re all happy to be around each other, sharing smiles and small bits of laughter.

“Well...” Raine stopped just outside her car. “Where to now?”

Emily brought her watch up to her face, biting her bottom lip. “It’s almost twelve already. Is anywhere open?”

“I say we drive around and find out. We’re *not* postponing, come on.”

Jason waved us all into our cars, and we followed him until we found a spot where the doors were still open: Woody’s Grill.

Green neon lights flashed over the establishment, two saloon doors on either side and the scent of what seemed to be barbeque flowed outside.

I closed my eyes, my mouth watering. After a twelve-hour shift and stolen yogurt from Gordon, I couldn’t imagine anything that would taste better than a steak and some crispy French fries.

“Welcome to Woodys!” Came a deep voice, and I think we all jumped, not noticing the rather large man. “I’m Woody, y’all can go head’ and get seated anywhere ya’ like, and someone will be right with you.”

Woody tipped his hat, and we looked around at the mostly empty restaurant with less than four people lingering. It was quiet, a slow night, which made it even better.

“Thanks, Woody,” I smiled, and we all piled into a booth in the back.

“This place smells like every one of my dreams,” Raine whispered happily, immediately grabbing the menu.

“So, before I dive into my mess of a life, I want to hear about you guys; what have you been up to?”

As we waited for the waiter to arrive, Gordon remained quiet, still keeping up his ‘upset’ facade, but the twinkle in his eyes betrayed him.

“Well, I traveled to Greece last month,” Raine began, hiding slightly behind the menu. “And I met someone.”

I raised my eyebrows. “*Wow*, is this the same Raine who doesn’t believe in love?”

She rolled her eyes, rolling her black hair forward, but I didn’t miss the subtle blush on her cheek. “It’s nothing too serious. We’re just... keeping in contact. He’s a pretty cool guy, but he’s from across the globe. My expectations aren’t sky high.”

“Let go and let love reign, Raine,” Emily said, like a true romantic.

Jason chuckled at Emily's comment and leaned back in his chair, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "Guess who finally took up salsa dancing?"

I gasped in mock disbelief, covering my mouth with one hand. "No way! The king of two left feet is now a salsa sensation?"

He shrugged sheepishly, his cheeks flushing slightly. "Hey, I'm a work in progress. But it's actually been a lot of fun. And who knows, maybe I'll even impress someone with my moves someday."

His eyes twinkled at those last words, and I couldn't help but laugh. "My parents are the ones taking lessons."

"Well, I'd love to meet them. There's nothing like a salsa dancing trio taking over the streets."

"So, Imara," Gordon spoke up, and I straightened my spine, hiding my smile behind the best blank face I could muster, "You finally decided to grace us with your presence after disappearing off the face of the earth. Care to explain yourself?"

"Only if you tell me what you've been up to as well; you can't just be saving lives all the time, Mr. Superhero."

"Haha," he laughed dryly, "I might have taken up a new hobby."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? And here I thought you were allergic to anything that didn't involve saving lives."

Gordon smirked, a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes. "Let's just say I've discovered the joys of woodworking. Turns out, there's something strangely therapeutic about shaping a block of wood into something beautiful."

"Aw, Gordon," Emily cooed beside him. She placed a hand on his arm. "That's really sweet."

As Gordon finished sharing his newfound hobby, a waitress sauntered over to our table, a bright smile on her face, complimenting her auburn hair and brown eyes.

"Well, howdy there, y'all," she greeted us with a bright smile, her pen already placed over her notepad. "I'm *Mrs.* Woody. What can I get ya' this evening'?"

Raine spoke up first; the excitement in her voice was almost comical. "I'll have the shrimp scampi, please. And could I get a side salad with ranch dressing?"

The waitress scribbled down Raine's order with practiced ease before turning to me. "And what'll it be for you, hon?"

"I... I'll just have some fries and a medium-sized barbeque rib."

Everyone else ordered the same as me, and the waitress flashed us another friendly smile before bustling off to the kitchen to put them in.

"Alright, now," Jason interrupted, turning back to me. "You're not off the hook at all, missy. What's been going on with you?"

"Well, where do I even begin?" I began, letting out a nervous laugh, my voice trembling slightly. "After I left here and went back home, I took the advice you all gave me and just tried more in my relationship."

"Uh huh," Emily leaned forward, her eyes twinkling. "And how'd that go?"

"Well," I squeaked, rubbing the back of my neck. "It's – it's been a journey, honestly. We've done date nights, and uh... we've started communicating a bit better... you know we'd both been... trying."

Emily didn't seem too convinced, and honestly, none of them really said anything. They all looked at me, knowing there was more to the story.

I paused for a moment, contemplating whether I should open up to them about everything that had happened. I wondered if it was okay if I was somehow breaking his trust or if I wanted to relive that moment.

But everything inside of me wanted to confide in my friends. I was craving a release and was hoping confiding in them would help me achieve it.

My hands trembled violently, and I raised my hand to brush some of my hair from my forehead.

“Um— but soon after.... I... uh... found out that I was pregnant.”

“My goodness, *aw*,” Raine chuckled, her eyes wide. It took her and the rest of them a moment to recuperate, their smiles slowly falling.

“Wait, was?” Gordon blinked a few times, and I swallowed hard, pinching my scrubs underneath the table. Emily noticed, and she looked up at me, her lips parted.

“Oh... oh no...”

I nodded, “I lost the baby.”

A heavy silence fell over the table, the air now suffocated with emotions. None of them knew what to say at that moment, and I didn’t blame them. I didn’t know what to say afterward, either.

"I'm so sorry, Imara," Emily said from beside me, pulling me into a hug. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as Emily's arms wrapped around me, and I leaned into her embrace, allowing her to hold and comfort me with the warmth of her presence.

"Thank you, Emily," I whispered, my voice choking with tears.

“That must have been incredibly difficult for you," Gordon murmured, his tears shining in his eyes. He grabbed his napkin.

“Don’t cry, or else you’re going to have me full-on sobbing in here,” I warned, letting out a little laugh.

“That’s why I haven’t said anything,” Raine croaked, pressing a hand against her chest. She gulped, shaking her

head. "If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here. We all are."

"I know, guys, I know, and I'm so grateful... I think I was honestly sent back here for a reason."

"True that," Jason breathed, reaching across the table to take my hand. Soon, Raine joined in, then Gordon, and then Emily.

"It feels like we're nothing short of family now."

I nodded in agreement, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

"With that said, I think you need a break more than any of us," Jason chimed in, looking around the table. "We're thinking of renting a beach house for the weekend in Cali... I think you should join."

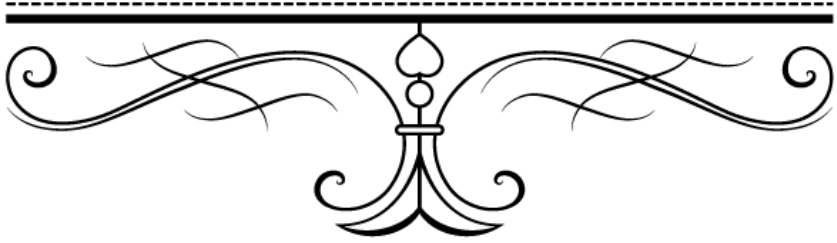
"Oh, yeah!" Raine exclaimed excitedly. "We're just going to relax, sip on fruity cocktails, and surf waves; it'll be a nice little escape."

"I don't know, guys; I just got here," I chuckled. "I think I want to settle into work a bit more –"

“Imara, you know how quickly time passes while you’re here. I say we all make the most of it *now*.”

"Fine, fine, I'm in," I declared, a surge of excitement coursing through me. "Let's make some memories together."

CHAPTER 29: THERAPY



“Is it connected? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Ms. Harris, we’re hearing you loud and clear. Thank you for joining us this morning.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the linen sheets, my reflection staring back at me in the mirror across the room. The blue and white walls that had been strangely calming to me over the last two days in this beach house suddenly had very little effect.

I daintily touched the bird's nest on top of my head, short black strands sticking up from all over the place, running a hand over it to calm them. I found that my brown eyes looked... softer, my shoulders didn’t look as broad even though they were a bit tense now, and my lips looked fully moisturized. Plus, slightly dried drool was next to them, and a ratty t-shirt with its neckline was nonexistent.

Maybe it was the sound of the ocean outside or the gentle breeze that came through the big window. Maybe it was just being in a... safer place – emotionally. But this had been the best night of sleep I'd ever had.

All in all, from across the room in this cute little beach house bedroom, I looked relaxed.

I was not sure how much longer it was going to last during this meeting here. The woman's mellifluous voice brought me back to my present situation.

"This is a camera-on session, by the way."

I shut my eyes, letting out a silent breath. "Sure, one second."

I dashed to the bathroom, rinsed out my mouth, and ran a hand with a bit of water over my hair the best that I could, which, as you can imagine, wasn't all that impressive.

As I returned to bed, I reached out to adjust the laptop's camera, my reflection shifting from fuzzy to clear as the lens focused on my disheveled appearance.

There was no hiding the evidence of a restful night's sleep. I worried slightly that Derek might think I was doing better than he was.

"Okay, I'm ready," I called, forcing a smile as I met the therapist's gaze on the screen. And then Derek, sitting in our living room. His eyes widened slightly. They wandered around my background, trying to make out what little they could.

I cleared my throat as my heart fluttered.

It had been an entire week since we last spoke. An entire week since neither of us had anything to say to each other. He had called the previous morning and suggested couples therapy, and I immediately wanted to say no – but I decided against it. It honestly felt like one of his... tactics, but a part of me still stupidly hoped it wasn't.

"Alright, let's begin with either of you. My name is Dr. Sholl, and I understand you've had some recent challenges in your relationship. Who would like to share what's been going on?"

Recently. Right.

Both of us stayed quiet. I took a deep, long breath before holding it in again. My stomach churned as she waited expectantly, my fingers wrapping around the sheets, rubbing them between each other.

Derek cleared his throat, his posture slumped against our couch. He didn't speak right away, rubbing his forehead on his arm before he finally said:

"I haven't been the best partner to Imara. I've been... rude, I don't listen to her, dismissive... and she's always tried to make things work, to make things right. I've messed up in nearly all areas of our relationship."

I quietly let out a shaky breath as the therapist nodded, averting her deep blue eyes to look down at her notepad. We both sat in silence as she wrote something.

"Thank you for sharing, Derek. It takes courage to acknowledge our shortcomings and take responsibility for our actions."

I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat making it difficult to speak.

"Did anything Derek say resonate with you, Imara?"

My eyes widened slightly. I stuttered for a moment, my mouth dry.

"I...I guess."

A silence followed, and I could feel both their eyes on me, wanting and waiting for more than I could give at that moment.

I shifted under their gaze, pressure pulsating through my neck as I shook my head.

"I appreciate Derek's honesty. But it's not just about what he's done wrong... and what he's saying now is nothing I haven't heard before."

Derek's face sagged, and I dropped my gaze to the floor. A lump formed in my throat, or maybe it had always been there; I don't know. But tears sprung to my eyes, and I fought to hold them back.

Gosh, I just felt so tired.

"It sounds like there's a lot of hurt on both sides," Dr. Sholl said as she leaned forward, resting her arms on her legs as she smiled gently. "But the fact that you're here, willing to

confront these challenges together, is a *positive* step forward."

"Is there something specific you'd like to share about how Derek's behavior has affected you?"

I sniffled, taking in a deep breath. "Sometimes I wonder if I can forgive him. This is the first time where I've wondered... whether it's even worth it to fix things."

Dr. Sholl nodded, and I appreciated that her eyes didn't widen in surprise. I guess this wasn't the first time she's heard this. But I appreciated it, nonetheless. I purposefully avoided Derek's eyes.

"I recently had a miscarriage," the lump thickened, and I paused for a moment, "and Derek... Derek *completely* shut me out. He didn't talk to me, he didn't try to reach out, he left me to deal with it on my own. How do I get past something like that?"

"Imara," she called softly, and the tone of her voice nearly broke the dam behind my eyes. "I want you to know that it's understandable that you're struggling to reconcile right now. Losing a child is a devastating experience, and it's only

natural to seek comfort and support from those closest to us, especially a partner.”

"I'm so sorry, Imara," Derek whispered, his voice barely audible. "I... I didn't know how to handle it. I was scared, confused... I thought I was protecting you by keeping my distance, but I see now that I only made things worse."

"I was scared too," I murmured, the tears finally dropping. They splashed on the laptop, and I clenched my jaw together as my lips quivered.

"It's clear that both of you have been deeply affected by this experience," she said. I could tell she was measuring her words carefully, her blonde hair trickling down her collarbone. "And while it's natural to seek comfort and support from our partners in times of grief, it's also important to remember that we each have our ways of coping with loss."

I glanced over at Derek, only for a split second, and then back at her. Her words, as much as I didn't like it, served as a small reminder that Derek went through the same thing that I did—the same hurt.

But it didn't excuse his actions. And I wished she could tell me exactly what she would do in a situation like this right there.

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before continuing. "Derek, it's understandable that you were scared and confused. Losing a child is an unimaginable pain, and it's not uncommon for people to withdraw in an attempt to protect themselves and their loved ones."

Derek nodded, "I know I messed up," he admitted, his voice thick with emotion. "But I want to make things right, Imara. I want to be there for you in whatever way you need me."

Things felt a little too much, and I looked away, not knowing how to reply, not wanting to.

"Forgiveness is a process, not an event. It's okay to feel hurt and angry, but it's also okay to give yourself permission to heal and move forward. Even if it's not right now."

"I just think... that I need space right now. Therapy may be a good idea, but I'm not sure I want to communicate outside of that right now... and it's good that we're states away."

"I think it's wonderful that you're prioritizing your well-being and emotional health. If you feel that you need space

right now, that's completely valid. Therapy can provide a safe space for you to process your thoughts and feelings without feeling pressured to communicate outside of those sessions."

I let out a shaky breath, a sense of relief washing over me.

Derek's gaze softened. "I want what's best for you, Imara," he whispered, running a hand over his face. After a moment's pause, he added, "Even if that means giving you the space you need to heal."

I let a moment pass before I looked down.

"Thanks."

The therapist nodded, a gentle smile gracing her lips. "It's been a productive session today, and I'm glad to see both of you taking steps towards healing and understanding. Remember, healing is a journey, and it's okay to take things one step at a time. If you ever need anything between sessions, don't hesitate to reach out."

As the call ended, I didn't know how to really feel. All I knew was I didn't *want* to feel.

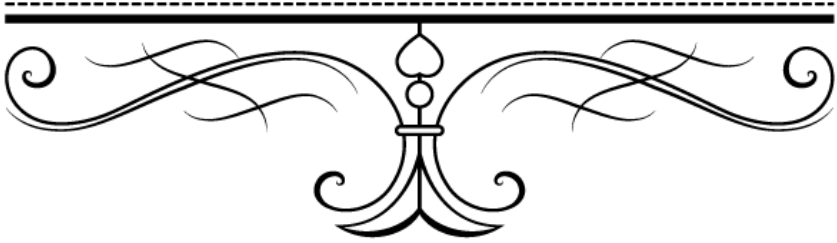
Just as I was getting lost in thought, a gentle knock came at the door, pulling me from my reverie. I blinked in surprise as Emily's voice filtered through the wood.

"Imara, are you ready to go down to the beach? The others are waiting for us."

A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips as I pushed myself up from the bed.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

CHAPTER 30: DEEP EXHALE



The salty breeze brushed against my skin as I stepped out of the beach house, the sound of crashing waves echoing in the distance.

The warm sun kissed my face, a smile following soon after as Jason tried to backflip in the sand and nearly ended up face down.

“You think you’re still young, but you’re not, sir. Actually, you’re going to feel that for the *rest* of your life,” Emily warned, uncontrollable laughter falling from her lips. Jason mocked her for a bit as he unsuspectingly and slowly trailed toward her.

I wondered if I should warn her or just let it happen.

In the end, Jason picked her up by her waist, and she screamed, her hands flailing. He took off running toward the sea, and a fit of laughter bubbled in my chest.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh ocean air, and let out a contented sigh.

“Were you talking to yourself in there?” Gordon chimed from beside me, swim trunks on and sunscreen in hand. “No judgment, but... I’d recommend seeing a psychiatrist if that’s a common thing.”

“I already have one; she says it’s totally normal, and I should do it *a lot* more often,” I rolled my eyes, letting out a sigh as we weaved through the sand. Emily walked beside me, looking a little distant. “If you must know... Derek and I are in couple’s therapy.”

“What?” Emily screeched, pausing. In all honesty, I didn’t think she heard. “But... I thought my advice worked!”

“It did, it did,” I defended quickly. “For... a little while, and then things kind of got worse. The miscarriage only sent things in a dumpster fire from there.”

They all exchanged worried glances, standing still in the middle of the beach, and I sighed loudly. “That’s why I didn’t say anything – guys, I’m *fine*.”

“How many things are you carrying on your shoulder right now?” Jason asked, and I jumped. He stood beside us, his hair now a wet mop over his face. “I hope it all turns out well.”

“*It will*,” I muttered quietly, even though I didn’t really know what ‘*well*’ is.

“Okay, none of that right now,” Raine clapped, drenched and barely standing straight. It’s clear she was a little winded from running back up to us. “We’re here to have fun, to make some bonfires, and to explore!”

At her words, Gordon dropped his sunscreen, Jason cheered with both hands in the air, Emily tightened her bikini top, and realizing that we were about to take off running, I kicked off my sandals and threw a leg back.

“Come on!”

Raine was in the lead, her laughter echoing across the shoreline as we all raced toward the water’s edge.

Oh, man. I hadn't felt like this in a long time. My stomach was bubbling with so much laughter it was almost uncomfortable. My hair whipped around right into my face from the breeze, the sand and salt slapping harshly against my skin.

But do you know what? It felt good.

As we reached the water's edge, I closed my eyes, and I didn't stop. I kept going until I could go no longer. Once fully submerged in the water, I just... sank.

My heart wasn't heavy enough to weigh me down this time. I let the waves carry me away, the cool water feeling like pure relief against my tender, heated skin.

By the time I resurfaced, floating to the top, everyone was following my lead. And we lay, with smiles on our faces, against the sun, floating around each other.

"I forgot what it feels like to let go for a moment," Gordon said first, a little breathlessly, and Raine hummed. "Back at the hospital, you have to be in control of so many things... it makes you forget that you can just... be a person."

"Not just the hospital," I found myself blurting, unable to stop. "Sometimes in every aspect of your life, too."

Sometimes, you're on autopilot.... And you don't even know."

"You guys are speaking life into me right now," Raine groaned. "We need to take these trips more often – Imara, consider moving out here."

We all laughed, nearly dipping right back into the sea. If I could, I would. For now, this was enough.

The sun began to dip below the horizon, casting a warm golden glow across the sky. We decided we'd had enough floating and sprawling about, and we crawled back to shore, a little tired but ready to continue the night.

The men gathered the driftwood, and we collected bits and pieces of dried grass. Raine stopped mid-gathering and gave the place a quick look around.

"Are you guys sure we can do this? Bonfires are illegal in some places." Jason was the first to wave her off, logging behind him dried wood, perfect for the fire.

"This is private property; I'm sure we'll be fine. In the meantime, someone can grab the marshmallows."

“I got it,” Emily and I said at the same time. We glanced at each other before she interlocked her arms in mine as we headed inside together.

“How are you?” I asked her once we stepped into the kitchen, just the two of us. She looked up at me, shrugging with a smile.

“I’ve been good, you know, nothing really to complain about.” She looked away, searching our tons and tons of plastic bags while I squinted my eyes at her.

I walked over closer to her and leaned against the counter. I needed her to feel the heat because something else was clearly there.

“What are you not telling me?”

Emily tilted her head, still avoiding my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, out of everyone here, I noticed that you’re a bit quieter. You know you can talk to me, right?”

She hesitantly looked up and pulled her bottom lip into her mouth. “My boyfriend... Erin, he proposed.”

She meekly raised her hand. I noticed the gorgeous ring sitting on her finger and gasped. “I’m getting married.”

“Emily... that's *wonderful*,” I hesitantly reached out to take her hand, as if afraid I’d break the ring. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, I was going to,” she said quickly. “But then I figured it wouldn’t be right because so much hurt’s being going on with you and –”

“No, no, no, I *never* wanted you to dim your happiness for me. I always want to hear about everything going right in your life,” I said, holding onto both of her hands as I stared into her teary eyes. “I’m just mad I didn't see it myself so that I could scold you.”

We both chuckled, and she laid her head on my shoulder and leaned against the counter.

“Are you happy?” I asked quietly, and she nodded, sniffing.

“I am. I’ve never been more sure about anything else in my life.”

“Good,” I sighed, staring ahead at the wall. “Then that’s all that matters.”

We stood in silence for a bit longer, figuring the others didn't really need us just yet. Then came a few shouts, and we rolled our eyes at their dramatics before heading back out.

"Alright, alright, we've got the treats." I raised the marshmallows, but they weren't concerned with me at all. Raine tiptoed over and over, her eyes wide as everyone stood in a circle.

"Guys?"

"What's going on?" I asked as I slowly walked toward them.

Jason pointed towards the shoreline, where a cluster of tiny turtles struggled to make their way across the sand.

"Oh my gosh... would you guys believe I've never seen those up close?"

"We need to help them," Gordon chimed quickly. "They're vulnerable, and the tide is coming in fast."

"What do we do?" I placed down the marshmallows as we sprung to action, forming a protective barrier around the hatchlings and fending off any potential curious onlookers.

Together, we guided the turtles towards the water, as patient as ever. I guess it was the medics in us.

As the last of the hatchlings disappeared into the waves, a wave of relief washed over us. Exhausted but exhilarated, we collapsed onto the sand, our laughter mingling with the sound of the crashing waves.

“When are we *not* saving lives?” I joked, staring up at the shining moon.

“We’re superheroes,” Gordon quipped, a playful grin spreading across his face.

Emily nodded in agreement, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

“Defenders of the sea!”

As I watched the waves crash against the shore, my fingers sank into the sand; it was almost therapeutic. How warm it was, slowly cooling as the sun disappeared; how it poured into my hand, tiny little grains, reminding me of here and now.

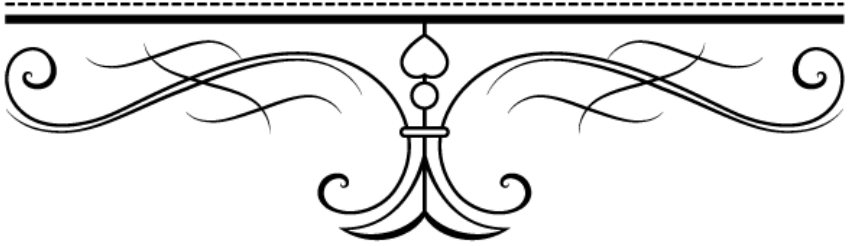
“*I still love Derek,*” I found myself whispering into my mind. The thought of him, of us, still plagued every moment.

But I knew I couldn't continue to sacrifice my happiness for the sake of our relationship, which I could see clearly know had been what I'd been doing all along.

It was time to prioritize myself and pursue the things that truly brought me joy and fulfillment. If therapy worked, then it would be great. We could learn to exist together, to love each other and the version of ourselves we're becoming.

But if it didn't, I knew I had something to uphold to myself: a promise between me and the sand.

CHAPTER 31: HOPE



“What changes have we made this week?” Dr. Sholl looked different today. She had a flower hidden on the side of a cute bun, and she’d applied extra blush on her face.

“She looks like she’s in love,” I thought to myself.

The thought brought a smile to my face.

Derek looked good as well. He’d dressed in a lapel shirt, a chain he hadn’t worn in *months* dangling around his neck, his skin glowing, and his hair freshly cut. He looked *good*.

"I've been making some conscious efforts to change," he spoke up first, his gaze meeting mine across the computer. "I've actually started a new job as a tech assistant at Giosoft."

A warm sensation coursed through my body. I straightened on the lunch room chair, fixing my air pods, afraid that my ears were deceiving me.

“Really?” I breathed, and he nodded, unable to hide his smile any longer.

There was a flutter of relief in my chest, a sense of pride swelling in my heart. That... that is really all I’ve been asking for. If I needed a clear sign of Derek changing, this was it.

“I knew you could do it; I’m so proud of you,” I chimed.

I didn’t miss the glimmer of hope in his eyes, and this time... it didn’t annoy me. I knew we both felt the same: the future didn’t seem so daunting anymore.

Dr. Sholl nodded approvingly, her smile radiant. “It’s wonderful to hear that you’ve taken this step, Derek. It sounds like you’re making real progress. How about you, Imara?”

“Well,” I sighed with a small laugh. “I haven’t made any progress as big as Derek’s, but I have been... communicating a lot better behind the scenes. I think we’ve both just been trying to... be kinder, listen more, and I’m learning to complain less.”

“Wonderful, really. Improving communication is a significant step. It's often the foundation for resolving conflicts and strengthening relationships. And learning to complain less can lead to a more positive outlook on life. It helps us appreciate what's already there in front of us.”

“I know you’re on your lunch, Imara, so I won’t make this session too long. I think we both appreciate your dedication to the sessions.”

“Definitely,” Derek reaffirmed. “I appreciate it as well.”

My heart grew warmer and fonder.

“Since you’re both actually getting to a space of better communication and even taking steps to fulfill your relationship, we must touch base on something that’s *most* important: trust.”

"Trust," I repeated, the word lingering on my tongue. It was something I'd struggled with in the past, but maybe, just maybe, it was something we could work on together.

Dr. Sholl nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Trust is the foundation of any healthy relationship. It's about feeling secure, knowing that you can rely on each other, and being open and honest with one another."

I averted my eyes, knowing that –

“Imara... from our conversations, it’s clear to me that you have a hard time trusting Derek sometimes. When he says he’s going to do something, or when he promises to change, there’s a part of you that doubts whether he’ll follow through. Why is that?”

I hesitated, “because he used to say it so often, and nothing would get done... it’s hard to let go of the fear of being disappointed again.”

Dr. Sholl nodded understandingly, her gaze gentle yet probing. “I understand, Imara. Your response is only natural. When we’ve been disappointed so many times, it gets harder to believe in our partners. But you’re still here, why?”

“Despite everything we’ve been through, I still love Derek, and I want to believe that we can work through our issues together. Maybe it’s naive, but I have hope that things can get better.”

“It’s not naive at all... Hope is a powerful motivator, Imara. But hope alone isn’t enough. It’s important to communicate your needs and boundaries clearly and to hold each other

accountable for your actions. You can rebuild trust, but it requires effort and commitment from both parties.”

I nodded.

“And it’s a great first step from you, Derek, that you’ve gone and fulfilled one of your promises. Do you have anything to say to Imara?”

"Imara, I want you to know that I'm committed to making things right between us. I know I've let you down in the past, and I'm truly sorry for that. But I'm determined to show you through my actions that I'm serious about change. I understand that rebuilding trust takes time, but I'm willing to put in as much effort as it takes. You mean everything to me, and I'll do whatever it takes to earn back your trust and make our relationship stronger than ever."

Dr. Sholl nodded, indicating the end of the session. "Well, it seems like we've made some good progress today. Remember to keep practicing the communication techniques we've discussed, and don't hesitate to reach out if you need further support. Take care, both of you."

Derek hang back on the call, and so did I.

“Hey,” he murmured, and I smiled softly.

“Hey.”

“I miss you... a lot. How’s it going over there?”

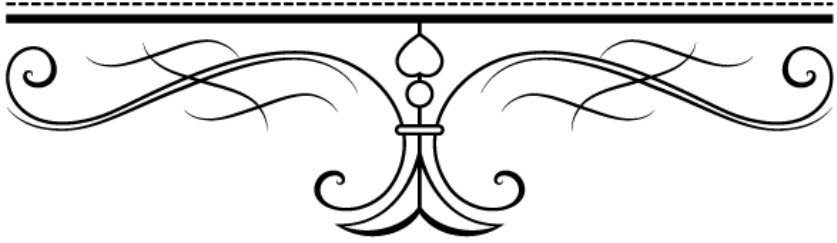
“I miss you too,” I rasped quietly, overcome with a feeling of yearning. “It’s good. I should be home in the next three weeks.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, but this time, they were tears of relief rather than sadness. For the first time in a long while, I felt a glimmer of optimism about our future together.

“Good.”

CHAPTER 32: HOME EARLY



I glanced at the designer watch sitting next to me at the back of my Uber, hoping that it hadn't magically disappeared.

I mean, one of them would equal an entire semester for Derek. But after all his sacrifices and the efforts he'd been putting in, especially in getting a new job, he deserved it.

He's been through so much, and I wanted to encourage him and show him what he could also get for *himself* when he pushed hard enough.

The trip from the airport was short, and I knew I'd be back home in no time. I had escaped work under the guise of a family emergency, but I just couldn't wait to see him.

I could imagine the surprise on his face; we'd really been connecting, and I could tell we missed the physical parts of being with each other. We needed it.

A part of me also wondered if this was too soon or if we needed more time and I was acting prematurely. A frown tugged at my brows as the cityscape blurred past, a sigh escaping me as unease grew in my chest.

"Anything on your mind?" The driver, a middle-aged man with a comforting 'dad' vibe, sporting an ascot hat and a plaid sweater that's seen better days, caught my sigh through the rearview mirror. I unconsciously smiled at him and shrugged my shoulders.

"Just a little worried about surprising my partner... we've been going through some tough times, and we've been doing better, but... we haven't seen each other in a while."

"Aw," the man groaned, offering a warm, knowing smile before waving me off. "I promise you, he wants to see you. No man can stay away from his woman for too long, especially after a moment in a tug-of-war. I promise when he sees you, he'll jump through the roof."

His words, simple yet sincere, coaxed a small giggle from me. "Thank you... that helps."

He tilted his head, returning to silence, and I turned my gaze back to the window.

Carry Me Home

As we drew closer and closer to home, I tried to remind myself of all the progress we've made... we were on a path to healing, and this visit was just another huge step.

After paying the driver, including a nice little tip, I made my way upstairs, fidgeting with everything I possibly could: the carry-on, the jewelry box, my coat, everything.

I got to my floor, and the key turned smoothly in the lock, the familiar click echoing through the quiet hallway as I pushed open the door to our home.

I bite my lip, my heart racing with excitement, my eyes eagerly searching the living room space with 'surprise!' at the tip of my tongue. I stepped inside fully, but Derek was not in his usual spot on the couch.

"Shoot," I whispered, letting out a small laugh. "He must be at work," I thought.

I looked around our space and saw just how neat it looked. It looked as if I'd cleaned it myself: everything was spotless and in its place. He was doing so well.

I placed the watch on the coffee table and pulled off my jacket. I' was so darn proud of Derek for everything he'd done and continued to do –

“Derek – *stop it*,” my heart froze at the sound of a feminine voice that sounded *oddly* familiar. I looked around as if I was hallucinating and trickled closer to our bedroom door.

His deep murmurs, the same way he talked to me, filled the space, and my hands trembled. My breathing felt shallow, and my mind didn’t even *try* to make sense of it because I already knew what was going on.

My mind was blank as I slowly walked up to the door and peeked in. *Nothing* could’ve ever prepared me for the sight. Derek’s eyes caught mine as he leaned over the woman, their bodies covered underneath the sheets on our bed.

A gasp left my lips, and the woman turned around. Seeing her shocked face sent me flying back a few steps, the world as I knew it collapsing around me.

“Oh crap,” she whispered, her eyes immediately filling with tears as she scrambled away from him. “Oh crap, oh crap, *no*.”

And then I saw it – the telltale outline of two figures entwined on our bed, their murmured whispers filling the silence like a dagger to the heart.

My breath caught in my throat, the blood draining from my face as I stood frozen in shock. My eyes darted between the two of them, not knowing what to say first.

They continued to shuffle around each other, their frantic movements being the only sound filling the palpable silence. No one said anything; no one tried to do damage control at that moment, and I think that was what hurt the most.

“Imara,” she whispered, tears dripping down her face.

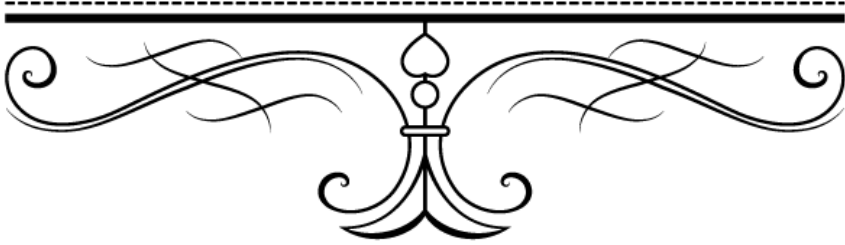
"How could you?" I managed to choke out, my voice barely above a hoarse whisper. "After everything we'd been through, after everything *you* told me about him, Tania?!"

Derek's eyes flickered with guilt and shame, but he couldn't bring himself to meet my gaze. His silence was deafening, each passing moment stretching between us. All Tania could do was shake her head from left to right, still clutching the sheets to her body.

“I-I wasn't thinking... I wasn't thinking, Imara. I'm so stupid, I -”

“I don't want to hear it,” I gulped, forcing my eyes to meet hers as I said the next words. “You're *dead* to me.”

CHAPTER 33: CLOSER THAN YOU THINK



Imara



The world spun around me in a dizzying blur as I held on to the corner of my kitchen counter, hot and relentless tears streaming down my cheeks.

I barely noticed the streak of brown hair that rushed toward the door. Tania barely had her clothes on: her shirt was hanging off her shoulder, and her pants were unbuttoned.

I forced my gaze away, focusing instead on the dim outlines of the world outside the kitchen window. It took everything inside of me to say nothing.

“I-Imara...” Tania's voice quivered, slicing through the silence. I closed my eyes, blocking her out, blocking everything out. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

The words meant nothing; at that moment, I couldn't care less. The doorknob turned, and Tania left with a quiet clasp. My heart sagged in my chest, blood pumping through my veins.

The sound of feet sliding against the tiles made me turn and look, even though I didn't want to, and before me stood a fully clothed Derek. He paused, my eyes apparently gluing him in place.

For the first time since he found out I'd lost the baby, he was pale. His lips pressed together in a tight line, shoulders up to his neck, eyebrows knitted together and downturned as if *he* wanted to cry.

He started walking toward me in the silence, and I quickly shook my head, pushing against the counter as if expecting it to move. I held out my hand.

“No,” I croaked, swallowing hard, and he stopped in his tracks, his fists clenching at his sides. “No, you stay there. Away from me.”

“Imara... let me... let me tell you what hap –”

“I don’t want to hear it!” I screeched, my voice foreign to me. The sound, filled with a pain that seared through me, bounced off the walls. “My best friend, Derek? Really?”

Ex-best friend.

I stared at the man I’d loved all my life, but I couldn’t recognize him.

A man I’d given everything to, the man I once lost everything with.

Tania was another thing. Something so painful I couldn’t even... *begin* to think about it. It hurt so much there was a fire in my throat; it hurt so much I almost wished she was still here so I could throw something at her and she could also get to experience the fury Derek was facing.

My heart raced, but my chest was tight. It felt like the questions running through my mind were suffocating me. I didn’t know which question to ask first.

“Actually... how long has this been going on?”

I watched as he averted his eyes, a knot forming in my stomach. He shifted nervously from one foot to the next, running a hand through his hair.

“How long, Derek?”

“Just,” he sighed heavily, rolling his lips into his mouth before finally admitting, “just a few months. I honestly thought that we were —“

My stomach dropped, goosebumps crawling over my skin, but at the same time, I felt almost... *numb*.

“So you sat in those therapy sessions... and you *pretended* the entire time?”

“Nothing was a pretense, Imara,” he stepped forward, and I ground my teeth together. “I-I was trying to let her go. I was going to. That was supposed to be the last time.”

“I... my baby *died* inside of me, and both of you were there, sleeping with each other behind my back!” I screamed. “

His words felt like a knife twisting in my already wounded heart. I shook my head frantically.

“Why would you do this to me?” I gasped, my heart constricting in my chest. “Oh no! *Why* Derek?”

He remained quiet, his gaze fixed on the floor as if searching for an answer there.

“I’ve literally done *everything* you’ve ever asked me to do. Pay for my tuition, Imara? I got it. Pay for this apartment, Imara. *I got it*,” I jabbed a finger into my chest as his lips twitched. My eyes watered, spilling over onto my cheek, and he dared to look away.

I stepped closer slowly, willing him to look at me. “I’ve carried you like a child in my womb, and I *lost* your child right here in this same womb... and even then, I was ready to drop my dreams to make sure we had a family, and all *you* had to do was do right by me.”

“That’s the thing!” He shouted suddenly, his voice rough as he held out his hands on either side of him, “You expected me to be some perfect man; well, I’m not that! I don’t come from a family that supports me no matter what. I don’t have a silver spoon, and all I’ve ever done is make myself small to make you happy.”

I stepped back, recoiling as a laugh escaped me.

“I didn’t ask you to make yourself small; I asked you to get a job!” I retorted, placing a hand on my chest. My world, as I

knew it, was being pulled from underneath my feet, and I didn't know how much longer I could stand upright.

"I asked you to *help me*, no matter how little. You belittled me every time I went out and did what I had to, and the entire time, you were sleeping with someone else. You chose Tania every time – over me."

My breath came out of me in pants, and Derek raised his finger and pointed it at *me*, his shoulders squared.

"You need to acknowledge the part you played in this as well, Imara. You weren't *innocent*. You traveled all around, and you left me behind like I was *nothing*. I felt alone, I felt neglected, and all you used to do was come back and *nag*. Tania was there because *I needed her*. She didn't make me feel less than a man – she understood what we went through."

"You nagged so much that you stressed yourself into killing our child and expected *me* to know exactly how to comfort you."

I sucked in a quick breath, my hand flying to my mouth to suppress the nausea churning in the pit of my stomach. I took a step back as if it would put enough distance between

us. My throat felt so *tight that* I couldn't swallow. My breathing was shallow as we just stared at each other in silence.

Derek closed his eyes., his shoulders slumping as his head lowered toward the floor. For the longest time, I remained silent. My breath cut from my throat.

He took a step forward, holding out his hands as they trembled.

"I... I'm sorry that was too far."

"Is that what you think.... What you've *been* thinking?" I whispered, my body trembling violently. "That I... *killed* our child?"

"Imara, no. What I meant was — "

I flew off from the counter, my feet slamming heavily against the floor. "Get out, get out, get out!" I screamed, grabbing his coat off the hanger. Everything broke loose as I screamed and wailed, shoving him outside and throwing his jacket after him. "

Get the hell out of my house!"

Derek protested, but I heard nothing. My mind had long shut down, and my body was on autopilot as I shut the door in his face.

A deafening silence followed, and all I could hear was the sound of my heartbeat. The pounding in my ears thumped, and images of me on that hospital bed, begging for a miracle, begging for *something* to happen, *for life to take me instead of my unborn child*, came rolling back in uncontrollably.

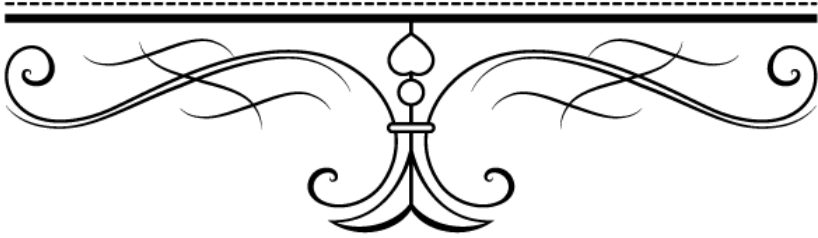
I collapsed against the door, cradling my arms to my chest. The sobs came out instantaneously, racking through my body with so much force that the pain felt excruciating.

In a matter of a few weeks, I'd lost *everything*. And somehow, Derek had still found a way to blame me.

My fingers traveled into my hair as I gripped at my roots, my chest aching, my throat burning. I thought about all the times I'd gone on assignment, every time I had come back and slept in that same bed. How could he have done that in the place where...

All the times I'd shared myself with him and all the good memories we'd ever had, wondering if she was having the same experience too.

CHAPTER 34: HOMECOMING



Imara



I stood in front of my parents' wooden door, mustering the strength to knock. Knowing I'd have to tell them everything caused shame to course through me. I knew I had no choice but to watch their expressions fall to dread.

I closed my eyes and felt eight years old again, running through the field behind our house with Tania. The sun was shining, our laughter echoing in the air. Tania's dark curls bounced as she chased me, her giggles infectious.

Things were simple back then. "You can't catch me, Imara!" she teased, her grin wide as she breezed through the field. I always wished I could be as fast as her.

“I can!” I shouted back, fisting my hands. Her laughter slowed her down. I lunged forward and tackled her to the ground, and we both rolled against the grass, our excited screams filling the air. We tumbled together, laughing so hard we could barely breathe.

When we finally came to a stop, we looked up at the bright blue sky, lying like little snow angels. The clouds moved slowly, but they didn’t move without each other. Everywhere they went, they were never alone.

“We’ll always be best friends, right?” I asked.

“Of course,” Tania promised, her hand finding mine. “Always.”

I opened my eyes, the memory fading into the cold, harsh present. I lied for Derek, most of all to my parents, and for years, and yet here I was now, on their doorstep, about to beg for support I didn’t deserve.

I felt like a brittle stick the breeze would blow away at any moment. On the drive to my childhood home, I kept wondering, what if I just went a little... off the road? What if something happened right there and then? After all, wasn’t

that easier than having to deal with the images, the pain, and everything that plagued my mind?

Silent heaves coursed through me as I knocked on the door. It was cold out here, but I'd forgotten my coat.

"Coming!" My mother called from inside. In a split second, I contemplated running away. She sounded so happy, so carefree, and I was about to shatter her world.

I closed my eyes in the same second that she opened the door. She took one look at me, and her smile disappeared. My mother dropped the rolling pin that she'd been holding in her hand and immediately pulled me into her arms as I collapsed.

"Imara!" My mother screamed, her voice cracking. "Harold! Harold!"

My father came as quickly as she called, and the shame intensified tenfold. Footsteps thundered through the house, and my father bursted into the doorway, eyes wide with panic. "What happened? Is she hurt?"

"I don't know," my mother cried, her voice trembling. "Imara, honey, tell us what's wrong, please. Oh, Harold, she's so cold!"

My father knelt beside us, his hands hovering, unsure where to touch. “Imara, sweetheart, what’s going on?”

He’d warned me from the very beginning, and a pang of guilt coursed through me. I avoided his gaze completely.

I tried to speak, but the words stuck in my throat and came out in a garbled mess. “Derek... Tania... they...”

My mother’s grip tightened, her fingers digging into my shoulders. “What about Derek and Tania, honey? What happened?”

I thought I had no tears left, but they came out of their own volition, hot and unstoppable. I collapsed, sobbing at my mom’s doorstep; my body wracked with inhumane sounds of grief.

I could only shake my head.

I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand how I could give my heart to these people, and they so easily *trampled* on it. *Tania*? After we’d watched each other grow up and started living out our childhood dreams?

Their faces looked blurred through my tears, their expressions morphing from confusion to horror. My father’s

hands found my shoulders, and I immediately felt grounded. “Take your time, Imara. We’re here. We’ll figure this out.”

I stayed there for a while. I don’t know how long. I let my mom hold me in her embrace and rock me back and forth as I searched my soul and begged it to find the words to say, but there were none. Not yet. It felt as if the guilt I had to face would kill me; the thought brought more tears. I was barely enduring at that point.

Despite everything Derek and I had been through, he had been my rock. He had been the person I envisioned my *entire* life with. And Tania. That was my sister.

“I can’t... I can’t move forward,” I finally managed to choke out between sobs. “I don’t know how to.”

My mother held me tighter, her tears falling freely. She stroked my hair, and her touch was gentle. “Sometimes... sometimes people do terrible things, things we can’t understand,” she whispered, trying on her own to put two and two together. “But that doesn’t mean you’re broken. You’re stronger than you know, Imara.”

It didn’t feel that way. Lord knows it didn’t feel that way.

As if sensing the thoughts running through my mind, my mother pulled back slightly and cupped both cheeks. Her eyes filled with tears, but I could see a fierceness behind them and a determination to protect and shield from the pain.

“Listen to me, Imara,” she said, her voice firm. “This is not your fault. Do you hear me? This is not your fault. They are the ones who betrayed you. They should be ashamed.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that I didn’t deserve this, that I didn’t bring this on myself. But the guilt and shame were suffocating, wrapping around me like a heavy blanket. How could I not have seen it? How could I have been so blind?

“I feel so stupid,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “I feel like... like I’ve wasted so much time. So much love. And for what? For them to throw it all away like it meant nothing?”

My father reached out, his hand resting on my shoulder. “You’re not stupid, Imara,” he said, his voice steady. “You’re kind and loving. You trusted them because that’s who you are. And they took advantage of that. But that doesn’t mean you should stop being who you are. It doesn’t mean you should stop trusting or loving.”

I looked up at him, his face blurry through my tears.

“But how do I move on from this?” I asked, my voice trembling. “How do I trust anyone again? How do I trust myself?”

My mother’s gentle touch brushed a strand of hair from my face. “You take it one day at a time,” she said softly. “You lean on the people who love you. And you remember that you are strong, Imara. Stronger than you think. You’ve been through so much but have always come out the other side. This time will be no different.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that I could survive this and find my way back to myself. But at that moment, the pain felt too big and too overwhelming. It felt unending... like it would never go away.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I admitted, my voice barely audible. “I don’t know if I can keep going.”

My father’s hand tightened on my shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. “You can,” he said, his voice unwavering. “And you will. Because you’re not alone, Imara. You have us. You have your family. And we’re not going anywhere.”

My mother nodded, her eyes filled with determination. “We’re here for you, honey. Every step of the way. You don’t have to do this alone.”

I looked between them, their faces filled with love and concern, and for the first time since I’d discovered the truth, I felt a flicker of hope. It was small and barely there, but it was enough to keep me going and enough to remind me that I was not alone.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice choking with tears. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

My mother pulled me tighter into her embrace, her arms warm and comforting. “You’ll never have to find out,” she said softly. “We’re here, Imara. Always.”

As I sat there, surrounded by my parents' love, I felt the first glimmer of healing. The road ahead would be long and painful, but I knew what I needed to do immediately: I took out my phone, emailed the housing agent, and gave notice to terminate my lease.

In that moment, an unspoken truth enveloped us in its familiar, warm embrace. I was exactly where I belonged: home!

The End