

# Shattered Mirrors

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## **Contents**

Ch. 1: Change	1
Ch. 2: Resentment	8
Ch. 3: Dread	18
Ch. 4: Attachment	26
Ch. 5: Home?	50
Ch. 6: Resilience	70
Ch. 7: Yes	83
Ch. 8: Home	94
Ch. 9: Family	109
Ch. 10: A call	122
Ch. 11: Meeting	132
Ch. 12: Peace.	155

# Ch. 1: Change

It was a chilly Friday morning on the first of October, and like most mornings, I was half-asleep on my way to college, wishing for more sleep. I was heading to physics, a class I'd failed before but was now one of my favorites. My new teacher had a gift for making complex concepts click. With him, even stationary waves, today's topic, seemed straightforward.

By my next class, communication practice, I was feeling awful. My mood had been sinking all day, but this was something else. I was used to the headaches and cramps that came with HRT, the same things I'd heard women complain about for years. And while I hated my body more than anything, this new pain was on a different level. It was a jackhammer to the skull and a sickening wave of nausea all at once. A glance around the room told me I wasn't alone. About half the class wore expressions of clear discomfort, and soon, their complaints echoed mine. My phone read 13:00. The class had just begun, and all I wanted to do was sleep to ease the pain.



Waking up felt like surfacing from a deep, dreamless sleep. I wasn't the only one. As my classmates stirred, a collective, dawning horror filled the room. Half of us had

transformed into draconic humanoids. We had sharp horns, long tails, pointed ears, forked tongues, carnivorous teeth, and slitted, canine eyes.

Some of us, myself included, had forearms that matched our new hair color. For me, it was a vibrant red that covered my forearms, contrasting with the paleness of my body. My hair turned stark white. It wasn't until later that I discovered a ridge of red hair running from the tip of my new tail all the way up my spine.

While everyone else panicked, I was lost in my own world. I had something else on my mind: my body was female. It wasn't the masculine form I'd always hated; it was completely and absolutely the body of a woman.

I snapped back to reality<sup>1</sup>. The teacher tried to claim our attention to him. He was the stereotypical "weeb" with a fedora. He had a soft voice. Needless to say, he was fighting for his life to get our attention. Most were freaking out by the change, others — such as myself — were too intrigued by our new bodies.

— (Random classmate) What the fuck are we supposed to do!

Using a loud buzzer played on his laptop's speaker, he finally managed to get our attention.

— (Julian) Attention! I'm ending class right now, for those unchanged, you can leave,

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<sup>1</sup>reference to Lose Yourself by Eminem

otherwise please come to me. I'll make a note to confirm your identity, for now.

Not even a few seconds later, a message was shared by the school administration on the speakers heard all throughout the campus: "1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. To students, teachers and staff alike. Please pay extra attention to the following directives: 'Due to an unexplained phenomenon where some people changed into some sort of dragon-like humans, we ask that a teacher or a member of the staff present near you write a note testifying of your identity, this is a precaution measure as some people seem to significantly change physical appearances. We will send a message once we've spoken with the authorities.'"

One by one, slowly, the teacher wrote on a piece of paper our names and signed it, we were then free to leave the class.



Until now, it had escaped my mind. My jaws started to clench hard at the sight of what I was confronted with: How was I meant to get back home and tell my mother about it? Since college is far from home, I have to drive there since no public transportation reaches home. I had the notes given by Julian, my teacher, but what good were the notes as proof of my identity when I looked nothing alike to my past body? It was mortifying. My breath started to get rough. I walked hazardously to my truck with clothes that barely fitted me anymore, wondering what my life was going to be like from now on.

I was heavily hesitant on driving back home. I was scared of what would happen if I was arrested. Could I even still drive? It was a completely new body after all. I even have a tail now, surely it would impact driving somewhat? I thought of asking my mother — Jeanne — to bring me back, but would she believe that it was indeed me? She was working the evening shift today, I'd have to wait five hours anyway.

After a moment of hesitation, I made the jump: I was going to drive home. I sat in my truck, took a moment to assimilate the feeling of having a tail while sitting before going on my way. The ride home was stressful, I felt every single fiber of my being as the horns kept scraping the roof, it was overwhelming. I was forced to tilt my head in an uncomfortable way to avoid it.

Finally home, the journey's stress melting away into a puddle of fatigue. I encountered our family dog and wondered for a brief moment if she'd recognize me, but the concerns fell silently in the distance as I collapsed onto my bed.



I was woken up by my mother. In her fifties, with the tired face of a woman who worked too many evening shifts, she stood at my door with... someone else. I was so tired I couldn't make out what they looked like. They stood at my door, gasping, their eyes wide with worry. My mother was the first to break the silence, her voice trembling as she asked, "Is that you, Kate?". It took me a

few seconds to process her words. "Uh?" I was confused. Who was this other person? My mom must have seen the confusion on my face because she said, "That's Olivier". Through my clouded thoughts, I couldn't help but notice how different he looked. He was still the same lanky teenager, with the same goofy smile and the same brown eyes, but his body was now that of a girl. A dragon-like girl, with emerald-colored hair that cascaded down his shoulders, and small, elegant horns that curled back from the top of his head.

As I looked half-asleep, my mom told me to rest before she went downstairs with my brother. I was perplexed by my new body. I started to explore it. I now had big breasts, a somewhat curvy body, but most important, I now had a vagina! Something that I wished for since forever. The sensation it procured was magical. I barely inserted a finger in the cavity and a jolt of pleasure, raw and overwhelming, shot through me. It was a sensation I'd only ever dreamed of, a feeling of rightness that eclipsed everything else. I explored further, my curiosity overriding the lingering exhaustion. Every touch was a revelation, a confirmation of a truth I had always known but never dared to hope for. I continued to explore my new body, a symphony of pleasure and emotion washing over me, until a familiar pang of hunger pulled me from my reverie. My stomach was screaming for food. It was near 22:00, and the last time I'd eaten was around 11:00. With a sigh, I calmed myself down and went downstairs.

As I came downstairs, I saw my mother and brother on the couch, talking about his new body. He seemed to hate it, he had a visible disgusted expression and he was clenching his fists. I was hungry however, so I ignored them and headed towards the fridge, took a sub from it then sat at the dining table. Eating food was so weird, the sharp teeth meant they got stuck even if they barely scraped the food. It was hard to masticate too since they were less molars to use. As I finished my sub and went to the cabinet to take some biscuits like usual, I overhead more of the conversation between my mother and brother. They talked about what being a girl meant, menstruations, long hair, clothes and bunch of stuff I already knew, I couldn't pay any mind to them because I was frustrated. I wanted to continue my self-discovery as soon as possible.



As I was heading upstairs after cleaning after myself, my mother stopped me and asked to sit on the couch.

- (Jeanne) Look, i understand that it's a very confusing time, but we need to do something.
- (Olivier) Supposed to do what!? What the fuck am I supposed to do? I'm in a body of a woman for Christ's sake!
- (Jeanne) Calm down please. We'll get that sorted later, the most important thing right now is getting you two new IDs and some new clothes. We'll leave tomorrow morning at 6 o'clock.

- (Kate) WHAT!? That's way too early, 8 o'clock would be more reasonable. Shops don't open that early anyway.
- (Jeanne) Fine! We'll leave at 7 o'clock.

## Ch. 2: Resentment

It was too damn early, I could barely open my eyes. The neon lights of the shopping mall were piercing my eyes. My mother dragged us to her favorite store: Simons<sup>2</sup>. Olivier was dragging behind, he wouldn't bother to lift his foot, if at all. His face was one of misery. I, on the other hand, couldn't suppress a new thrill of excitement. New body, new clothes. It felt like a fresh beginning.

I grabbed a few things to try on — a cute skirt, a tight-fitting top, some leggings. In the fitting room, I was flabbergasted. Sure it was a little hard to put clothes with the horns and tail being in the way, but for the first time ever, clothes looked right on me. The skirt swished around my legs, the top shaped my new curves. I felt... pretty.

I came out to show my mom, and she gave a small smile, hiding sorrow within her eyes. Then I saw Olivier. He was holding a pair of men's jeans, looking at them desperately. He went into the fitting room and came out a few minutes later, crying and looking even more defeated. The jeans obviously didn't fit his new hips.

He threw them violently on the floor.

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<sup>2</sup>[Simons.ca](http://Simons.ca)

- (Olivier) This is bullshit! Nothing is going to fit me!
- (Jeanne) Hey! Calm down. turned to me with eyes full of venom.
- (Olivier) You love this, don't you? You finally got what you wanted!
- (Kate) What !? No! I'm just trying to make the best of it.
- (Olivier) The best of it? You get to be a girl, and I'm stuck like this!
- (Kate) I know it's hard. But, if you want... you can ask me anything. About... you know. Being a girl. I've... done a worryingly amount of research about it. I can help too if you want to transition back to a guy... though, I'm not as familiar.

His face contorted in disgusts and hatred

- (Olivier) I don't want your help!

He stormed off, leaving my mother and me standing there among passersby in deafening silence.

- (Jeanne) sigh Jesus Christ... Let's checkout what we have then go after him...
- (Kate) ...okay.

After searching for over an hour in the mall, my mother's face sickened. We were searching everywhere for him, in Simons, in nearby stores, in the mall. We just couldn't find him. We called security, gave them a description, then the guards went on their way. Another 2 hours went by, nothing. After a few more minutes, one of the security came to us and asked to follow him.

My brother was found curled up in a ball in a bathroom stall on the opposite side of

the mass. He was crying a river. My mother rushed to the closed stall.

— (Jeanne, with a cracking voice) Oli? Honey, it's me. Please open the door.

A muffled sob was the only reply.

— (Jeanne) Please, sweetie. I beg you. We can go home. We can do this some other day.

I stood back, the security guard giving me a sideways glance that felt heavy with judgment. I felt like an intruder in my own family's drama. My earlier excitement about the clothes now felt like a bitter poison in my stomach.

After a long time of pleading, Oliver emerged from the stall, his face red, his emerald hair a mess. He wouldn't look at either of us, staring at the floor instead. His shoulders were slumped from defeat.

The ride to the government agency center was suffocatingly silent. My mother decided against going straight home. "We really need to get this over with", she said with a strained but firm voice. Olivier sat in the back while looking out the window. I could see him in the mirrors, his face was one of misery.

The service center was exactly as soulless as I'd imagined. Grey walls, uncomfortable plastic chairs, and the smell of stale coffee and quiet desperation. We took a number and waited. And waited. For hours. Each number called felt like a tick of a clock counting down to a bomb. Would we even be able to pass through today? The entire waiting room was filled...

When our number, 389, was finally called, we approached the counter. A tired-looking woman with glasses perched on her nose looked up at us, her expression flat. My mother stepped forward slightly.

— (Jeanne) Hello. My children... They need new identification cards, and photos too. There's been... a change.

The clerk looked from me to Olivier, then back to my mother, her eyebrow raising a fraction of an inch.

— (Clerk) A change? As in the dragon-like thing everyone's talking about?

— (Jeanne) Yes. As you can see.

The clerk sighed, a long, suffering sound as if she was there since the beginning of time. She asked for our current IDs.

— (Clerk) Name?

— (Kate) Kate Raye.

The clerk's eyes flickered to my horns, then to my face. She typed.

— (Clerk) And you?

She looked at my brother. He stayed silent, his jaw clenched.

— (Jeanne) His name is Olivier Raye.

It was quiet, but sharp.

— (Clerk) Olivier Raye. Fine. Step back for the photo.

After getting our photos done, the ageless clerk gave us a temporary license and explained that the new IDs would be sent over mail.

My brother stayed silent the whole time. The tension was at an all time high. The ride

was awful, the roads' condition made the car bump around endlessly, making us all more stressed. The traffic was awful, there was over two kilometers of cars bumper to bumper on the highway. Time felt infinite. Almost longer than a one minute planck.

- (Jeanne) Olivier, listen. If you cooperate and get the shopping done, we'll go to your favourite restaurant. How does that sound? I get that you hate this, but... you won't be able to do anything about it if you don't face it...
- (Olivier, reluctantly) Fine, we'll just get basic clothes, none of that feminine crap. And then, we are **done**.

I saw my mother relax in relief as I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. We made our way back to the mall amidst the overabundance of traffic. My brother's reluctance was a heavy cloud over us. Every suggestion from my mother for anything remotely feminine was met with a sharp retort, and the air crackled with his anger. I was uncomfortable and restless around him. I went shopping on my own after asking for my mom's permission.

I ventured in the women's section, where I previously avoided in fear of being seen as creepy or weird. There, I found a few more skirts and tops to my liking. I found myself more conscious about my image, what I looked like. It felt surreal, spending years avoiding myself because of the masculine body I hated then finding myself in a woman's body, one that I dreamt of for years. It was amazing.

I had quite a few clothes, I made my way back to my mom and brother. I found them in the underwear section, my brother was impatient, he kept looking around as if he was completely uninterested. My mother was explaining to him how underwear worked for girls, I doubt that he cared even one bit. Nonetheless, with some persuasion, they made it through. My mom saw me, she was widening her eyes in surprise by the amount of clothes I had gotten. We had gotten enough clothes, it was time for lunch.

We headed to A&W. I asked for my favourite a combo consisting of 5 chicken strips, fries and Sprite. Both my mom and brother took their usual cheeseburger and a wrap. We sat at a table close to the windows given view to the endless parking lot. Olivier looked depressed, his forehead frowned, a thousand yard stare into the infinite boredom of the grey sky of autumn. We slowly ate our food in silence, Jeanne looked overwhelmed, she was looking down with baggy eyes as if she hadn't slept in a week. It was apparent everyone was tired.

- (Kate) We could go to the library afterward... Could maybe change place of mind.
- (Olivier) ...

My mother looked over to my brother.

- (Jeanne) sigh Let's just go home... We'll go another day...

We cleaned our table and we left.

Going home was a nightmare, the mall was filled to the brim, the road over flooded

with cars. Traffic was barely moving. It took us hours to get home.

After the ordeal of the day, we finally made it home. Olivier, still fuming, stormed into his room and slammed the door shut, leaving my mother and me to deal with the mountain of shopping bags. We worked in silence, a shared weariness hanging between us as we loaded the washing machine and then the dryer.

As the house settled into a fragile quiet, I found myself alone with my thoughts. Sleep was the furthest thing from my mind. The thrill of self-discovery from the previous night was a stark contrast to the day's tension, and I yearned to return to it. I had made a detour while we were searching for my brother, a quick, secret purchase at a sex shop. Now, in the quiet of the night, it was time to use the dildo I had bought.



Back in the safety of my room, the day's overwhelming stress faded away, replaced by the anticipation. I unwrapped the toy I had bought from its package, its smooth surface cold against my hand. Since the walls of my room were too thin for privacy and knowing my brother was in the room right beside it, I opted for the calm of the bathroom. I sneakily brought the toy among my change of clothes. My heart pounding of nervousness and unadulterated excitement. Frankly, I was scared. I previously didn't have the time to take a good look at my nude body; It was going to be the first time. I started to

fill the bath with water. As I got naked, I was mesmerized by my new body. My skin was so smooth, my curves well defined. It was a little strange but I had red pubic hair, not that I minded though, it was cute if I say so myself. The feeling of my tail was quite intense, despite being covered of scales like snakes, it was surprisingly sensitive to touch.

When the bathtub was filled enough, I entered it and I begun to explore, reacquainting myself with the new landscape of my body. The first touch was electric, a shock wave of bliss so intense it stole my breath. It was far from the clumsy and detached attempts of my old body. This was real. This was *me*. Every sensation was a validation I had craved my entire life. After a while, my curiosity got the better of me. I reached for the toy, I hesitated for a moment, then, taking a deep breath, I introduced it to my body. The new sensation was overwhelming, a step beyond what I had just experienced. I moved with an instinct I didn't know I had, chasing the feeling as tears blurred my vision. Each wave stronger than the last washed away years of pain. It was a confirmation, a deepening of the truth I was just beginning to understand. Under the dim light of the bathroom, I was finally home in my own skin.

After this magical experience, I wiped myself with a towel, still in a daze about my body. And headed back to my room to sleep.



It was now Sunday, Québec's usual grey sky was still there. Unfortunately, I had to work today's evening. It was necessary since I dreamt of making it to McGill. Going there came at a cost: The fees were a few more thousands compared to other universities. Of course, I had to perform well in college.

I had a cashier job at a local A&W. It was located near a highway so it was very busy. I was in front of people the entire day as a cashier. It was something that I didn't like to begin with, but my whole appearance change made me even more anxious. I phoned my manager Eric about the circumstances.

- (Kate) Hey Eric, this is Kate.
- (Eric) *muffled sounds of a busy kitchen*
- (Kate) Sorry, I can't hear you very well.
- (Eric, shouting over the noise) Kate? Is that you? You sound weird. What's up?
- (Kate) Yeah, it's me. Look, something's happened. You know that... phenomenon everyone's talking about.
- (Eric) The dragon thing? Don't tell me you saw one and you're too scared to come to work.
- (Kate) No, it's... I'm one of them now.
- (Eric) ...
- (Eric) *A drawn-out sigh.* Frankly, I don't get paid enough to deal with this. Can you still work the register?
- (Kate) I... I think so. Yes.
- (Eric) Then you can come for your shift. Just... wear your hat and some plain clothes for now, we'll give you a new uniform when we *hopefully* have time.



The evening shift was busy. A few other dragons were there, but they kept to themselves. Suspicion lingered in the gazes of the regulars — a silent choreography of eyes that made it clear we were unwelcome. Despite the tension, time flew as the intensity of work overtook the unending stress. As the night wore on, people seemed to care less; they came to eat, not to judge.

The shift ended as abruptly as a storm. I headed home feeling as if I hadn't made a single difference in the world, nursing a growing fear that we would be ostracised.

## Ch. 3: Dread

The college sent a message through their platform early morning on Monday.

Dear students,

We're sure you've noticed the news about the change of some people becoming dragons. We've spoken with the relevant authorities and we've come to the decision that the school will continue, even for those affected by the change. If you are, we ask that you come at the registrar office to make your new student ID card.

Despite schedule not changing, please take an appropriate amount of time to rest if you've been affected.

Sincerely,  
The School Administration.

It was a rainy day, the air was thick and humid. Light was scarce, the days had started getting shorter. The pressure of the atmosphere was low. Fog started to crawl in and cling to the surrounding maple trees. The wind howled and whispered through the woods. The day started slowly, I made my way to my first class: Linear Algebra. My classmates were noisy as usual. I was sitting alone,

like always. When me and my family moved to another city after secondary school, I lost contact with my old friends. It was a bit lonely, but I got used to it.

A dragon girl sat beside me.

- (???) Hey, it's fine if I sit here, right?
- (Kate) Ah, uhh. Yeah..
- (???) I'm May by the way.
- (Kate) Oh, okay. I'm Kate.
- (May) Saw you were programming earlier on your laptop. What are you working on?
- (Kate) I'm trying to use Odin<sup>3</sup> to make a 3d game with raylib.
- (May) Oh cool! What's Odin?
- (Kate) It's a language trying to fixed the actual problems of C and C++.
- (May) Sounds cool.

The teacher, Alexandre, interrupted us.

- (Alexandre) Alright class, we'll start.
- (...) chatter
- (Alexandre) ALRIGHT, we'll start! Today we'll see how we can solve a linear system using the Gauss-Jordan method. We'll see it's the same method as Gauss but with extra steps. But first, I'll take attendance.

He began taking attendance as usual, people would raise their hands or say they are present. Anxiety started to fill my head as my name was closer and closer to be said.

- (Alexandre) Kate?
- (Kate with a shy voice) Y-Yeah.

He looked up from his tablet, his eyes finding me. He paused for a moment.

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<sup>3</sup>[odin-lang.org \(#notanad\)](https://odin-lang.org/#notanad)

- (Alexandre) You've... changed a lot it seems.
- (Kate) Uh... um yeah. You... You could say that.

It was clear he had something on his mind, he said nothing however as he continued to take attendance.

As usual, despite the teacher in front, students in the back kept talking about their projects for computer science. Everyone's voice became distant as a rhythmic cramp deep in my stomach tightened its grip. It was a foreign sensation, a ghost of a pain I'd only read about. The feeling was so alien, yet... Expected. A sudden warmth spread through me. I excused myself and hurried to the bathroom. The evidence was stark against the fabric of my underwear: blood.

Its sight, stark and vivid, was a shock that sent a wave of nausea through me, and retched into the toilet. But as I caught my breath, leaning against the cool porcelain, a different feeling began to dawn, a slow, brilliant sunrise chasing away the shadows of my fear. It was a promise. A confirmation of the new miraculous possibility: I could have children.

Shortly after, May came to the toilet.

- (May) Hey, Kate! Are you here?
- (Kate with a voice in pain) Yeah...
- (May) Are you okay? You don't sound okay.
- (Kate) Yeah... Yeah. Just starting period. Not too... bad.
- (May) Do you need pads? I have some if you need.
- (Kate) That'd be nice, thanks.

After washing my hands, I thanked her and we headed back to class. This experience led to a quiet conversation about periods. It turned out we had more in common than just our new bodies; she, too, was a transgender woman before the change. It was a comforting knowing someone else shared my experience. The rest of the class went smoothly, the pain was still lingering but manageable.

After class, May and I headed to the cafeteria. As usual, I brought a pre-prepared sub and some bear paws. I sat at a table while May went to buy today's meal, spaghetti.

May came back, tray in hand, and plopped down opposite me, her energy a stark contrast to the quiet cafeteria.

- (May) Okay, so! I was thinking about what you said, about Odin. And I looked it up on my phone while in line. It seems really cool! Like, C without the footguns? Sign me up! And you're making a game? That's so awesome. What kind of game is it? A shooter? An RPG? Oh, oh, is it a racing game? I love racing games.
- (Kate) It's... just a small 3d platformer.
- (May) A platformer! Even better! Like Mario 64? Or more like Crash Bandicoot?

Her phone buzzed, cutting her off. She glanced at the screen, and her expression shifted, the excitement draining away.

- (May) Oh, uh, sorry. It's my mom. I should take this.
- (Kate) Oh, okay.

May answered the phone, her voice a little more subdued.

— (May) Hey mom... Yeah... No, I'm at lunch... I know, but... Can we talk about this later? ... I just... Okay, fine... Yes, I'm still packing...

She listened for a moment, looking stressed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

— (May) Look, I have to go. I'll talk to you tonight. Bye.

She hung up and shoved her phone in her pocket, her earlier energy gone.

— (May) Sorry about that. Family stuff.

— (Kate) Is everything okay?

— (May) It's... complicated. Hey, I'm sorry, I have to go. Something came up.

— (Kate) Oh. Okay.

— (May) I'll see you around, okay?

May quickly gathered her things and left, leaving her barely-touched spaghetti on the table. I was left alone again, the silence of the cafeteria suddenly rung much louder.

The next day, I saw May near the registrar's office. She was holding a small stack of papers. She saw me and gave a weak smile.

— (Kate) Hey.

— (May) Hey. Look, about yesterday...

— (Kate) You don't have to explain.

— (May) No, I want to. My family... we're moving. To Vancouver. My dad got a new job there.

— (Kate) Oh. When?

— (May) Soon. Like, in two days. I'm just here to sort out the transfer papers.

— (Kate) So... you're leaving?

- (May) Yeah. I'm sorry. I was really looking forward to getting to know you.
- (Kate) Me too.

An awkward silence hung between us.

- (May) Well, I should... get this done.
- (Kate) Yeah. Good luck... with everything.
- (May) Thanks. You too, Kate.

And just like that, she was gone, disappearing into the registrar's office. My first new friend in years, and she was leaving before we even had a chance to begin.

The walk home was a blur. The world felt muted, matching the hollowness in my chest. When I opened the front door, the house was quiet. Mom wasn't back from work yet. I headed upstairs, wanting nothing more than to hide in my room.

As I passed my brother's room, I noticed his door was ajar. I heard a sniffing sound, then the sharp *snip-snip* of scissors. I peeked inside.

Olivier was sitting on the floor in front of his mirror, a pair of kitchen scissors in his hand. Clumps of his beautiful emerald hair lay scattered around him on the carpet. He was hacking at it, leaving it a jagged, uneven mess.

- (Kate) Olivier, what are you doing?

He froze, then slowly turned his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and filled with a chilling, cold fury I hadn't seen before. It was worse than the hot anger in the mall. This was something deeper, more settled.

- (Olivier) What does it look like I'm doing? I'm fixing it.
- (Kate) Fixing it? You're... Olivier, stop. Let me help you. We can go to a salon, they can...
- (Olivier) You. He spat the word out. He stood up, the scissors still in his hand.
- (Olivier) You always want to *help*. You offered to help me "transition back". Is this what you meant? You think a haircut is going to fix this?

He gestured wildly at his own body with the scissors, a gesture so frantic and full of self-loathing it made me take a step back.

- (Olivier) I'm still stuck in this... this costume! This *freakshow*! And you... you just get everything you ever wanted. You get to be pretty. You get a new body you love. I bet you're even happy about all the disgusting things that come with it. Getting your period, all that crap.

The question was a calculated strike, turning a biological reality into a twisted insult. He was projecting his own horror onto me, assuming I'd welcome what he despised. It was invasive and cruel.

- (Kate) That's... that's none of your business.
- (Olivier) I hear you in the bathroom sometimes. Humming. You sound so happy. Happy with all your little secrets while I'm stuck in this hell.

His voice cracked on the last word. The anger in his face seemed to crumble, replaced by a wave of raw despair. He looked from

me to his reflection in the mirror, at the butchered hair and the feminine face he despised.

— (Olivier) You get to be happy, but when I look in the mirror I... I see a monster. It's... it's just not me.

He dropped the scissors, which clattered onto the floor. He slid down the wall, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with violent, silent sobs.

I stood frozen for a moment, a war of pity and fear raging inside me. I wanted to help, to say something, but the words wouldn't come. I slowly backed out of the room, pulling the door quietly shut, leaving him alone with his grief. The sound of his muffled sobs followed me down the hall. The loneliness I felt after May left was now tangled with a heavy, suffocating guilt.



## Ch. 4: Attachment

The silence in the house was a heavy blanket, thick with the sound of my brother's muffled sobs. I retreated to my room, the quiet hum of my computer a stark contrast to the storm in my head. Each sob from across the hall was a fresh wave of guilt washing over me. I had gotten everything I'd ever wanted, a body that felt like home, a truth I could finally live in. But it had come at a cost, a cost my brother was paying in tears and self-hatred.

The brief spark of connection I'd felt with May now seemed like a distant dream. A whole new world of possibilities had opened up, a friend who understood, who saw me. And just as quickly, it was gone. The loneliness I'd grown so accustomed to came rushing back, deeper and more biting than before. It was a bitter pill to swallow, the realization that even in this new life, some things remained the same.

My brother's words echoed in my mind, sharp and venomous. "You get to be happy." Was I? The euphoria of my new body was undeniable, a deep, primal joy that sang in my blood. But it was tangled with the thorns of my brother's pain, the sting of my own isolation. The cacophony in my head was deafening, a chaotic symphony of guilt,

loneliness, and a desperate, aching need for something, anything, to quiet the noise.

I couldn't stay in that house, couldn't face the ghost of my brother's grief in the hallway, couldn't bear the weight of my own conflicted heart. I needed to escape. A bar. The thought came to me, unbidden. A place to drown the noise, to lose myself in the anonymity of a crowd. It was a stupid idea, a cliché, but it was all I had.

After driving around downtown, I found a small, dimly lit place called "The Serpent's Coil." The name was fitting, I thought, a wry smile touching my lips for the first time that day. The air inside was thick with the smell of stale beer and something else, something musky and reptilian. It was a haven for our kind, a place where horns and tails didn't draw a second glance.

I found a seat at the bar, the wood worn smooth by countless elbows. I ordered a beer, the bitter taste welcomed distractions. The chatter of the other patrons washed over me, a meaningless drone that slowly, mercifully, began to quiet the storm in my head.

I was on my second beer when a voice cut through the haze.

— (???) Mind if I sit here?

I looked up. He was a dragon, like me, but his scales were a deep, obsidian black, his horns long and sharp. He had a kind face, a gentle smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

— (Kate) No, go ahead.

He sat down, his tail brushing against mine. A jolt, unexpected and electric, shot through me.

- (???) I'm Nathan.
- (Kate) Kate.

He ordered a whiskey, the amber liquid glowing in the dim light. We sat in a comfortable silence for a moment, the noise of the bar was worlds away.

- (Nathan) You look like you've had a rough day.
- (Kate) You could say that.
- (Nathan) I know the feeling.

He took a sip of his whiskey, his eyes distant. There was a sadness in them, a weariness that I recognized. It was the same weariness I saw in my own reflection. For the first time that day, I felt a flicker of something other than guilt and loneliness. A spark of connection, as unexpected as it was welcome.

- (Kate) What's your story?
- (Nathan) My story?

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound.

- (Nathan) Nothing too exciting. My parents... they couldn't handle the change. They packed up and moved to BC a few weeks ago. Said

they needed a fresh start, away from... all this. Well, there's dragons everywhere, but you get what I mean.

- (Kate) And you didn't go with them?

— (Nathan) This is my home. My friends are here, my life is here. I couldn't just... leave. Even if it means being on my own.

His words hung in the air, a mirror to my own feelings of being left behind. I took a long drink of my beer, the bitterness of a familiar comfort.

— (Kate) I'll drink to that.

I ordered another beer, and then another. The world began to soften at the edges, the cacophony in my head fading to a dull buzz. I talked, I rambled, I poured out all the frustration and guilt and loneliness of the past few days. Nathan listened, his presence steady in the swirling chaos of my mind.

The next thing I knew, the bar was closing, the lights coming up with a harsh, unwelcome glare. I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't cooperate. The room tilted, the floor shifting, an unreliable landscape.

— (Kate) Whoa...

Nathan was there, a steady hand on my arm.

— (Nathan) Easy there. Looks like you've had a few too many.

— (Kate) I'm fine... I just... need a minute.

I tried to take a step, but my legs buckled. Nathan caught me, his arm wrapping around my waist.

— (Nathan) You're not fine. You can't even stand. Where do you live? I'll get you a cab.

— (Kate) I... I can't go home.

The thought of facing my brother, of the suffocating silence of that house, was more than I could bear.

— (Nathan) Okay. Okay. You can stay with me. It's not far.

I didn't have the strength to argue. I nodded, my head lolling against his shoulder. He half-carried, half-dragged me out of the bar and into the cool night air. The world was a blur of streetlights and shadows, my mind hazy, a drunken fog. I was vaguely aware of walking, of the rumble of his voice as he talked to me, his words could only soothed my frayed nerves.

The next thing I knew, I was in a small, clean apartment, the scent of hard wood and old books filling the air. Nathan helped me onto his bed, his touch was gentle despite his muscular forearms.

— (Nathan) You'll be safe here.

He tried to drape a blanket over me, but my hand shot out, my fingers clumsy as they wrapped around his forearm. A desperate, primal need, fueled by alcohol and loneliness, clawed its way to the surface. I didn't want comfort. I wanted to be consumed.

— (Kate) Don't go.

The words were a drunken slur, barely audible between two hiccups. I pulled him down, my body flush against his. He was tense, his muscles coiled beneath my hands.

— (Nathan) Kate, you're drunk. We shouldn't...

His protest was a whisper, lost as I silenced him with a kiss. It was messy, hungry, and desperate. For a heartbeat, he was still a statue of resistance. Then, a low growl rumbled through his chest, a vibration that I felt deep in my bones. The hesitation shattered. His arms, which had been braced against the bed, now snaked around me, crushing me against him. The gentleness I'd seen in the bar was gone, replaced by a raw, possessive hunger.

His mouth devoured mine, his tongue a hot, wet invasion. His hands were everywhere, rough and demanding, tracing the curve of my spine, the swell of my hips. My clothes were a barrier, an inconvenience to be torn away. Buttons popped, fabric ripped, the sound lost in the storm of our passion. My own tail, acting on some primal instinct, coiled around his, the scales scraping, sending shivers of pleasure through me.

The world dissolved into a blur of sensation. The scent of alcohol, the rough texture of his scales against my skin, the sting of his claws as they raked across my back. He entered me with a force that stole my breath, a guttural roar escaping his lips. It was a brutal, beautiful claiming. I was lost, a willing captive in the eye of a hurricane, every coherent thought obliterated by the raw, animalistic pleasure of it all. His hips slammed against mine, a relentless rhythm that drove me deeper into the haze. I cried out, a sound that was half pain, half pleasure. He filled me, stretched me, owned me. My nails dug into his back. The pleasure

was a sharp, bright thing, a supernova in the darkness of my mind, and I clung to it, to him, as I lost sight of the world around me.



I woke to the feeling of a heavy weight on me. My head was pounding, my mouth was dry, and my body ached in places I didn't know existed. I tried to move, but an arm was wrapped tightly around my waist, holding me in place. Memories of the night before came flooding back, hazy and fragmented, but vivid enough to make my cheeks burn.

I turned my head slowly, my heart hammering against my ribs. Nathan was awake, his slitted, canine eyes already on me. He was watching me with an intensity that made my breath catch in my throat.

– (Nathan) Morning.

His voice was a low rumble, sending a fresh wave of shivers down my spine.

– (Nathan) How are you feeling?

– (Kate) Like I've been run over by a truck.

He chuckled, sending a warm vibration against my back.

– (Nathan) I'm not surprised. You had a lot to drink last night. By the way, I must say, your horns are really beautiful.

He loosened his grip, his arm sliding from my waist.

– (Nathan) I'm going to make some pancakes. You stay here and take it slow.

– (Kate) Hmm.

After giving a gentle kiss on my forehead, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, and for the first time, I saw the deep scratches my nails had left on his back. A fresh wave of shame washed over me. He stood up and stretched, his body was covered of lean muscles and scattered obsidian scales. He headed for the bathroom, and I quickly buried my face in the pillows, my cheeks burning. The sound of the shower starting was a brief reprieve, a moment to collect my messy thoughts.

When the water shut off, I held my breath. He emerged a few minutes later, a towel slung low on his hips, droplets of water clinging to his torso. He walked over to a dresser and pulled out a thick, grey bathrobe.

– (Nathan) Here.

He held it out to me, his eyes soft, a stark contrast to the raw intensity of the night before.

– (Nathan) You can use this. It's clean.

He placed it beside me on the bed, giving me another kiss on the forehead on the way. He went back towards the dresser, removed his towel revealing... everything. Anxiety ran through my head as he picked up another robe, this time putting it on himself. After waiting for him to leave for the kitchen, I slowly sat up, clutching the bedsheets to my chest. I took the robe, my fingers sliding against the fabric, it was soft and heavy, and it smelled like him. I quickly slipped it on, the warmth of it seeping into my skin, a comforting embrace. I scurried back under

the covers, pulling the blanket up to my nose, as if to hide my face. He was being so... gentle and kind. After everything, after the way I'd thrown myself at him, after being so dominant, he was making me pancakes and giving me his bathrobe. A blush crept up my neck, hot and overwhelming. It was a feeling I hadn't felt in a long time, a tender, fragile thing. The feeling of being cared for.

The smell of pancakes slowly drifted from the kitchen, a sweet aroma that cut through the lingering scent of Nathan and my own anxiety. My stomach rumbled, a gentle reminder that I hadn't eaten since the bar. The thought of facing Nathan was daunting, my cheeks still burned with a mixture of shame and a strange, fluttering excitement. But the smell of food was too tempting to resist.

Slowly, I pushed back the covers, the cool air of the apartment raising goosebumps on my skin. The bathrobe was a comforting weight, a shield against the morning's vulnerability. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my muscles protesting with a dull ache. I stood up, my legs a little shaky, and padded softly out of the bedroom, my tail swishing nervously behind me. The apartment was small, the kitchen a few steps from the bedroom. I peeked around the corner, my heart doing a little flip-flop in my chest.

Nathan was at the stove, his back to me. He was humming a low tune, a pleasant rumble in the quiet apartment. A stack of golden-brown pancakes sat on a plate on the counter, and he was just pouring the batter for another one. The scene was so domestic, so normal, it

made my heart ache with a feeling I couldn't quite name.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the kitchen.

— (Kate) Smells good.

He turned, a smile lighting up his face when he saw me.

— (Nathan) Morning, sleepyhead. I was wondering when you'd get up. Coffee's on the counter.

He gestured with his spatula to a coffee pot on the counter. I poured myself a mug, the warmth of it seeping into my cold hands. I leaned against the counter, taking a sip.

— (Kate) Thanks. For... everything.

— (Nathan) It's nothing. I'm glad you're okay.

He flipped the pancake, his movements deft and practiced.

— (Nathan) Hungry?

— (Kate) Starving.

He chuckled and slid the last pancake onto the stack. He divided them between two plates, adding a generous dollop of butter and a drizzle of maple syrup. He handed me a plate.

— (Nathan) Dig in.

We ate in a comfortable silence, the only sounds were the clinking of our forks and the soft hum of the refrigerator. The pancakes were delicious, light and fluffy, and the

coffee was strong and hot. It was the best breakfast I'd had in a long time. Under the table, my tail had a mind of its own, slowly, cautiously, inching closer to his. I wasn't sure if he noticed, but his tail seemed to be doing the same, a slow, deliberate dance of two shy creatures.

My heart skipped a beat as the tip of my tail brushed against his. A jolt, a tiny spark of electricity, shot through me. I pulled back instinctively, a blush creeping up my neck. I risked a glance at him. He was looking at me, a soft, knowing smile on his face. He hadn't pulled his tail away. In fact, he moved it a little closer, a silent invitation.

Slowly, tentatively, I let my tail touch his again. This time, I didn't pull away. The scales were smooth and cool against mine. He gently wrapped his tail around mine, a gesture so tender and intimate it made my breath catch in my throat.

– (Nathan) So... about last night.

My cheeks flushed, and I looked down at my empty plate.

– (Kate) I... I'm sorry. I was drunk, and I...

– (Nathan) Hey.

He reached across the table and gently touched my hand. His thumb stroked the back of my hand, sending shivers up my arm.

– (Nathan) You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm not, well... I'm sorry for the clothes I ripped.

I looked up at him, and he gave me a small, reassuring smile.

– (Nathan) I had a good time.

– (Kate) Me too.

The admission was a whisper as my eyes avoided his piercing gaze, but he heard it. His smile widened.

– (Nathan) Good.

He leaned back in his chair, his expression turning more serious. His tail was still wrapped around mine, a comforting weight.

– (Nathan) But we should probably talk about what happens now. Do you want me to take you home?

– (Kate) I... I don't know.

The thought of going home, of facing my brother and the suffocating silence of that house, made my stomach clench.

– (Nathan) Hey, it's okay. You don't have to decide right now. Why don't we go chill on the sofa for a bit?

I nodded. We cleaned up our breakfast dishes together, moving around each other in a comfortable, domestic dance. Then we moved to the living room. The sofa was a large, comfortable-looking thing, piled with cushions. I sank into one corner, pulling my legs up under me.

Nathan sat down next to me, leaving a respectable amount of space between us. Just as he was about to say something, his phone

buzzed on the coffee table. He picked it up, a slight frown on his face.

— (Nathan, into phone) Hey, what's up?... Yeah, I'm free... Give me a minute.

He hung up and looked at me, a sheepish grin on his face.

— (Nathan) That was my friends. They're asking me to hop online. Do you mind if I play for a bit?

— (Kate) No, go ahead.

He put on a headset and started talking to his friends, speaking in a low and cheerful murmur. I watched him for a while, his face illuminated by the glow of the screen, his hands moving deftly over the controller. He was completely absorbed in his game, and yet, I didn't feel ignored. It was a comfortable, easy presence.

The space between us felt like a chasm. I wanted to be closer to him, to feel the warmth of his body against mine. My heart was pounding, a nervous flutter in my chest. I took a deep breath and scooted closer, my thigh brushing against his. He glanced at me, a quick, questioning look in his eyes. I gave him a small, shy smile. He smiled back, a warm, reassuring smile, and then turned his attention back to the game.

The sound of his voice, the soft clicks of the controller, the warmth of his body next to me... it was all so soothing. My eyelids started to feel heavy. The exhaustion from the emotional turmoil of the past few days,

the alcohol, the lack of sleep... it was all catching up to me.

My head started to nod. I tried to fight it, but it was a losing battle.

- (Nathan) Shh, it's okay.

My head dropped, and this time, I let it rest on his shoulder. It felt... right. Through the headset, I could faintly hear his friends' voices. One of them, with a loud, boisterous laugh, asked, "Hey, who was that you were talking to?"

I was hovering in the space between wakefulness and sleep, but I held my breath, my ears straining to hear his reply.

- (Nathan, into his headset) Oh, that's my girlfriend.

Even in my drowsy state, the word sent a jolt through me. Girlfriend. A blush, hot and fierce, crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks, a secret warmth against his shoulder. I snuggled closer, a contented sigh escaping my lips as the last vestiges of consciousness faded away, leaving me to dream of the sweet, unbelievable melody of that single word. The breeze of sleep swept me away.



I woke up to the gentle pressure of a hand on my shoulder. The apartment was quiet. I was still on the sofa, my head resting on Nathan's shoulder. He was looking down at me, a soft smile on his face. The TV was off, the controller resting on the coffee table.

— (Nathan) Hey, sleepyhead. Did you have a good nap?

I stretched, my body still aching but feeling much more rested.

— (Kate) I guess so. What time is it?

— (Nathan) Almost noon. You've been out for a few hours.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table, the same boisterous laugh from before echoing from the speaker. Nathan picked it up.

— (Nathan, into phone) Hey, man. What's up?... Yeah, she's awake... McDonald's? Sure, sounds good... Give us like, thirty minutes.

He hung up and looked at me, his eyes hopeful.

— (Nathan) That was my friends again. We're all going to grab some lunch at McDonald's. Do you... do you want to come with us?

Meet his friends? The thought sent a nervous flutter through my stomach. But the idea of spending more time with him, of being included in his life, was too tempting to resist.

— (Kate) I'd love to go with you.

His smile widened, and he squeezed my hand.

— (Nathan) Great. I'll go get changed. You can borrow some of my clothes if you want. They might be a bit big for you though.



He led me back to his bedroom and rummaged through his closet, pulling out a large,

black hoodie. It smelled faintly of him, a comforting scent that made me feel a little less anxious. I slipped it on over my head. It was huge on me, the sleeves covering my hands completely, the hem reaching my mid-thigh. I paired it with the skirt I had worn the day before, which was surprisingly not as wrinkled as I had expected. The combination was a little strange, but it was comfortable, and right now, comfort was all I cared about.

We met his friends at a nearby McDonald's. There were two of them, both dragons like us. One, a lanky guy with bright green scales and a mischievous grin, introduced himself as Leo. The other, a stockier guy with deep blue scales and a more serious expression, was named Sam.

— (Leo) So, you're the famous Kate! Nathan wouldn't shut up about you on the voice chat while you were sleeping.

Nathan's cheeks turned a shade darker, and he playfully punched Leo's arm.

— (Nathan) Shut up, man.

I couldn't help but smile, a real, genuine smile that reached my eyes. We ordered our food. I got a McChicken, and Nathan got a Quarter Pounder. His friends both got Big Macs. We found a table in a corner, and I sat close to Nathan, my shoulder brushing against his.

His friends were loud and boisterous, their conversation jumping from video games to college classes to the latest news about the "change". I mostly listened, content to just be there, to be a part of their world. Nathan

kept a protective arm around my chair, his thumb occasionally stroking my shoulder, a small, reassuring gesture that spoke volumes.

After we finished eating, Leo suggested we go to the park nearby. It was a small, quiet park with a few benches and a lot of trees. We found a secluded spot and sat on the grass, the autumn leaves crunching beneath us. The conversation continued, a comfortable, easy banter that I found myself slowly being drawn into. I still didn't say much, but I was starting to feel less like an outsider and more like... a friend.

I leaned my head on Nathan's shoulder, just like I had on the sofa earlier. He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer. The warmth of his body, the sound of his friends' laughter, the crisp autumn air... it was all so perfect. For the first time in a long time, I felt a sense of peace, a feeling of belonging. And as I sat there, surrounded by new friends and the boy who called me his girlfriend, I allowed myself to hope that this feeling would last.



As the afternoon sun began to dip lower in the sky, a cool breeze rustled the leaves around us. Leo, who had been unusually quiet for a few minutes, suddenly grinned at me.

– (Leo) You were really out of it earlier, you know. Snoring and everything on Nate's shoulder. It was adorable.

My cheeks flushed, and I buried my face in Nathan's shoulder, muttering, "I don't snore."

Nathan chuckled, his chest vibrating against my cheek.

– (Nathan) Don't worry, it was a cute little snore.

Sam rolled his eyes at Leo's teasing.

– (Sam) Leave them alone, man. Let's head back to your place, Nate. I call dibs on Yoshi in Mario Party.

– (Leo) No way, I'm Yoshi! You can be Toad.

– (Nathan) Guys, guys, we'll figure it out when we get there.

We all got up and started walking back to Nathan's apartment. The easy banter between his friends was infectious, and I found myself smiling as they argued about which Mario Party mini-games were the best.

Back at the apartment, the energy was high. Sam and Leo immediately fired up the Nintendo Switch, and the familiar, cheerful music of Mario Party filled the room. I had never played before, so Nathan sat next to me on the sofa, his arm around my shoulders, patiently explaining the rules of each mini-game.

I was terrible at it, my character constantly falling off ledges or getting hit by obstacles. But I couldn't stop laughing. Nathan's friends were hilarious, their competitive spirit making every round a riot. Nathan was a surprisingly good sport, cheering me on even when I accidentally stole one of his stars.

After a few hours of intense competition, Sam and Leo finally decided to call it a day.

- (Sam) That was fun, man. We should do this again soon.
- (Leo) Yeah, and next time, I'm not letting you win, Nate.

They said their goodbyes, and then it was just me and Nathan again, the apartment suddenly quiet. The remnants of our game were still on the screen, a colorful, chaotic mess that mirrored the happy jumble of my emotions.

- (Nathan) So... did you have fun?
- (Kate) I did. A lot of fun. Your friends are great.
- (Nathan) They like you too.

He stood up and stretched, then offered me his hand.

- (Nathan) I was thinking... we could take a bath. Relax a little.

My heart skipped a beat. A bath. Together. The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating. I nodded, my voice barely making a sound.

- (Kate) Okay.

He led me to the bathroom. He started the water, the sound of it filling the tub was soothing melody. He added some bubbles, the scent of lavender filled the air.

We undressed in a comfortable silence, the initial nervousness fading into a gentle intimacy. He got in first, his body displacing the water, the bubbles clinging to

his scales. He held out his hand to me, and I took it, my fingers lacing with his.

I slid into the water in front of him, the warmth of it enveloping me. He pulled me back against his chest, his arms wrapping around me, his chin resting on my shoulder. We sat like that for a long time, the water lapping gently around us. It was a different kind of intimacy than the night before, not hungry and desperate, but slow and tender. It was a quiet promise, a silent acknowledgment that this was more than just a one-night stand. This was something real.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Nathan shifted behind me. He reached for a washcloth, lathering it with soap. His hands, which had been so rough and demanding the night before, were now surprisingly gentle as he began to wash my back. His fingers traced the line of my spine, the curve of my shoulders, sending shivers of a different kind down my body. This was a tender, caring touch, a touch that spoke of affection and a deep, growing connection.

I leaned back against him, my eyes fluttering shut. His hands moved from my back to my shoulders, his thumbs massaging the tense muscles there. I let out a soft sigh of contentment, my body relaxing completely into his.

His hands slid lower, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. My breath hitched as his hands moved to my stomach, his fingers dancing lightly over my skin. He

leaned in closer, his lips brushing against my ear.

- (Nathan) You're so beautiful. I love this red hair running down your spine.

His voice was a low whisper, a rumble that vibrated through me. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic bird trapped in a cage. His hands continued their exploration, his fingers dipping lower, teasing, tormenting.

My breath came in short, sharp gasps as his fingers brushed against the soft curls of my pubic hair. I arched my back, a silent invitation. He chuckled, a low, throaty sound that sent a fresh wave of shivers down my spine.

His fingers delved deeper, his touch sure and confident. He found my most sensitive spot, his fingers circling, teasing, until I was a writhing, gasping mess in his arms. The pleasure was a slow, rising tide, a stark contrast to the violent storm of the night before. This was a gentle, deliberate claiming, a slow, sweet seduction that left me breathless and wanting more.

He lifted me from the water as if I weighed nothing, his strong arms cradling me against his chest. "Got you," he murmured, his voice rumbled against my ear. He wrapped me in a large, fluffy towel, his movements gentle and deliberate as he dried my skin. "Can't have you catching a cold." He carried me to the bedroom and laid me on the bed, the cool clashing with the heat of my skin.

He stood over me for a moment, his eyes dark with a desire that made my breath catch in my throat. "You have no idea how beautiful you are," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "So beautiful." He was in control, his dominance a palpable force in the room. But there was no fear, only a thrilling anticipation.

He lowered himself onto the bed, his body hovering over mine. "I'm going to take my time with you," he whispered, his lips brushing against mine. "I want to explore every inch of you." He kissed me, a slow, deep kiss that was both a question and a command. I responded with an eagerness that matched his own, my arms wrapping around his neck, pulling him closer.

His hands roamed my body, his touch both gentle and firm. "So soft," he murmured, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist. "So perfect." He explored every curve, every dip, every sensitive spot, his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake. "I want to hear you scream my name," he whispered, a seductive promise.

He entered me slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Look at me, Kate," he commanded, his voice a low growl. "I want to see your face when I make you mine." It was a gentle invasion. But there was no mistaking the power behind it, the quiet dominance made the promise to unravel me completely.

He moved with a slow, deliberate rhythm, each thrust sent a wave of pleasure that washed over me, building higher and higher until I was drowning in it. "That's it, baby,"

he encouraged, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Let go for me." I cried out his name, my voice strangled of sobs. He smiled, a slow, predatory smile that sent a fresh wave of shivers down my spine.

He picked up the pace, his thrusts becoming harder, faster, deeper. "You're mine, Kate," he growled, his voice a raw, primal sound. "All mine." The gentleness was gone, replaced by a raw, primal hunger that mirrored my own. I met his every thrust with an equal ferocity, my nails digging into his back, my body arching to meet his.

The pleasure was an all-consuming fire, a supernova that shattered my senses and left me gasping for breath. "Mine," he repeated, his voice a triumphant roar as he found his own release. I was lost, a willing captive in his embrace, my body and soul his to command. And as the waves of pleasure finally receded, leaving me limp and trembling in his arms, I knew that I was completely and utterly his.

The world slowly came back into focus, the frantic rhythm of my heart gradually slowing to a steady beat. I was lying on top of him, my head resting on his chest, his arms wrapped around me in a protective embrace. The silence in the room was a comfortable one, filled with the unspoken emotions that hung in the air between us.

- (Kate) Wow...

The word was a breathless whisper, the only sound I could manage.

He chuckled, the vibration of it rumbling through his chest and into mine.

— (Nathan) Yeah. Wow.

He tilted my chin up, his thumb gently stroking my cheek.

— (Nathan) You okay?

I nodded, a small, shy smile playing on my lips.

— (Kate) More than okay.

I snuggled closer, my body molding to his. I felt a sense of peace, of safety, that I had never experienced before. I was home.

I curled up in a ball on his chest, my tail wrapping around his leg. He held me close, his hand stroking my hair, his touch soothing to my frayed nerves.

— (Nathan) Get some sleep, cutie.

His voice was a soft murmur, a gentle command that I was more than happy to obey. I closed my eyes, the last vestiges of my anxiety melting away as I drifted off to sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

## Ch. 5: Home?

I woke up to the feeling of strong arms wrapped around me. Nathan's warm body pressed against mine. The morning sun was streaming through the window casting a golden glow on the room. I was still curled up on his chest, still comforted by a steady heartbeat against my ear.

I stirred, and he tightened his grip on me, his voice rumbled in his chest.

– (Nathan) Morning, beautiful.

I looked up at him.

– (Kate) Morning.

We stayed like that for a while, tangled in each other's arms, the world outside forgotten. I was so comfortable and at peace, it was something I didn't have in a long time, I began to draw a small smile on my face. Eventually, the rumbling of my stomach broke the comfortable silence.

– (Kate) I'm hungry.

– (Nathan) Me too. Cereal?

– (Kate) Sounds nice.

We got out of bed and headed to the kitchen. He poured us both a bowl of Cheerios, and we sat at the small table. Our knees brushed against each other. It was a simple breakfast, but felt more intimate than any fancy dinner.

As I was finishing my bowl, a sudden thought struck me, a jolt of panic that made me drop my spoon with a clatter.

– (Kate) My truck!

Nathan looked at me, a mixture of confusion and concern appeared on his face.

– (Nathan) What about your truck?

– (Kate) It's still at the bar! I completely forgot about it.

I buried my face in my hands, a groan of frustration escaping my lips. I couldn't believe I had been so careless.

– (Nathan) Oh right... Hey, it's okay. We'll go get it.

He reached across the table and took my hand, his thumb stroking the back of it.

– (Nathan) We'll go after. It's no big deal.

I looked up at him, a wave of relief washing over me. He was so calm, so reassuring.

– (Kate) Okay.

We quickly finished our breakfast, and after getting dressed, we headed out to his car. The ride to the bar was a comfortable one, filled with easy conversation and the occasional touch of his hand on my thigh. When we arrived, my truck was right where I had left it, a familiar sight in the now-empty parking lot of the bar. I got out of his car and walked over to it. I had my truck back. I had a way to get home. I took a deep breath and walked back to his car.

- (Kate) Hey, I need to go home and grab some things. Can I... can I call you later?
- (Nathan) Of course. Take your time.

He gave me a quick kiss. It was a quiet promise, one that meant he was a safe space. I got in my truck hazily.



The moment I walked through the door of my parents' house, my mother and brother were sitting on the couch. My mother looked worried, but Olivier just looked angry.

- (Jeanne) Where have you been? We were worried sick!
- (Olivier) You just disappear for two days and don't even bother to call? What the hell is wrong with you?
- (Kate) I'm sorry, I... I was with a friend.
- (Olivier) A friend? Or a random guy you met? You're unbelievable. You finally get the body you've always wanted, and this is what you do with it? You just run off with some guy?

His words were like a slap in the face, each one dripping with venom and jealousy.

- (Kate) You have no idea what you're talking about.
- (Olivier) Don't I? I see the way you look at yourself in the mirror. You love this. You love being a girl. You probably love all the attention you're getting from guys now.
- (Kate) That's not true!

- (Olivier) Isn't it? You don't care about anyone but yourself. You didn't even think about how worried mom would be.
- (Jeanne) Olivier, that's enough!
- (Olivier) No, it's not enough! She gets to be happy, and I'm stuck in this nightmare! It's not fair!

He stood up, his fists clenched, his face contorted with rage. I couldn't take it anymore. I turned away and ran upstairs, his angry shouts were lingering, following, trying to capture me as I got away in my room.

I slammed my bedroom door shut and locked it, my back pressed against the cool wood. I could hear my mother trying to calm him down, their voices muffled.

I grabbed a bag and started throwing clothes and my computer into it, my hands were shaking. I had to get out of here. This house was suffocating me.

I waited until I heard Olivier go into his room and slam the door. I crept down the stairs, my bag slung over my shoulder. My mother was sitting on the couch, her face in her hands, she looked up as I approached, her eyes red and swollen.

- (Jeanne) Kate, please...
- (Kate) I can't, Mom. I just... I can't.

I turned and walked out the door. My heart ached with a mixture of guilt and relief. I jumped into my truck and drove, not knowing where I was going, only that I had to get away.

Finally, I pulled over in an empty parking lot, the kind with no shops in sight, no building, no reasons to exist, nothing. I took a deep breath, my body trembling as tears kept leaving my eyes, and pulled out my phone, my fingers fumbling as I dialed Nathan's number. He answered immediately.

- (Nathan) Kate? Are you okay?
- (Kate) No. I... I had a fight with my family. I can't go back there.
- (Nathan) Where are you?

I told him where I was, and he was there in less than twenty minutes. He pulled up behind me and got out of his car, his face etched with concern.

He opened my truck door and pulled me into his arms, holding me tight as I sobbed into his chest.

- (Nathan) It's okay. You're okay. You can stay with me as long as you need to.
- (Kate) Really?
- (Nathan) Really.

He wiped away my tears with his thumb.

- (Nathan) Let's go home.

He said the word "home" as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And as I followed him back to his car. I realized it wasn't the meaningless word this time.

I walked into his apartment. The familiar scent of him came rushing over me. I dropped my bag on the kitchen counter carelessly. I turned to face him, my eyes welling up with fresh tears. He didn't say a word, just opened his arms to me. I fell into his embrace, my

face buried in his chest. He held me tight, his arms were a fortress around me.

He lifted me up. My legs wrapped around his waist instinctively. He carried me to the sofa and sat down, still holding me close. I clung to him, my body shaking with silent sobs. I cried for my brother, for my mother, for the family I was losing. I cried for the guilt that was eating me alive, and for the fear of what the future held.

Nathan just held me, his hand stroking my hair. He murmured soft words of comfort into my ear, his voice vibrated through me. He told me that it was going to be okay, that he was here for me, that I wasn't alone. And as I cried, I slowly started to believe him.

After a long while, my sobs subsided into sniffles. I was still clinging to him, my face buried in his chest. I felt drained, but also... safe. The storm inside me had passed, leaving a quiet calm in its wake.

- (Nathan) Feeling better?
- (Kate) Yeah. Thank you.
- (Nathan) Anytime.

He smiled, a gentle, reassuring smile that made my heart flutter. He tucked a stray strand of my white hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my skin.

- (Nathan) You have really beautiful hair.

He started to gently run his fingers through my hair, his touch sending a pleasant shiver down my spine. I let out a contented sigh from my lips as I leaned into his touch.

His hand moved from my hair to my head, starting to trace the base of my horns.

— (Nathan) I've been meaning to say since I first saw you, I really like your bright red horns, they're really beautiful.

He gently wrapped his hand around one of my horns, his fingers stroking the smooth, hard surface of the base. A jolt, sharp and electric, shot through me. It wasn't painful, but it was... intense. A gasp escaped my lips, and my back arched involuntarily.

— (Kate) Ah!

Nathan pulled his hand back as if he had been burned, his eyes wide with surprise and concern.

— (Nathan) Did I hurt you?

— (Kate) No, it's... I don't know. It was... a lot.

I reached up and touched my horn, the surface still tingling from his touch. I had never thought of them as being sensitive. They were just... there.

— (Kate) I didn't know they were... sensitive.

— (Nathan) Me neither.

He looked at my horns with a newfound curiosity.

— (Nathan) Can I... try again?

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. I was curious too. He reached out again, his touch even more gentle this time. He wrapped his hand around my horn again, his thumb stroking the surface in slow, deliberate circles.

The same jolt of electricity shot through me, but this time, it was followed by a wave of pleasure, a deep, resonant hum that vibrated through my entire body. A soft moan escaped my lips, and I leaned against his body, my eyes fluttering shut.

— (Nathan) Wow.

His voice was a low whisper, filled with awe. He continued to stroke my horn, sending waves of pleasure through me. It was a strange, new sensation, but it was... incredible.

He leaned in and kissed me, a slow, deep kiss that was full of a newfound tenderness. The combination of his kiss and the sensation of his hands on my horns was overwhelming. I felt a deep, primal connection to him, a sense of belonging.

He pulled back from the kiss, his eyes dark with a tender desire.

— (Nathan) You are so incredible.

He kissed me again, soft and tender. His hands slid from my horns down my back, pulling me closer until there was no space left between us. I sighed into the kiss, my arms wrapping around his neck, my fingers tangling in his hair. He peppered my face with small, sweet kisses, on my cheeks, my nose, my forehead. I giggled, a real, happy sound that seemed to fill the quiet room. He smiled against my skin, his own joy made me happy. We stayed like that for a long time, tangled together on the sofa, trading soft kisses and whispered words, safe and warm in our own little world.

The peaceful bubble we had created for ourselves was abruptly popped by the shrill ringing of my phone. It was on the coffee table, the screen lighting up with a name I didn't want to see: "Mom".

The sound was jarring, an unwelcome intrusion into our quiet world. I tensed in Nathan's arms, the happy, relaxed feeling of moments before evaporating like mist. He pulled back slightly, his brow furrowed with concern.

– (Nathan) You gonna get that?

I stared at the phone, my stomach twisting into a knot. I didn't want to talk to her. I didn't want to hear her pleas, her guilt-trips, her disappointment.

– (Kate) No.

The word was a quiet, firm refusal. I didn't want to deal with it. Not now. Not when I finally felt safe.

Nathan looked from me to the phone, then back to me. He didn't press, didn't ask any more questions. He simply tightened his arms around me, pulling me back against his chest.

– (Nathan) Okay.

The phone continued to ring, a persistent, nagging sound that grated on my nerves. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block it out, trying to hold onto the feeling of Nathan's arms around me. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, it stopped, plunging the room back into a blessed silence.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding, my body sagging with relief. But the peace was short-lived. A few moments later, my phone buzzed again, this time with a text message. And then another. And another. A relentless barrage of notifications, each one a fresh wave of anxiety.

I knew it was her. I didn't have to look. I could feel her desperation, her panic, reaching out to me through the screen. I tried to ignore it, to focus on the warmth of Nathan's body, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. But it was no use. The damage was done. The outside world had intruded, and the fragile peace we had built was shattered.

I pulled away from Nathan, my body feeling cold and exposed without the comfort of his arms. I reached for my phone, my hand trembling slightly. I had to see. I had to know what she was saying.

The screen was filled with a wall of text, a desperate, rambling plea from my mother.



I stared at the screen, the words blurring together through a fresh wave of tears. Each message was a new stab of guilt, a fresh twist of the knife in my already wounded heart. I

could feel Nathan's eyes on me, his concern a palpable presence in the room.

- (Nathan) Kate?

His voice was soft, gentle. He reached out and gently took the phone from my hand, placing it face down on the coffee table. He pulled me back into his arms, his embrace a safe harbor in the storm of my emotions.

- (Nathan) Hey, look at me.

I shook my head, burying my face in his chest. I didn't want him to see me like this, so broken and pathetic.

- (Nathan) It's okay to be upset. But you don't have to go through it alone.

He held me for a long time, his hand stroking my back in slow, comforting circles. He didn't offer any easy answers or empty platitudes. He just... held me. And slowly, very slowly, the storm inside me began to calm.

- (Nathan) I know you're hurting. And I know that nothing I can say will make it all go away. But I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes full of a deep, unwavering affection.

- (Nathan) How about we get some food? My treat. I'm thinking... A&W?

The suggestion was so unexpected, so normal, it almost made me laugh. A&W. The place I used to work. The place I had gone with my family after the disastrous shopping

trip. It was a strange, bittersweet reminder of a life that felt a million miles away.

But it was also... perfect. It was a taste of normalcy in a world that had been turned upside down. It was a simple, easy solution to a problem that felt impossibly complex.

I looked at him, a small, watery smile touching my lips.

— (Kate) Yeah. A&W sounds... good.

— (Nathan) Good.

He smiled back, a warm, genuine smile that reached his eyes. He stood up and pulled me to my feet, his hands lingering on my waist.

— (Nathan) You stay here and relax. I'll go pick it up. What do you want?

— (Kate) The five-strip combo. With a Sprite.

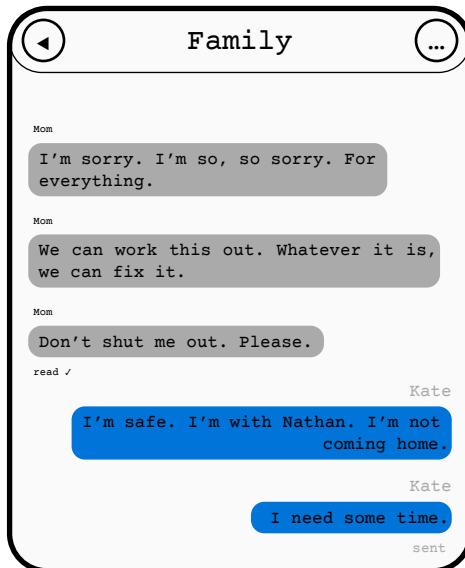
— (Nathan) You got it.

He gave me a quick, sweet kiss, then grabbed his keys and headed for the door. As he left, I sank back onto the sofa, a fragile sense of hope blooming in my chest. Maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay.

The silence of the apartment settled around me, a stark contrast to the emotional storm that had been raging just moments before. I curled up on the sofa, pulling a soft blanket over my legs. My phone lay on the coffee table, a silent black rectangle that held so much pain. I pushed it to the opposite edge of the table, not wanting to even look at it.

But I couldn't ignore it forever. I knew I had to say something. I couldn't just leave her hanging, not after everything. With a deep, shaky breath, I reached for the

phone. My hands trembled as I opened the messaging app, my mother's desperate words still burning in my mind. I typed out a reply, my thumb hovering over the send button for a long moment before I finally pressed it.



I didn't wait for a reply. I quickly turned the phone off and tossed it back on the coffee table, my heart pounding in my chest. It was done. I had finally said it. A wave of relief washed over me, so potent it almost made me dizzy. But it was quickly followed by a fresh wave of guilt, a bitter aftertaste to the sweet relief of freedom.

My thoughts drifted back to my family. To my mother's desperate texts, to the raw, unfiltered hatred in my brother's eyes. A fresh wave of guilt washed over me, cold and sharp. Was he right? Was I selfish? I had run away, leaving my mother to deal with the fallout of my brother's despair.

But then, another thought surfaced, a quiet voice of defiance in the cacophony of my guilt. I had a right to be happy. I had a right to a life where I wasn't constantly walking on eggshells, where I wasn't made to feel ashamed of who I was.

The sound of the key in the lock pulled me from my thoughts. Nathan was back, a familiar large paper bag in his hands.

— (Nathan) I come bearing gifts.

He placed the bag on the coffee table, the smell of greasy food filling the air. He handed me my chicken strips and Sprite, then sat down next to me with his own burger and root beer.

We ate in a comfortable silence. The food was exactly what I needed, a simple, uncomplicated pleasure in a world that felt anything but.

— (Kate) Thank you.

— (Nathan) Anytime.

He finished his burger and leaned back on the sofa, his arm resting on the back of it, his fingers gently playing with a strand of my hair.

— (Nathan) Feeling better?

— (Kate) A little.

— (Nathan) Good.

He didn't press for more. He didn't ask about my family, about the texts, about the fight. He just let me be, his presence a quiet, unwavering support.

- (Nathan) You know, I was thinking... we could watch a movie. If you're up for it.
- (Kate) A movie sounds nice.
- (Nathan) Any requests?
- (Kate) Surprise me.

He scrolled through the streaming service, his brow furrowed in concentration. He finally settled on a classic, "Jurassic Park".

- (Nathan) You can't go wrong with dinosaurs.

He pressed play, and the iconic music filled the room. I leaned against him, my head resting on his shoulder, his arm wrapping around me. The movie was a welcome distraction, a thrilling adventure that pulled me out of my own head and into a world of dinosaurs and danger.

I don't know when I fell asleep. One moment, I was watching the T-Rex chase the jeep, the next, I was drifting in a warm, comfortable haze. I was vaguely aware of Nathan shifting, of him pulling the blanket more snugly around me. I snuggled closer, my face buried in his chest, the sound of his heartbeat singing a gentle lullaby. I felt truly, completely safe.



I was woken up by a gentle hand on my shoulder. The credits for "Jurassic Park" were rolling on the screen. I blinked, my eyes heavy with sleep, and looked up to see Nathan smiling down at me.

- (Nathan) Hey, sleepyhead. The movie's over.
- (Kate) Hmm? Already?

— (Nathan) You slept through the whole second half.

He chuckled.

— (Nathan) Come on. Let's go to bed. You'll be more comfortable there.

He stood up and pulled me to my feet. I was still half-asleep, my legs unsteady. He wrapped an arm around my waist, supporting me as we walked to the bedroom.

The bed was a welcomed sight, the sheets cool and inviting. I crawled under the covers, my body instantly relaxing into the soft mattress. Nathan slid in beside me, a familiar warmth in the darkness. He pulled me close, my back pressed against his chest, his arm wrapped around me.

— (Nathan) Goodnight, Kate.

— (Kate) Goodnight, Nate.

I fell asleep almost instantly, lulled by the steady lullaby of his breathing and the comforting weight of his arm around me.



The next morning, I woke up to the smell of coffee. I stretched, my body feeling more rested than it had in days. I was alone in the bed, but I could hear the soft sounds of someone moving around in the kitchen.

I got out of bed and padded into the living room. Nathan was in the kitchen, already dressed for the day, pouring two mugs of coffee.

— (Nathan) Morning. I figured you could use this.

He handed me a mug, his fingers brushing against mine.

- (Kate) Thanks.

We got ready for college in a comfortable, domestic silence. We shared the small bathroom, brushing our teeth side-by-side, our elbows bumping occasionally. It was so... normal. So easy. It was a life I had only ever dreamed of.

- (Nathan) Ready to go?

- (Kate) Yeah.

We walked out to the building. Making our way to his car. He leaned in and gave me a quick, sweet kiss, my heart doing a little flip-flop in my chest. I couldn't help but smile.



The ride to college was a comfortable one. The morning sun was warm on my face, and the soft music from the radio filled the comfortable silence between us. I leaned my head against the window, watching the world go by, a sense of peace settling over me.

When we got to the college, Nathan found a parking spot and we walked hand-in-hand towards the main building.

- (Nathan) What's your first class?

- (Kate) Linear Algebra. You?

- (Nathan) Physics. It's on the other side of the campus.

- (Kate) Oh.

- (Nathan) Hey, it's okay. I'll walk you to your class.

He squeezed my hand, and we continued our walk, a small, domestic bubble in the midst of the morning rush of students. When we reached my classroom, he leaned in and gave me a quick, sweet kiss.

- (Nathan) I'll text you after my class. We can grab lunch.
- (Kate) Okay.
- (Nathan) Have a good class.
- (Kate) You too.

I watched him go, a smile on my face, before turning and heading into my class.

The lecture was surprisingly interesting, and for the first time in a while, I found myself able to focus without the constant buzz of anxiety in the back of my head. After class, I met Nathan in the cafeteria. He was already there with Leo and Sam, saving me a seat. Lunch was filled with laughter and easy conversation, and I found myself relaxing in a way I hadn't thought possible.

The rest of the day passed in a similar fashion. We went to our afternoon classes, met up afterwards, and drove back to Nathan's apartment, the setting sun casting a warm glow over the city.

Back at the apartment, we fell into an easy routine. We made dinner together. We ate on the sofa, watching some stupid comedy on TV, my legs thrown over his lap. It was so... normal. So domestic. It was everything I had ever wanted.

Later that night, as we lay in bed, tangled in each other's arms, I found myself thinking about the future. For the first time, it

didn't seem like a big, scary void. It seemed... hopeful.

- (Kate) Nate?
- (Nathan) Hmm?
- (Kate) Thank you.
- (Nathan) For what?
- (Kate) For everything.

He tightened his arms around me, pulling me closer.

- (Nathan) Anytime, Kate. Anytime. Forever.

I closed my eyes, a sense of peace washing over me. I was home.

## Ch. 6: Resilience

The days that followed melted into a comfortable routine. My life before Nathan, the constant anxiety, the suffocating loneliness, it all seemed like a distant, half-forgotten dream. Now, my world revolved around him, around us. We were inseparable, a two-person universe orbiting around his small, cozy apartment.

Mornings were soft and slow, filled with the scent of coffee and the comfortable silence of two people who didn't need words to understand each other. We'd get ready for college together, a domestic dance in the small bathroom that always ended with a sweet, lingering kiss before we headed out the door.

Afternoons were for classes and stolen moments between them. We'd meet for lunch in the crowded cafeteria, our friends' loud banter was a familiar backdrop to our own quiet conversations. He'd walk me to my classes, his hand always finding mine, a silent reassurance that he was there.

Evenings were my favorite. We'd come home, shed the weight of the day, and just... be. We'd cook dinner together, our movements synchronized in the small kitchen. We'd eat on the sofa, our legs tangled together, watching movies or just talking for hours.

He learned all my little quirks, the way I hummed when I was concentrating, the way I always stole the blankets in my sleep. And I learned his. The way his brow furrowed when he was focused on a video game, the low rumble of his laugh that always made my heart skip a beat.

It was a simple life, a quiet life, but it was ours. And it was more than I had ever dared to hope for.



One Saturday afternoon, we were lazing on the sofa, a documentary about deep-sea creatures playing on the TV. I was curled up against him, my head on his chest, his fingers gently tracing patterns on my back. His friends, Leo and Sam, were supposed to come over later for a game night.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table. It was a text from Leo.



- I chuckled and showed the text to Nathan.
- (Nathan) Of course, he is. He takes his snacks very seriously.
  - (Kate) It's adorable.

I tossed my phone back on the table and snuggled closer to him, a contented sigh escaping my lips.

– (Kate) I'm glad we have some more time alone. I was starting to miss you.

He chuckled, his chest vibrating against my cheek.

– (Nathan) I was right here the whole time.

– (Kate) I know. But I still missed you.

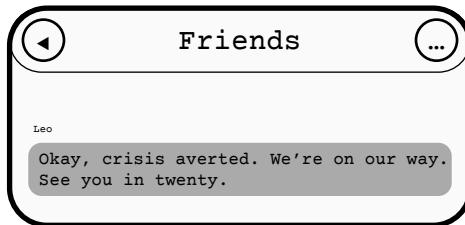
He tilted my chin up and gave me a slow, sweet kiss.

– (Nathan) You're ridiculous.

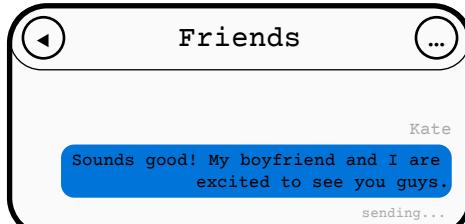
– (Kate) You love it.

– (Nathan) Yeah, I do.

We fell back into a comfortable silence, the strange and wonderful world of the deep sea unfolding on the screen before us. A while later, my phone buzzed again. It was Leo.



I smiled and started to reply, my thumbs flying across the screen.



I hit send without thinking, my mind still half-focused on the giant squid on the TV. And then, the words I had just typed registered in my brain.

*My boyfriend.*

My fingers froze. My heart did a frantic little flip-flop in my chest. I had never called him that before. We had never talked about it. It just... slipped out.

A hot blush crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks. I quickly deleted the message, my heart hammering against my ribs. But it was too late. The "read ✓" icon appeared next to Leo's last message. He had seen it.

I risked a glance at Nathan. He was looking at me, a strange, unreadable expression on his face.

— (Nathan) What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.

My cheeks burned even hotter. I couldn't look at him. I just stared at my phone, wishing the ground would swallow me whole.

— (Kate) I... uh... I accidentally...

I couldn't even say it. I just showed him the phone, my hand trembling slightly. He took it from me and read the message, his brow furrowing in concentration. And then, a slow smile spread across his face.

He put the phone down and gently tilted my chin up, forcing me to look at him. His eyes were soft, and his smile was so full

of affection it made my breath catch in my throat.

– (Nathan) Your boyfriend, huh?

He said the word slowly, testing it out. It sounded so right coming from his lips.

– (Nathan) I like the sound of that.

He leaned in and gave me a slow, deep kiss, a kiss that was full of unspoken promises and a deep, unwavering affection. When he pulled back, he was grinning.

– (Nathan) So, I guess that makes you my girlfriend?

– (Kate) I... I guess so.

I couldn't help but smile, a real, genuine smile that reached my eyes. He kissed me again, a quick, sweet kiss that was full of joy.

– (Nathan) Good.

The sound of the doorbell ringing startled us both. Leo and Sam were here. Nathan stood up and pulled me to my feet, his hand still holding mine.

– (Nathan) Come on, girlfriend. Let's go let our friends in.

He said the word "girlfriend" with a playful emphasis, and I couldn't help but laugh, a happy, carefree sound that filled the small apartment. For the first time in my life, everything felt... perfect.



*Fast forward a few years...*



University life was a whirlwind of lectures, late-night study sessions, and the constant, comforting presence of Nathan. We had moved into a slightly bigger apartment closer to campus, but the feeling of home was the same. It was in the way he always made me coffee in the morning, the way my head fit perfectly on his shoulder, the way our hands always found each other, no matter where we were.

We were a team, navigating the challenges of university together. We'd study for exams side-by-side in the library, his quiet, powerful presence was a calming force in the stressful environment. We'd celebrate our successes with cheap pizza and bad movies, and we'd comfort each other through our failures with quiet hugs and whispered words of encouragement.

Our little family had grown too. Leo and Sam were a constant presence in our lives. We were a tight-knit group, a found family of dragons navigating the human world together. Life wasn't always easy. There were still moments of anxiety, of feeling like an outsider. But with Nathan by my side, it was all manageable. He was my anchor, my safe harbor, my home. And as long as I had him, I knew that everything would be okay.



One night, the city was quiet outside our window, the only light coming from the soft glow of the streetlights below. We had just finished a grueling week of midterms, and the

apartment was filled with a sense of quiet relief. We were tangled up in bed, the sheets were a messy heap around us, my head resting on his chest. His fingers were gently tracing circles on my back, a familiar comfort.

I tilted my head back to look at him, a soft smile on my face. He looked down at me, his eyes dark with an emotion that still made my heart skip a beat, even after all this time. He leaned down and kissed me, a slow, deep kiss that was full of love and a deep, unspoken understanding.

The kiss deepened, and the familiar fire ignited between us. Our movements were a well-known dance, a symphony of touch and sensation that we had composed together over the years. It was passionate and intense, a celebration of our love and the deep connection we shared.

Afterward, as we lay in the quiet darkness, our bodies still intertwined, a sudden, cold realization washed over me. I sat up, my heart starting to pound in my chest.

- (Kate) Nate?
- (Nathan, his voice thick with sleep) Hmm?
- (Kate) We... we didn't use a condom.

He was silent for a moment, the sleepiness in his voice replaced by a sudden alertness. He sat up, running a hand through his hair.

- (Nathan) Oh. Shit.

We looked at each other in the dim light, a silent, shared panic in our eyes. The possibility of an unplanned pregnancy hung in the air between us, a heavy, unspoken weight.

- (Nathan) I'm so sorry, Kate. I... I wasn't thinking.
- (Kate) It's okay. It takes two to tango. I wasn't thinking either.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the frantic beating of my heart.

- (Kate) It's probably fine. I'll... I'll get a morning-after pill tomorrow.

He reached out and took my hand, his thumb stroking the back of it.

- (Nathan) Okay. I'll go with you.

We were quiet for a long moment, the weight of what had just happened settling over us. Then, Nathan spoke, his voice soft and hesitant.

- (Nathan) What if... what if we didn't?

I looked at him, my brow furrowed in confusion.

- (Kate) What do you mean?

- (Nathan) What if you didn't take the pill?  
What if... we had a baby?

The question hung in the air between us, a shocking, terrifying, and yet... strangely thrilling possibility. A baby. A tiny, perfect combination of me and him. My heart did a strange little flip-flop in my chest.

- (Kate) A baby? Nate, we're still in university. We're not ready for a baby.

- (Nathan) I know. But... would it be so bad?  
We love each other. We have a good life. We could make it work.

He looked at me, his eyes full of a hopeful, nervous excitement. And in that moment, I could see it. I could see us with a child, a little boy with his father's kind eyes and my white hair, or a little girl with my red horns and his gentle smile.

A small, hesitant smile touched my lips.

– (Kate) No... it wouldn't be so bad.

I leaned my head on his shoulder, the idea of a family, our family, taking root in my heart.

– (Kate) But I want to finish university first. I want to be able to give our kids a good life, a stable life.

– (Nathan) Okay. I can agree with that.

He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close.

– (Nathan) So, after university?

– (Kate) After university.

We were quiet for a moment, a new, comfortable silence settling between us.

– (Kate) And... maybe not too many. Three at most.

He chuckled, the sound rumbled in the quiet room.

– (Nathan) Three at most. You got it.

He kissed the top of my head, his lips staying against my hair.

– (Nathan) I love you, Kate.

– (Kate) I love you too, Nate.

We laid back down, my body on top of his. The panic of moments before was gone, replaced by a new, exciting sense of hope for the future. A future that now included the pitter-patter of little feet, a future that was brighter and more beautiful than I had ever dared to imagine.



The peace was shattered by the incessant buzzing of my phone. It was a weekday night, I was trying to finish an assignment, Nathan was reading a book on the couch behind me. The screen lit up with a familiar, dreaded name: "Mom". I ignored it, pressing the silence button on the side of my phone. A few seconds later, it buzzed again. And again. And again. A relentless assault on my carefully constructed peace.

- (Nathan) You gonna get that?
- (Kate) No.

But the calls didn't stop. It was a frantic, desperate rhythm that grated on my nerves. My focus on the assignment was gone, replaced by a rising tide of anger.

- (Nathan) Kate, maybe you should just answer. It's not going to stop.

He was right. With a sigh of resignation, I picked up the phone, my thumb hovering over the green icon. I took a deep breath and answered, putting the phone on speaker.

- (Kate) What do you want?
- (Jeanne, her voice was a frantic torrent) Kate! Oh, thank God! I've been so worried!

Why haven't you been answering my calls?  
Are you okay?

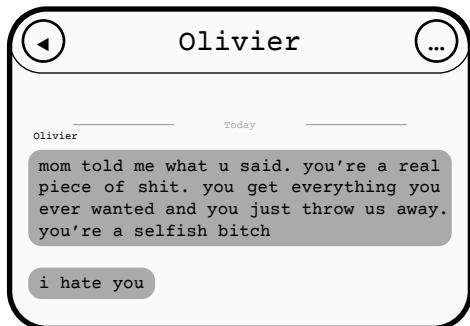
- (Kate) I'm fine. I was busy.
- (Jeanne) Busy? I've been calling for days! You can't just shut me out like this! It's been years! I'm your mother!
- (Kate) And I'm an adult. I don't have to answer every single one of your calls. This is harassment.
- (Jeanne) Harassment? I'm trying to make sure my daughter is alive, and you call it harassment?
- (Kate) I told you I was safe. I told you I needed time. You're not respecting that.
- (Jeanne) How can I respect that when I don't know where you are, who you're with? What if something happened to you?
- (Kate) I'm with Nathan! You know that! And nothing has happened to me. I'm happy. Can't you just accept that?
- (Jeanne) Happy? How can you be happy when you've torn this family apart? Your brother... he's a wreck. He barely leaves his room. He needs you.
- (Kate) He needs a therapist, not me. I can't fix him. And it's not my job to.
- (Jeanne) He's your brother!
- (Kate) And he has done nothing but hurt me! He has said horrible, unforgivable things. And you just let him! You always take his side!
- (Jeanne) That's not true! I'm just trying to keep the peace!
- (Kate) There is no peace! There's just you, enabling his toxic behavior, and me, the one who always has to suck it up and pretend it's okay. Well, I'm done.

- (Jeanne) What does that mean?
- (Kate) It means I'm done with all of it. I'm done with the drama, the guilt trips, the constant feeling that I'm not good enough. I'm done with you.
- (Jeanne, her voice cracking) Kate, don't say that. Please.
- (Kate) It's the truth. I can't do this anymore. I need to be happy, and I can't be happy with you in my life. Not right now. Maybe not ever.
- (Jeanne) So that's it? You're just throwing away your family?
- (Kate) I'm choosing myself. For once. Goodbye, mom.

I hung up, my hand trembling. The silence in the room was deafening. Nathan was looking at me, his face mixed with concern and pride. He didn't say anything, just opened his arms. I went to him, burying my face in his chest, a wave of relief washing over me. It was done.

My phone buzzed again. A text message. I didn't have to look to know who it was from. I opened my phone, my resolve hardening. I opened her contact, and without a moment's hesitation, I pressed the "Block" button. A small, insignificant-looking button that felt like the weight of the world lifting off my shoulders.

Then, another buzz. A new number. A text from Olivier.



The words were like a punch to the gut, but they didn't hurt as much as they used to. They were just... empty. The last, dying embers of a fire I had already extinguished.

I blocked his number too.

I tossed the phone on the sofa and curled into Nathan's arms, a profound sense of finality settling over me. It was over. Really over. A chapter of my life had closed.

## Ch. 7: Yes

### *Graduation Day*

The years had flown by in a blur of textbooks, exams, and stolen moments of quiet intimacy. Now, standing in the crowded auditorium, the cap heavy on my head and the gown sticking to my skin, it all felt surreal. I had made it. We had made it.

I scanned the sea of faces until I found him. Nathan. He was a few rows away, his eyes already searching for mine. When our gazes met, he broke into a wide, proud grin that made my heart soar. He looked so handsome in his cap and gown, his obsidian horns a stark, beautiful contrast to the dark blue fabric.

The ceremony was long, a procession of speeches and names that seemed to stretch on for an eternity. But I didn't mind. I was floating, buoyed by a sense of accomplishment and a giddy, bubbling excitement for the future. A future that was no longer a terrifying, unknown void, but a bright, shining path that I would walk with Nathan.

After the ceremony, we were swept up in a whirlwind of congratulations and camera flashes. We found Leo and Sam, who had graduated the year before and had come to cheer us on. They engulfed us in bone-crushing hugs, their boisterous laughter was a familiar, comforting sound.

- (Leo) You guys finally did it! I was starting to think you were going to be professional students forever.
- (Sam) We're proud of you guys. Seriously.

We went out to a fancy restaurant to celebrate, the kind of place with white tablecloths and wine glasses that cost more than my textbooks. We drank champagne, the bubbles tickling my nose, the alcohol going straight to my head. We were all a little tipsy, our laughter echoing through the restaurant, our faces flushed with joy and excitement.

Later that night, back at our apartment, the celebratory energy shifted into something else, something quieter and more intimate. The city lights twinkled outside our window, a million tiny stars in the velvet darkness. We were slow-dancing in the living room, no music playing, just the soft shuffling of our feet on the hardwood floor.

I rested my head on his chest, his arms wrapped around me, his chin resting on the top of my head. The scent of him, a familiar, intoxicating mix of something uniquely him, filled my senses.

- (Kate) We did it, Nate.
- (Nathan) I know. I'm so proud of you.

He tilted my head back and kissed me, a slow, deep kiss that was full of all the love and pride and hope that we were both feeling. It was a kiss that promised forever.

He scooped me up into his arms, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, my fingers tangling in his hair. He carried me to

the bedroom, the world tilting and spinning around me in a dizzying, wonderful haze.

He laid me gently on the bed, his body hovering over mine. The look in his eyes was one of adoration, a deep, reverent worship that made me feel like the most beautiful creature in the world. This wasn't the frantic, desperate passion of our first nights together. This was something else entirely. It was the culmination of years of love and trust, a deep, soulful connection that transcended the physical.

His hands roamed my body, his touch familiar and yet, still so thrilling. He knew every curve, every dip, every sensitive spot. He knew how to make me tremble with just a look, how to make me cry out his name with just a touch. Our bodies moved together in a slow, sensual rhythm, a dance of two souls who had become one. It was a tender, loving claiming, a quiet affirmation of our bond.

In the midst of our passion, as we were lost in the haze of pleasure, he paused, his forehead resting against mine, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

- (Nathan) Kate...

His voice was a hoarse whisper, thick with emotion.

- (Nathan) Is it... is it okay if I don't use a condom? We talked about it... after university...

The question hung in the air between us, a gentle echo of a promise we had made to each other years ago. My heart swelled with a

love so fierce it almost hurt. I looked into his eyes, and in their dark, loving depths, I saw our future. A future filled with the our little lookalikes, a future we were finally ready to begin.

I reached up and cupped his face in my hands, my thumbs stroking his cheeks.

— (Kate) Yes, Nate. Yes.

A slow, beautiful smile spread across his face, a smile that lit up his eyes and took my breath away. He kissed me, a deep, soulful kiss that was both a thank you and a promise. A promise of a new beginning, a new chapter in our lives, a future we would build together.



Afterward, we lay tangled in each other's arms, our bodies slick with sweat, our breathing slowly returning to normal. I was tracing idle patterns on his chest, my head resting in the crook of his shoulder. He was stroking my hair, sometimes touching my horns, his touch so full of love and tenderness it brought tears to my eyes.

He shifted slightly, propping himself up on one elbow to look down at me. He tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek.

— (Nathan) I love you so much, my beautiful wife.

The words were a soft murmur, almost lost in the quiet of the room. But they hit me with the force of a physical blow. My breath caught in my throat, and my heart did a frantic little flip-flop in my chest. Wife.

I stared at him, blood coming to my cheeks, my eyes wide with a mixture of shock and a wild, burgeoning hope.

– (Kate) What... what did you just say?

He blinked, a look of surprise on his face, as if he hadn't even realized what he'd said. A slow, sheepish grin spread across his face, and his cheeks turned a shade darker.

– (Nathan) I... uh... I called you my wife.

– (Kate) I heard that part. What did you mean by it?

He took a deep breath, his playful demeanor shifting into something more serious, more intense. He reached out and took my left hand, his thumb stroking the back of it.

– (Nathan) I mean... I want you to be. My wife, I mean. For real.

My heart stopped. The world seemed to tilt on its axis. He was... proposing?

– (Nathan) I know it's sudden. And we don't have a ring, and this isn't some big, romantic gesture. But... I love you, Kate. I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love someone. You're my best friend, my partner, my home. The thought of spending the rest of my life with you, of raising a family with you... it's the only future I want.

He looked at me, his eyes full of a nervous, hopeful vulnerability that made my heart melt.

– (Nathan) I should have planned this better. I should have bought a ring. But it just...

it felt right. To ask you now. So... what do you say? Will you marry me, Kate? Will you be my wife?

Tears were streaming down my face, but they were tears of pure, unadulterated joy. I couldn't speak. I could only nod, a frantic, jerky movement that was all the answer he needed. A radiant smile broke across his face, a smile of pure relief and happiness. He leaned down and kissed me, a deep, passionate kiss that was full of all the love and joy and hope in the world.

— (Kate, in a choked whisper) Yes. Yes, I'll marry you.

He laughed, a happy, carefree sound that filled the room. He kissed me again, and again, and again, until we were both breathless and laughing and crying all at the same time.

I was going to be his wife. It was a dream I had never even dared to dream, a future that was more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. And as I lay there in his arms, I knew that my life had just begun.



The emotional high of the proposal slowly subsided, leaving a warm, peaceful glow in its wake. We were both exhausted, emotionally and physically, but in the best possible way. Nathan kissed my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin.

— (Nathan) How about a bath, my fiancée?

The word sent a fresh thrill through me. My fiancée. It sounded even better than girlfriend.

– (Kate) I'd love that.

He got up and started the water, the familiar sound filling the quiet apartment. I followed him into the bathroom, my legs still a little shaky. He added a generous amount of bubbles to the water, the scent of lavender and vanilla filled the air.

We slid into the tub, our bodies fitting together like two pieces of a puzzle. I leaned back against his chest, his arms wrapping around me, his hands resting on my stomach. We were quiet for a long time, just enjoying the warmth of the water and the comfort of each other's presence.

– (Kate) I can't believe this is real.

– (Nathan) Me neither. But it is.

He kissed the top of my head.

– (Nathan) I love you so much, Kate.

– (Kate) I love you too, Nate. More than words can say.

We talked for what felt like hours, our voices were soft whispers in the steamy room. We talked about the future, about our wedding, about our kids. We talked about everything and nothing, our conversation gently meandering in a river of hopes and dreams.

Eventually, the water started to cool, and our fingers and toes were wrinkled like prunes. Reluctantly, we got out of the tub, wrapping ourselves in big towels. We dried

each other off, our movements slow and tender, a silent expression of our love.

We crawled into bed. I snuggled into his side, my head on his chest, his arm wrapped around me.

- (Nathan) Goodnight, my beautiful fiancée.
- (Kate) Goodnight, my handsome husband.

I closed my eyes, a smile on my face, and drifted off to sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, my heart full of a love so big it felt like it could burst.

#### *A quiet wedding*

The spring air was crisp and clean, a welcome change from the stuffy confines of our apartment. We stood on a small, secluded hill overlooking the city, the afternoon sun casting a warm, golden glow on everything. It was just the two of us, exactly as we wanted. No crowd, no fuss, just the quiet promise of forever.

Nathan looked so handsome, my heart ached. He was wearing a simple black suit. He was fidgeting with his tie, a nervous habit I had come to adore. I reached out and stilled his hands, my fingers lacing with his.

- (Kate) Hey.
- (Nathan) Hey.

He smiled, a nervous, breathtaking smile that made my stomach do a little flip-flop.

- (Nathan) You look... wow. Just, wow.

I was wearing a simple white dress, the fabric soft and flowing around me. It wasn't a traditional wedding gown, just a dress I

had fallen in love with, a dress that made me feel beautiful.

We didn't have an officiant, no witnesses, no script. We just had each other. Nathan took both of my hands in his, his thumbs stroking the backs of them.

— (Nathan) Kate... I don't have any fancy vows written down. I'm not good with words, you know that. But I know this. I love you. I have loved you since the moment I saw you, a sad, beautiful dragon girl drinking alone in a bar. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You make me a better person. You make me want to be a better person. I promise to love you, to cherish you, to protect you, for the rest of my life. I promise to be your partner, your best friend, your home. Always.

Tears were streaming down my face, but I didn't bother to wipe them away. My voice was thick with emotion when I spoke.

— (Kate) Nate... you are my home. Before you, I was just... drifting. You saved me, in more ways than you'll ever know. You taught me how to love, how to be loved. You make me feel safe, and cherished, and so, so happy. I promise to love you, to support you, to laugh with you, to cry with you. I promise to be your wife, your partner, your best friend. Forever.

He pulled a small, velvet box out of his pocket. He opened it, and my breath caught in my throat. Inside was a simple, elegant ring, a band of white gold with a single, stunning obsidian stone. It was perfect.

– (Nathan) It's not a diamond. I know it's not traditional, but... it reminded me of you. Strong, beautiful, and a little bit mysterious.

– (Kate) It's perfect. I love it.

He slid the ring onto my finger, his touch sending a shiver down my spine. It fit perfectly. I pulled another small box from the pocket of my dress. His eyes widened in surprise.

– (Kate) You didn't think I'd let you be the only one with a ring, did you?

I opened the box to reveal a simple, masculine ring, a band of dark tungsten with a single, brilliant white diamond embedded in the center.

– (Kate) A little piece of me for you to carry with you.

I slid the ring onto his finger. He stared at it for a long moment, his expression a mixture of shock and adoration.

– (Nathan) I... I don't know what to say.

– (Kate) You don't have to say anything.

I reached up and cupped his face in my hands, my new ring cold against his skin.

– (Kate) Just kiss me, husband.

He did. He kissed me with all the love and passion and promise in the world. It was a kiss that sealed our vows, a kiss that marked the beginning of our forever.



Our honeymoon was a dream. We flew to Japan, to the city of Fukuoka. We explored traditional castles, wandered through bustling markets, and ate more ramen than I thought was humanly possible. We spent our days exploring, our nights tangled up in each other in our small, traditional hotel room. It was perfect.

One evening, we were walking along the beach, the sun setting over the ocean in a fiery blaze of orange and pink. I leaned my head on his shoulder, his arm wrapped around my waist.

- (Kate) I'm so happy, Nate. I've never been this happy.
- (Nathan) Me too, my beautiful wife. Me too.

He stopped walking and turned to face me. He tilted my chin up and kissed me, a slow, sweet kiss that was full of all the love and happiness in the world.

- (Nathan) I love you, Kate.
- (Kate) I love you too.

We stood there for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms, the waves lapping at our feet, the setting sun painting the sky with a masterpiece of color. It was a perfect moment, a perfect end to a perfect day, a perfect beginning to our perfect life together.

## Ch. 8: Home

*Two weeks later*

The joy of our engagement carried me through the next two weeks in a haze of happiness. Everything felt brighter, more vibrant. The future, once a source of anxiety, was now a beautiful, sun-drenched landscape stretching out before us. But a subtle, persistent nausea had begun to creep into my mornings, a discordant note in the symphony of my contentment.

At first, I dismissed it as post-graduation stress or the result of too many celebratory drinks. But as the days wore on, the feeling intensified, accompanied by a new, profound exhaustion that left me feeling drained and listless. A small, insistent voice in the back of my mind began to whisper a possibility, a suspicion that grew louder with each passing day.

One morning, after a particularly rough bout of sickness, I couldn't ignore it any longer. Nathan had already left for a job interview, his first full time one since we graduated. The apartment was quiet, the silence amplifying the frantic beating of my heart. I rummaged through the bathroom cabinet, my hands trembling as I pulled out a small, unassuming box I had bought on my way home from the grocery store the day before. A pregnancy test.

The minutes I spent waiting for the result felt like an eternity. I paced the small bathroom, my mind losing itself in hopes and fears. A baby. Our baby. It was what we wanted, what we had planned for. But was it too soon? Were we ready?

I took a deep breath and looked at the test. Two pink lines. Unmistakable.

I was pregnant.

A wave of emotions washed over me, so potent it almost knocked me off my feet. Joy, fierce and overwhelming. Fear, cold and sharp. And a deep, bone-deep love for the tiny, nascent life that was growing inside me. I sank onto the edge of the bathtub, my hand resting on my still-flat stomach, a giddy, disbelieving laugh bubbling up from my chest.

I was going to be a mother.



I spent the rest of the day in a daze, my mind reeling with the news. I tried applying for jobs, but the words on the webpages were just a meaningless jumble. All I could think about was the tiny life inside me, and how I was going to tell Nathan.

He came home a few hours later, his face flushed with excitement.

– (Nathan) I got it! I got the job!

He swept me up in a hug, spinning me around the living room.

– (Kate) Nate, that's amazing!

I was so happy for him, so proud of him. He had been working so hard, and he deserved this. He had landed a position as a junior software developer at a small but growing tech company. It was the perfect start to his career.

– (Nathan) I know! I can't believe it. We have to celebrate!

He pulled back, his eyes shining with a joy that mirrored my own. And in that moment, I knew I couldn't wait any longer.

– (Kate) I have something to tell you too.

He looked at me, his brow furrowed with a loving curiosity. I took his hand and led him to the sofa, my heart hammering against my ribs. I took a deep breath and looked into his eyes.

– (Kate) I'm pregnant.

The words hung in the air between us, a fragile, beautiful thing. He stared at me, his eyes wide with a mixture of shock and disbelief. And then, a slow, radiant smile spread across his face, a smile so full of love and joy.

– (Nathan) Pregnant? You're... you're sure?

I nodded, a watery smile on my face.

– (Kate) I'm sure.

He let out a whoop of joy, a loud, unrestrained sound that filled the small apartment. He pulled me into his arms, his embrace tight and protective.

– (Nathan) I'm going to be a dad.

He whispered the words against my hair, his voice thick with emotion. He pulled back and looked at me, his hands cupping my face.

– (Nathan) We're going to be parents.

He kissed me, a deep, passionate kiss that was full of all the love and joy and hope in the world. We were going to be a family.



With Nathan's new job and a baby on the way, our small apartment suddenly felt a lot smaller. We started spending our weekends house hunting, a new, exciting chapter in our lives. We looked at dozens of houses, from modern townhouses in the city to charming bungalows in the suburbs. But none of them felt quite right.

Then, one sunny Saturday afternoon, we found it. It was a small, two-story house nestled on a quiet, tree-lined street. It had a big backyard that sloped down to a gentle river. It was perfect.

We walked through the house, our footsteps echoing in the empty rooms. I could already picture our life here. I could see our kids playing in the backyard, their laughter echoing through the trees. I could see us growing old together, sitting on the porch, watching the river flow by.

– (Kate) Nate... it's perfect.

– (Nathan) I know.

He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder. We stood there for a long time,

looking out at the river, the afternoon sun warming our faces.

— (Nathan) We should make an offer.

— (Kate) I know.

And so we did. The next few weeks were a mess of paperwork and phone calls, a stressful, complicated process that was made bearable only by the fact that we were in it together. And then, one day, we got the call. The house was ours.



Moving day was chaotic and exhausting, but it was also one of the happiest days of my life. We were lost in the endless sea of cardboard boxes and packing tape, our friends Leo and Sam sent their helpful energy along our way.

By the time the sun started to set, the last box was inside. The house was a chaotic mess, but it was our mess. Our home.

Leo and Sam had to leave, and then it was just us. We were sitting on the floor in the empty living room, eating pizza out of the box, our bodies tired but our hearts full.

— (Nathan) We did it.

— (Kate) We did it.

He reached out and took my hand, his thumb stroking the back of it.

— (Nathan) I love you, Kate.

— (Kate) I love you too, Nate.

We were quiet for a moment, the crickets outside were the only sound we could hear. I leaned my head on his shoulder, a sense of

peace settling over me. I was home. We were home. Our home.



### *The next nine months*

The pregnancy was a strange, surreal journey. The initial nausea gave way to a profound, bone-deep exhaustion that became my constant companion. It felt as if all my energy was being siphoned away, redirected to the tiny life growing inside me. I was perpetually sleepy, my days mixing with each other in a hazy blur of naps and half-finished tasks.

Nathan was my rock. He took over most of the household chores, his quiet competence was a comforting presence in the chaos of our new life. He would come home from work and find me asleep on the sofa, a book open on my chest, and he would just smile, tuck a blanket around me, and start making dinner.

My body, which had once been a source of so much joy and discovery, now felt like a foreign country. My belly swelled, my skin stretched, and my once-familiar curves were replaced by a new, maternal roundness. I spent a lot of time in Nathan's arms, his embrace a safe harbor in the storm of my changing body. He would hold me for hours, his hands resting on my belly, his voice low as he whispered to our unborn child.

The months passed in a slow, steady rhythm. Autumn faded into winter, the river outside our window freezing over, a sheet of glittering ice. Winter melted into spring, the trees budding with new life, the river

thawing and flowing once more. And with each passing season, my belly grew, a constant, visible reminder of the miracle that was happening inside me.

But as my body changed, a new anxiety began to take root, a quiet fear that grew with my expanding waistline. Giving birth. The thought sent a shiver of apprehension down my spine. It was a daunting prospect for any woman, but for me, it was tangled with a whole new set of fears. Our baby would be a dragon, like us. What would that mean for the birth? Would they have horns? A tail? The thought of trying to push a baby with sharp horns out of my body was a terrifying one.

I tried to voice my fears to Nathan one evening, as we were lying in bed, his hand resting on my belly.

- (Kate) Nate... what if the baby has horns?
- (Nathan) Hmm?
- (Kate) The birth. What if it's... complicated?

He was quiet for a moment, his thumb stroking my belly in slow, comforting circles.

- (Nathan) We'll figure it out. Whatever happens, we'll face it together. The doctors will know what to do.

His voice was calm and reassuring, but it didn't completely quell the anxiety that gnawed at the edges of my mind. As the due date approached, the fear grew, a dark cloud on the horizon of my otherwise happy world. I was more in love than I had ever been in my life. But I was also scared. We were on the

cusp of a new adventure, a new life. And I couldn't wait to meet our baby, even if the thought of how they would arrive terrified me.



It happened in the dead of night. I woke up with a start, a strange, warm gush of fluid soaking my underwear. For a moment, I was just confused, my sleep-addled brain struggling to catch up. And then, a slow, dawning realization washed over me. My water had broken.

A jolt of adrenaline shot through me, chasing away the last vestiges of sleep. It was time.

— (Kate) Nate. Nate, wake up.

I shook his shoulder, my voice a little more frantic than I intended. He stirred, his voice thick with sleep.

— (Nathan) Hmm? Kate? What's wrong?

— (Kate) It's time. My water just broke.

That woke him up. He shot up in bed, his eyes wide in the dim light of our bedroom.

— (Nathan) Now? Like, right now?

— (Kate) Yes, right now!

Panic and excitement warred on his face. He scrambled out of bed, nearly tripping over his own feet.

— (Nathan) Okay. Okay. Don't panic. I'm not panicking. Are you panicking?

— (Kate) A little!

He took a deep breath, running a hand through his messy hair. He was trying to be the calm one, but I could see the adrenaline coursing through him.

— (Nathan) Okay. Hospital bag. It's by the door. I'll get it. You get dressed. Slowly. Carefully.

The drive to the hospital was a blur. The streets were empty, the city asleep. A contraction hit me as we were pulling into the hospital parking lot, a wave of intense, gripping pain that stole my breath. Nathan held my hand, his thumb stroking the back of it, a steady anchor in the rising storm.

We were rushed into a delivery room, a sterile, brightly lit space that was a stark contrast to the cozy darkness of our bedroom. The next few hours were a whirlwind of nurses, doctors, and monitors. The contractions came faster and harder, each one a new peak of pain that I didn't think I could survive. Nathan was by my side the whole time, his hand in mine, his voice a constant, soothing murmur in my ear.

And then, it was time to push. The pain was all-consuming, a fire that ripped through my body. But through it all, a new, fierce determination took hold. I was going to meet my baby.

— (Doctor) Okay, Kate, one more big push. I can see the head.

I bore down with everything I had, a guttural scream tearing from my throat. And then, a sudden, miraculous release. A new sound filled the room, a tiny, furious cry

that was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard.

— (Doctor) Congratulations. You have a beautiful baby girl.

A nurse placed her on my chest, a tiny, wriggling creature with a tuft of white hair and a face that was a perfect combination of me and Nathan. She was so small, so perfect. Tears of joy and relief streamed down my face as I looked at her, my heart swelling with a love so fierce it almost hurts.

I vaguely heard the doctor say something about the APGAR score, about her being perfectly healthy. But all I could focus on was the tiny baby in my arms. And then, I remembered my fear.

— (Kate) Her horns...

The doctor smiled, a kind, reassuring smile.

— (Doctor) They're just little bumps for now. They'll harden up over the next few days. It's perfectly normal for dragons.

I reached up and touched the top of her head. And there they were, two tiny, soft nubs, no bigger than my thumbnail. My fears had been for nothing. She was perfect.

Nathan was leaning over me, his face a mask of pure, unadulterated joy. He kissed my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin.

— (Nathan) She's beautiful, Kate. Just like her mom.

He reached out and touched the baby's hand, his large finger dwarfing the tiny, perfect

fingers that curled around it. We were a family. Our family. And our life had just begun.



The next few days in the hospital passed in a sleep-deprived, blissful haze. Our world had shrunk to the size of the hospital room, our universe revolving around the tiny, precious girl who had completely captured our hearts. We learned how to change her, how to feed her, how to soothe her cries. Every moment was a new discovery, a new lesson in the beautiful, terrifying, all-consuming love of parenthood.

Finally, the day came when we were allowed to go home. The doctor gave us a final check-up, a warm smile on her face.

— (Doctor) You're both healthy and strong.  
You're ready to go home.

Nathan carefully strapped our daughter into her car seat, his movements slow and deliberate, as if he were handling the most precious treasure in the world. And he was.

Carrying her out of the hospital was a surreal experience. The world outside seemed too bright, too loud, too fast. I had walked into this building as a wife, and I was walking out as a mother. Everything had changed.

The drive home was quiet. Our daughter slept in the back, her tiny chest rising and falling in a steady, peaceful rhythm. Nathan drove slowly, cautiously, his eyes constantly

flicking to the rearview mirror to check on her.

Walking through the front door of our house was like stepping into a dream. The house was quiet, the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. It was the same house we had left a few days ago, but it felt completely different. It felt like a home.

We took our daughter to the nursery we had so carefully prepared. The room was painted a soft, sunny yellow, with a mural of friendly forest creatures on one wall. We had spent weeks putting it together, but now, with our daughter in the room, it finally felt complete.

Nathan gently placed her in the crib, and she stirred, her tiny mouth working in a sleepy suckling motion. We stood over her for a long time, our hands clasped together, our hearts overflowing with a love that was too big for words.

– (Kate) What should we name her?

We had talked about names, of course, but none of them had felt quite right. Now, looking at her, a name came to me, a name that felt as perfect and right as she was.

– (Kate) Lily.

Nathan looked at me, a soft smile on his face.

– (Nathan) Lily. I love it.

He leaned down and kissed my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin.

— (Nathan) Welcome home, Lily.

We stood there for a long time, just watching our daughter sleep, the three of us together in our quiet, peaceful home. The world outside could wait. For now, this was all that mattered.



### *The First Few Weeks*

The first few weeks of Lily's life were a blur of sleepless nights and chaotic days. Our lives were measured in three-hour increments, a relentless cycle of feeding, burping, changing, and soothing. The profound exhaustion of pregnancy was nothing compared to this. It was a deep, bone-weary tiredness that seeped into every fiber of my being.

But I wasn't alone. Nathan was there, my partner in every sense of the word. We were a team, a sleep-deprived but determined unit. He would take the late-night shifts, rocking Lily back to sleep so I could get a few precious hours of rest. I would handle the early morning feedings, my body still aching but my heart full as I held our daughter in my arms.

There were moments of frustration, of course. Moments when Lily's cries seemed endless, when our patience wore thin. But there were also moments of pure, unadulterated joy. The way her tiny fingers would curl around mine, the soft, milky scent of her skin, the way she would look at me with her big, dark eyes, as if I were the center of her universe.

One Saturday afternoon, our doorbell rang. It was Leo and Sam, armed with bags of takeout and a giant teddy bear for Lily.

— (Leo) We come bearing gifts! And food. We figured you guys probably haven't had a decent meal in weeks.

He was right. We had been subsisting on a diet of toast, cereal, and whatever we could grab from the fridge in the few seconds Lily was asleep.

They tiptoed into the living room, their usual boisterous energy toned down to a respectful whisper. Lily was asleep in her bassinet, a tiny, perfect bundle in a pink onesie.

— (Sam) Wow. She's... tiny.

— (Leo) Can I hold her?

He looked at me, his eyes wide with a mixture of excitement and terror. I chuckled and gently lifted Lily from her bassinet, placing her in Leo's outstretched arms.

He held her as if she were made of glass, a look of pure awe on his face. Sam crowded around, his serious expression softening as he looked at the sleeping baby.

— (Leo) She has your hair, Kate.

— (Sam) And Nate's eyes.

— (Leo) And their pointy ears too.

They stayed for a few hours, their intrusion was welcomed into our little bubble. They held Lily, they made us laugh, we played some games, and they reminded us that there was still a world outside of our walls.

After they left, the house was quiet again. Nathan and I were on the sofa, Lily asleep on my chest. The setting sun cast a warm, golden glow over the room.

- (Kate) They're good friends.
- (Nathan) The best.

He wrapped his arm around me, his hand resting on Lily's back. We were tired, we were overwhelmed, and we were happier than we had ever been.

- (Nathan) Love you, my beautiful wife.
- (Kate) Love you too, handsome husband.

I leaned my head on his shoulder, my heart full. This was our life now. And it was more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

## Ch. 9: Family

### *Eleven Months Later*

Life with Lily was a beautiful, chaotic whirlwind. For eleven months, my world had been a cycle of feeding, sleeping, and soaking in every precious moment with our daughter. She was the sun, and Nathan and I were happy to be caught in her orbit. He was the perfect father, the perfect husband, a steady anchor in the storm of new parenthood.

But as the rhythm of our life settled, something else awoke in me. It wasn't a gentle stirring; it was a violent, primal roar. A hunger so deep and so ravenous it shook me to my core. The soft, maternal contentment that had enveloped me for months was ripped away, replaced by a searing, insatiable lust for my husband.

It was a physical ache, a constant, throbbing need that centered low in my belly. My body, which had nurtured a child, now screamed for its mate. Every glance at Nathan was an exercise in restraint. I watched the muscles in his back as he lifted Lily, and my fingers itched to trace them, to dig my nails into his skin. I heard him laugh, a low, rumbling sound, and a jolt of pure, unstoppable want would shoot through me, leaving me weak-kneed and breathless. The scent of him on our sheets, in our clothes, was a constant torment, a reminder of a

pleasure I now craved with a terrifying intensity.

My mind was a fever dream of him. His hands, his mouth, his body. I was consumed by a desperate, almost painful horniness that left no room for anything else. It was more than just desire. It was a biological imperative, a deep-seated, animalistic need to be claimed by him, to be his, completely and utterly.

One night, the fragile thread of my control finally snapped. Lily was asleep. The house was quiet. Nathan was in the living room, lost in a book. I stood in the doorway, my body trembling, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. The sight of him, so calm and unsuspecting, only fueled the fire. He was my prey, and I was the predator.

He looked up, a slow, easy smile on his face. "Hey, beautiful. Is Lily—"

He never finished the sentence. I was on him in a flash, a silent, desperate assault. My mouth crashed down on his, not a kiss, but a claiming. It was brutal, hungry, and unapologetic. I tangled my hands in his hair, pulling his head back, deepening the kiss until I could taste his surprise, his confusion, and then, the delicious, intoxicating spark of his own rising desire.

For a moment, he was stiff with shock. Then, a low, guttural growl ripped from his chest, a sound of pure, primal instinct. The book fell to the floor, forgotten. His arms, which had been limp at his sides, now wrapped around me like steel bands, crushing me against him. The gentleness I knew was

gone, replaced by a raw, dominant hunger that matched my own.

He flipped us over, his body pinning me to the sofa, his eyes burning with a fire that mirrored the inferno in my soul. There were no words, no tender caresses. Just a frantic, feverish tearing of clothes, a desperate, almost violent collision of bodies. It was a battle for dominance, a clash of two wild animals finally giving in to their most basic instincts. He entered me with a force that stole my breath, a guttural roar escaping his lips. It was a brutal, beautiful claiming, and I met his every thrust with a ferocity that bordered on madness, my nails digging into his back, my hoarse voice screaming his name.



In the weeks that followed, that night became the new normal. The dam had broken, and there was no holding back the flood. Our nights were a blur of sweat, and a desperate, insatiable hunger that only grew with each encounter. We were addicted to each other, to the raw, primal connection that we had unleashed.

And then, the inevitable happened. The morning sickness, the bone-deep exhaustion. I knew before I even took the test. Two pink lines. A tiny, nascent life, a consequence of our wild, untamed passion.

I showed Nathan the test that night, my heart pounding in my chest. He stared at it, his eyes wide with a mixture of shock and awe.

Then, he threw his head back and laughed, a loud, joyous sound that filled the house.

— (Nathan) Another one? Already?

He swept me up in his arms, spinning me around until I was dizzy.

— (Nathan) We're insane. I love you.

I laughed, a real, happy sound that was full of relief and excitement. Another baby. Our family was growing, a testament to a love that was as wild and untamed as the magic that had brought us together. It was reckless, but I wouldn't have it any other way.



#### *Four Months Later*

The initial shock and excitement simmered into a comfortable reality. I was pregnant again, my body once more a vessel for a new life. This time, however, was different. The fierce, primal hunger for Nathan had softened, replaced by a deep, abiding tenderness. The raw, almost violent passion of the preceding months had mellowed into a gentle, intimate affection. Our nights were still filled with love, but it was a quieter, more soulful connection, a silent acknowledgment of the precious new life we had created.

The second pregnancy was easier in some ways, harder in others. The nausea was less intense, but the exhaustion was a leaden weight on my bones. Chasing after a toddling Lily, who was now a ball of curious energy, while carrying her sibling was a challenge I hadn't anticipated. She had just started

walking. Her unsteady steps were a constant source of both joy and anxiety.

One Saturday afternoon, I was curled on the sofa, watching Nathan and Lily play on the living room floor. He was making silly faces, and she was erupting in peals of delighted, high-pitched laughter. My hand rested on my swollen belly, a gentle, protective gesture. I felt a soft flutter from within, a tiny, nascent life making its presence known. A slow, contented smile spread across my face. This was my life now. A loving husband, a beautiful daughter, and another baby on the way. It was a chaotic, beautiful mess.

Nathan looked up and caught my eye, his face softening with a love so profound it still made my breath catch in my throat.

- (Nathan) You okay, beautiful?
- (Kate) More than okay. Just... happy.

He smiled and crawled over to the sofa, his movements slow and deliberate. He leaned in and gave me a slow, sweet kiss, his hand coming to rest on my belly.

- (Nathan) We're going to need a bigger car.

We both laughed, a shared, knowing sound. Lily, seeing that she was no longer the center of attention, toddled over to us, her face filled with concentration. She reached out and climbed the sofa, making her way on my side. She patted my belly, her tiny hand warm against my skin.

- (Lily) Baby.

The word was a soft, garbled sound, but it was clear as a bell. My heart swelled with a

love so fierce it almost hurt. I looked at Nathan, my eyes welling up with tears. He was already looking at me, his own eyes shining with a mixture of love and awe.

He leaned in and kissed me again, a deep, soulful kiss that was full of all the love and joy and hope in the world. Our little family was growing, our little world expanding. And as I sat there, surrounded by the three people I loved more than life itself, I knew that I was the luckiest woman in the world.



#### *Five Months Later*

The last five months of the pregnancy passed in a blur of preparations and anticipation. The house was filled with a quiet, buzzing energy as we prepared for the arrival of our second child. This time, there was no fear of the unknown, no anxiety about horns or tails. We were seasoned veterans now, our confidence bolstered by our experience with Lily.

It happened on a Tuesday. I was in the kitchen, trying to reason with a very determined Lily who had decided that her Cheerios belonged on the floor, not in her bowl. A familiar, tightening sensation gripped my belly, and I paused, my hand instinctively going to my stomach. It was happening. Again.

This time, there was no frantic rush, no wide-eyed panic. Just a calm, knowing look exchanged between me and Nathan. He called Leo, who had enthusiastically volunteered for toddler-wrangling duty, and then he helped

me to the car, his presence steady in the cascading river.

The birth was faster this time, more intense, but blessedly free of the terror that had colored Lily's arrival. I knew what to expect, and my body remembered what to do. After a few hours of intense, focused effort, a new cry filled the room, strong and healthy.

- (Doctor) It's a boy!

A wave of relief and joy washed over me, so potent it left me breathless. They placed him on my chest, a tiny, perfect creature with a shock of black hair and a face that was the mirror image of his father's. He was beautiful.

- (Nathan) He looks just like me.

He whispered the words against my hair, his voice thick with emotion. He reached out and touched the baby's hand, his large finger dwarfing the tiny, perfect fingers that curled around it.

- (Kate) What should we name him?

- (Nathan) I was thinking... Luca.

Luca. It was perfect. Strong and gentle, just like his father. I looked down at our son, at Luca, and my heart felt like it could burst.



Bringing Luca home was a surreal experience. The house was quiet, Leo having taken Lily to the park for the afternoon to give us some time to settle in. We walked through the front door, our tiny son nestled

in his car seat, and the world seemed to tilt on its axis. We were a family of four.

We were sitting on the sofa, Luca asleep in my arms, when Leo and Lily returned. Lily toddled into the living room, her face flushed from the afternoon sun, a half-eaten cookie clutched in her hand. She stopped short when she saw the tiny bundle in my arms, her brow furrowing in confusion.

— (Kate) Hey, sweetie. Come and meet your baby brother.

She approached cautiously, her eyes wide with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. She peered at Luca, her head tilted to the side. She reached out a sticky finger and gently poked his cheek. He stirred, his tiny mouth working in a sleepy suckling motion.

— (Lily) Baby.

She said the word again, this time with a sense of ownership, a dawning realization that this tiny creature was a part of her world now. She looked up at me, a slow, shy smile spreading across her face.

Nathan sat down next to me, his arm wrapping around my shoulders. He pulled Lily onto his lap, and she leaned against his chest, her eyes still fixed on her new brother. The four of us sat there for a long time, a quiet, perfect tableau of our new life.



*A Few Weeks Later*

The house was a chaotic symphony of a toddler's boundless energy and a newborn's demanding cries. Life with two children was a beautiful, messy, exhausting reality. The quiet moments were few and far between, stolen in the dead of night or during the rare, miraculous alignment of simultaneous naps.

One evening, after a particularly trying day, I retreated to the bathroom, a sanctuary of steam and silence. The hot water was a balm to my aching muscles and frayed nerves. I sank into the tub, the water a comforting weight, and let out a long, slow breath.

The door opened a few minutes later, and Nathan peeked in, a gentle smile on his face.

- (Nathan) Everything okay in here?
- (Kate) Just... decompressing.
- (Nathan) Mind if I join you?

I shook my head, a tired smile on my face. He slid into the tub behind me, his presence a familiar comfort. He pulled me back against his chest, his arms wrapping around me.

- (Nathan) You're doing amazing, you know.
- (Kate) It doesn't feel like it. I feel like I'm constantly failing at least one of them.
- (Nathan) You're not. You're the best mom they could ever ask for.

His words were a soothing balm to my frayed soul. I leaned my head back against his shoulder, my thoughts drifting to the two small children sleeping peacefully in their beds. And then, as they often did in these

quiet moments, my thoughts drifted further, back to a life that felt a million miles away.

— (Kate) I was thinking about my mom today.

Nathan was quiet, his hand gently stroking my arm.

— (Kate) Luca was crying, and for a second... I just wanted my own mom. It's stupid.

— (Nathan) It's not stupid.

— (Kate) I wonder if she ever thinks about me. If she regrets how things ended. I wonder if Olivier is okay.

A tear I hadn't realized was forming slipped down my cheek.

— (Kate) My kids have grandparents they'll never meet. A whole side of their family they'll never know. And it's my fault.

— (Nathan) Hey. No. It's not your fault. You did what you had to do to be happy, to be safe. You chose yourself. That's not something you should ever feel guilty for.

He turned my face towards him, his hands cupping it, his thumbs wiping away my tears.

— (Nathan) I know it hurts. But look at what you've built. This beautiful, crazy, wonderful and amazing family. It might not be the one you started with, but it's yours. It's ours.

I looked into his eyes, and I saw my own love and sadness reflected there. He was right. This was my family now. This was my home.

— (Kate) It feels impossible to ever fix it. To go back.

— (Nathan) Maybe you can't go back. But that doesn't mean you can't move forward. We don't have to figure it out tonight. For now, let's just be here, together.

He kissed me, a slow, tender kiss that was full of a deep, unwavering love. He pulled me close, and I rested my head on his chest, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat a comforting lullaby. The ache for the family I had lost was still there, a quiet, persistent sorrow. But it was mingled with a profound gratitude for the family I had found. It was a bittersweet symphony, a life of beautiful, messy, complicated love.



#### *Two Years Later*

Life, as it turned out, did not slow down. It only got faster, more chaotic, and more beautiful. Lily was a whirlwind of questions and boundless energy, her white hair a constant, bright beacon in our lives. Luca, my sweet, quiet boy, was his father's shadow, his dark hair and serious expression a miniature echo of the man I loved. Our house was a noisy, joyful mess, a testament to a life lived to the fullest.

The ache for my old family had softened over time, a dull, persistent throb that I had learned to live with. I had my own family now, a loud, loving, chaotic tribe that filled every corner of my heart.

And then, just when I thought our lives couldn't possibly get any more chaotic, it happened again. The familiar, tell-tale signs. The exhaustion, the nausea, the

subtle, internal shift that I now knew so well. I was pregnant. Again.

This time, there was no dramatic reveal, no tearful, joyous embrace. I simply walked into the living room where Nathan was attempting to build a block tower with two very enthusiastic toddlers, and tossed the positive pregnancy test into his lap.

He looked at the test, then at me, a slow, disbelieving smile spreading across his face.

– (Nathan) You’re kidding me.

I shook my head, a weary but happy smile on my face.

– (Kate) I wish I was.

He threw his head back and laughed, a deep, booming sound that sent the block tower tumbling to the ground. Lily and Luca squealed with delight, and I couldn’t help but laugh along with them. Three. We were going to have three children. We were officially outnumbered.

– (Nathan) We’re going to need a bigger boat.

He stood up and pulled me into his arms, his embrace a warm, familiar comfort.

– (Nathan) I love you, you crazy, fertile woman.

– (Kate) I love you too, you ridiculously handsome man I can’t resist.

He laughed again, and kissed me, a sweet, gentle kiss that was full of all the love and chaos and joy that defined our lives.



The third pregnancy was, by far, the hardest. My body was tired, worn out from the relentless cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. The exhaustion was a constant, heavy weight, and the nausea was a relentless, unwelcome companion. But this time, I had two little helpers who were surprisingly good at fetching me crackers and patting my back.

The birth, however, was the easiest. It was fast, it was furious, and it was blessedly short. And then, she was here. A tiny, perfect baby girl with a tuft of white hair and a pair of tiny, perfect horns.

– (Doctor) Another beautiful girl.

They placed her on my chest, and I looked at her, my heart swelling with a love so big it felt like it could burst. She was so small, so fragile, a perfect blend of me and Nathan.

– (Kate) Charlotte.

I whispered the name, a name we had chosen together, a name that felt as perfect and right as she was. Nathan was by my side, his hand in mine, his eyes shining with a love that still took my breath away.

– (Nathan) Welcome to the chaos, Charlotte.

He leaned down and kissed me, a long, loving kiss that was a promise of all the beautiful, messy, wonderful years to come. Our family was complete. Our little world was full. And as I lay there, with my husband by my side and my new daughter in my arms, I knew that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

## Ch. 10: A call

The years had a way of softening the sharp edges of the past. The raw, gaping wound of my family's rejection had faded to a dull, persistent ache, a phantom limb that twinged with a bittersweet sorrow on quiet nights. My life was a chaotic, beautiful symphony of spilled juice, scraped knees, and bedtime stories. Lily, my bright, inquisitive girl; Luca, my quiet, thoughtful boy; and Charlotte, my sweet, giggling baby. They were my world, my everything. Nathan was my rock, my partner, my home. I had built a new life, a new family, a new identity. I was a wife, a mother, a woman who was loved.

But the past, I was learning, was never truly gone. It was a ghost that lingered in the shadows, waiting for a moment of weakness to reappear.

It happened on a Tuesday afternoon. The kids were all miraculously napping at the same time, a rare and precious alignment of the planets that I was determined to take full advantage of. I was curled on the sofa with a book I had been trying to read for weeks, a cup of lukewarm coffee on the table beside me. The house was quiet, a blissful, welcome silence.

And then, my phone rang.

It was an unknown number, a local area code I didn't recognize. I almost ignored it, assuming it was a telemarketer or a wrong number. But something, some strange, inexplicable impulse, made me answer.

- (Kate) Hello?

For a moment, there was only silence. And then, a voice that was both achingly familiar and strangely foreign.

- (???) Kate? Is that... is that really you?

The book slipped from my fingers, falling to the floor with a soft thud. My blood ran cold. I knew that voice. I would know it anywhere.

- (Kate) Mom?

- (Jeanne, her voice cracking with emotion)  
Oh, thank God. I... I didn't know if this was the right number. I've been trying to find you for... for years.

I was frozen, my mind a chaotic jumble of shock, anger, and a deep, buried grief that was suddenly, violently, unearthed.

- (Kate) I... I don't recognize this number.

- (Jeanne) I... I had to get a new phone. A new number. I've been calling your old number for years, Kate. Years. I never knew if it would even ring. I just... I hoped.

A bitter, humorless laugh escaped my lips.

- (Kate) You've been calling? After I told you I needed space? After I blocked you?

- (Jeanne) I didn't know what else to do! You were just... gone. I was so worried.

- (Kate) I didn't disappear. I moved on. I built a life. A life that you are not a part of.
- (Jeanne) Please, Kate. Don't say that. I... I miss you so much. I want to see you. I want to be a part of your life again. Please, just... come home.

"Come home." The words were a punch to the gut, a stark, painful reminder of a home that had never truly been a home. A home where I had been tolerated, not celebrated. A home where my happiness had been a source of resentment, not joy.

- (Kate) Home? I am home. I have a home. A real one. With a husband who loves me, who has always loved me. With children who are my entire world.
- (Jeanne) Children? You have... children... and a husband?

Her voice was a choked whisper, full of a shocked, dawning realization.

- (Kate) Yes, Mom. Remember Nathan? He's my husband and I have three. Three beautiful, amazing children who will never know their grandmother because you and Olivier couldn't accept that I deserved to be happy.

The words were harsh, but they were true. And they were words that had been buried in my heart for years, a poison that I was finally, finally, releasing.

- (Jeanne) I... I didn't know. I'm so sorry, Kate. I was wrong. I should have stood up for you. I should have... I should have been a better mother.

Her apology, which I had once craved with a desperate, all-consuming need, now felt... empty. It was too little, too late. The damage was done. The wounds had scarred over, and I was not the same person she had known.

- (Kate) It's been years, Mom. Years. You can't just call me out of the blue and expect everything to be okay. I have a family now. A life. My life.
- (Jeanne) I know. I know I don't deserve it. But please, just... give me a chance. Let me meet them. Let me be a grandmother to your children.

Her words sent a fresh wave of panic through me, cold and sharp. My children knew me as Mommy. That's it. They didn't know the lonely, unhappy boy I had been. They didn't know the years of pain and confusion, the desperate yearning to be someone else. My mother, in her grief and desperation, could shatter that innocence with a few careless words. She could plant a seed of confusion in their minds, a question of "who was Mommy before?" that I wasn't ready to answer. A question they might never need to ask.

- (Kate) I can't. Sorry, not sorry. But I can't.

I hung up the phone, my hand trembling. The silence of the house rushed back in, but it was different now. It was heavy, thick with the ghosts of the past. I sat there for a long time, the tears I had held back for so long finally streaming down my face. I cried for the mother I had lost, for the brother who hated me, for the family that had been broken

beyond repair. And then, I cried for myself. For the little girl who had just wanted to be loved, and for the woman who had finally, finally, learned to love herself.



The emotional storm eventually subsided, leaving a hollow ache in its wake. The tears dried, but the grief remained, a heavy cloak I couldn't seem to shrug off. The quiet of the house, once a blessing, now felt oppressive. The nap-time truce wouldn't last forever. Soon, the pitter-patter of little feet would fill the halls, and I would have to put on a brave face, to be the unshakable, ever-present Mommy they needed.

A glance at the fridge revealed a new, more immediate crisis: we were out of milk. A collective gasp of horror from my three children was not something I had the emotional fortitude to handle today. A quick trip to the supermarket. The thought was both daunting and appealing. Maybe the mundane reality of fluorescent lights and squeaky cart wheels would be a welcome distraction, a way to ground myself in the present.

The supermarket was a familiar assault on the senses, a chaotic ballet of shoppers and announcements. I grabbed a cart and navigated the aisles on autopilot, my mind still a million miles away. Cereal, bread, apples, milk. I ticked the items off my mental list, the repetitive motions a small, comforting ritual.

I was in the dairy aisle, reaching for a carton of milk, when a voice, hesitant and

trembling, cut through the low hum of the refrigerators.

- (???) Kate?

I froze, my hand hovering over the milk. I didn't have to turn around. I knew that voice. Twice in one day. The universe, it seemed, had a cruel sense of humor.

I turned slowly, my heart sinking into my stomach. It was her. My mother. She looked... older. The years had etched new lines on her face, and her hair, once a familiar brown, was now streaked with grey. She was clutching a carton of eggs to her chest like a shield, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and a desperate, pleading hope.

- (Kate) ...

The word was a flat, empty sound in the cavernous aisle. We stood there for a long, awkward moment, a chasm of unspoken words and years of pain stretching between us. Shoppers bustled past, oblivious to the silent, invisible drama unfolding next to the milk aisle.

- (Jeanne) I... I didn't mean to... I was just getting some things.

She gestured vaguely with the egg carton, as if to prove her point.

- (Kate) It's a supermarket. People buy things here.

My voice was colder than I intended, a defensive wall I had built brick by brick over the years. Her face fell, and she looked down

at her shoes, a flicker of the old, familiar guilt in her eyes.

- (Jeanne) I know you're angry. You have every right to be. But seeing you... you look good, Kate. You look... happy.
- (Kate) I am.

The words were a simple statement of fact, but they felt like a victory. A declaration of a life I had built in spite of her, not because of her.

- (Jeanne) I'm glad. I really am.

We stood in silence again, the air thick with all the things we couldn't say. I could see the questions burning in her eyes, the desperate urge to ask about her grandchildren, to bridge the gap that had grown so wide between us. But she didn't. And for that, I was grateful.

- (Kate) I have to go. My kids... they'll be waking up soon.

It was an excuse, but it was also the truth. My children were my anchor, my reason, my safe harbor.

- (Jeanne) Of course. I... It was good to see you, Kate.

The word didn't make it out, a ghost of a habit from a life that was no longer mine. I turned and walked away, my cart rattling in front of me. I didn't look back. I paid for my groceries in a daze, the cashier's cheery "have a nice day" was a jarring note in the somber symphony of my emotions.

I fled the store, the automatic doors hissing shut behind me like a final, definitive goodbye. The bright afternoon sun was a stark contrast to the darkness that had settled in my heart. Seeing her, in the flesh, had been so much harder than I could have ever imagined. It wasn't a clean break, a neat, tidy ending. It was a messy, complicated, painful reminder that some wounds never truly heal. They just scar over, a permanent, tender reminder of what was lost.



The drive home was a blur. I put the groceries away on autopilot, my mind a million miles away. The kids were starting to stir, their soft, sleepy cries a welcome distraction from the turmoil in my head. I picked up Charlotte, her warm, tiny body a comforting weight in my arms. I went through the motions of the rest of the afternoon - snacks, playtime, dinner, bath - a hollow, disconnected feeling settling deep in my bones.

By the time Nathan came home, the kids were in bed and the house was quiet again. He walked in the door, his face tired from a long day at work, but his eyes lit up when he saw me, as they always did.

- (Nathan) Hey, beautiful.

He came over to kiss me, but he paused, his brow furrowing with concern. He knew me too well. He could read the sadness in my eyes, the tension in my shoulders.

- (Nathan) What's wrong? You look... sad.

I tried to smile, but it was a weak, watery thing.

- (Kate) It's nothing. Just a long day.
- (Nathan) Don't lie to me, Kate. I know you. Something's happened.

He led me to the sofa and sat down, pulling me into his arms. His embrace was a safe harbor, a quiet space where I could finally let my guard down. And so, I told him. I told him everything. About the phone call, the unknown number, the voice from a past I had tried so hard to bury. About the supermarket, the awkward, painful silence in the dairy aisle, the look of desperate hope in my mother's eyes.

He listened patiently, his hand stroking my back in slow, comforting circles. He didn't interrupt, he didn't offer any easy answers. He just ... listened. When I was done, my voice was a hoarse whisper, my cheeks wet with tears I hadn't even realized I was crying.

- (Kate) I just... I don't know what to do. I don't know what to feel.
- (Nathan) You don't have to do anything. And you're allowed to feel whatever you want. Angry, sad, confused... it's all valid.

He tilted my chin up, his thumb gently wiping away my tears.

- (Nathan) I'm so sorry you had to go through that alone. You should have called me.
- (Kate) I didn't want to bother you at work.
- (Nathan) Kate. You are never a bother. You are my wife, and I love you. Your pain is my pain. We're a team, remember?

I nodded, a fresh wave of tears welling up in my eyes. But this time, they were tears of gratitude, of a deep, unwavering love for the man who had become my everything.

- (Kate) I love you so much.
- (Nathan) I love you too. More than you'll ever know.

He held me for a long time, his embrace a silent promise that I was not alone. The ache in my heart was still there, a dull, persistent throb. But it was a little lighter now, a little easier to bear. The ghosts of the past were still there, but they didn't seem so scary anymore. Not with him by my side.

## Ch. 11: Meeting

The conversation with Nathan was a pleasant relief to my raw, frayed nerves. His unwavering support, his quiet, steady presence, was the anchor I desperately needed in the emotional storm that had engulfed me. He didn't offer easy solutions or platitudes. He just held me, listened to me, and loved me. And in that moment, that was all I needed.

But the ghosts of the past, once stirred, are not so easily quieted. The next morning, as I was trying to wrangle a giggling Charlotte into her high chair, my phone buzzed on the counter. An unknown number. My heart did a frantic, panicked little dance in my chest. I stared at it, my hand hovering, my mind a chaotic whirlwind of indecision.

Nathan, who was in the process of making coffee, saw the look on my face. He walked over and picked up the phone, his eyes questioning.

— (Nathan) You want me to answer it?

I nodded, unable to find my voice. He answered the phone, his voice calm and steady.

— (Nathan) Hello?

He listened for a moment, his expression unreadable.

— (Nathan) Who is this? ... I see. ... Yes, she's here. ... Just a moment.

He covered the receiver with his hand and looked at me, his eyes soft with a mixture of concern and sympathy.

— (Nathan) It's your mother. She wants to talk to you.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, my heart pounding against my ribs like a trapped bird. I shook my head, a silent, desperate plea.

— (Nathan, his voice low and gentle) It's okay. You don't have to talk to her if you don't want to.

He started to hang up, but I stopped him, my hand on his arm. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't run from this forever. I had to face it. I had to be strong. For my family. For myself.

— (Kate) No. It's okay. I'll... I'll talk to her.

I took the phone from him, my hand trembling. I put it to my ear, my voice a hoarse whisper.

— (Kate) Hello?

— (Jeanne) Kate? I'm so glad you answered. I was so worried when you hung up yesterday.

— (Kate) What do you want, Mom?

— (Jeanne) I want to see you, Kate. I want to see you and... and your husband. Nathan. I want to meet him.

— (Kate) Why? So you can tell him all about my past, the person I hated being? So you can tell him about the freak he married?

- (Jeanne) No! No, nothing like that. I just... I want to understand. I want to see you happy. Please, Kate. Just one dinner. That's all I'm asking.
- (Kate) I... I'll have to think about it.

I ended the call, my heart a tangled mess of anger, grief, and a tiny, flickering flame of hope that I was too afraid to acknowledge. I looked at Nathan, my eyes welling up with tears.

- (Kate) She wants to have dinner. With both of us.
- (Nathan) What do you want to do?
- (Kate) I don't know. A part of me wants to tell her to go to hell. But another part of me... another part of me wants to see her. I want her to see me. I want her to see that I'm happy, that I have a beautiful life, a beautiful family. I want her to see what she threw away.
- (Nathan) Then let's do it. Let's have dinner with her.
- (Kate) Really? You'd be okay with that?
- (Nathan) Of course. I'm with you, Kate. Whatever you decide. We're a team, I'll be forever at your side.

He pulled me into his arms, and I buried my face in his chest, the familiar scent of him a comforting balm to my wounded soul.

- (Kate) What if it's a disaster? What if she says something awful? What if she tries to turn you against me?
- (Nathan) She won't. And even if she tries, it won't work. You're my wife, Kate. I love you. Nothing she can say will ever change that.

I looked up at him, at his strong, handsome face, at the unwavering love in his eyes, and I knew he was right. We could do this. Together.

— (Kate) Okay. Let's do it.

The words were a quiet exhalation, a surrender, a leap of faith into an uncertain future. I didn't know if it was the right decision. I didn't know if it would bring healing or more pain. But I knew I wouldn't be facing it alone. And for now, that was enough.



The week leading up to the meeting was a blur of anxiety and anticipation. I replayed the phone call with my mother in my head a thousand times, each time with a different ending. In some, I was gracious and forgiving. In others, I was cold and distant. In reality, I was a mess of conflicting emotions, a tangled knot of hope and fear.

Saturday arrived, grey and overcast, a perfect reflection of my mood. Sam and Leo arrived early, their cheerful banter a stark contrast to the nervous energy that filled our house. Lily, Luca, and Charlotte were ecstatic to see their favorite uncle and aunt, their squeals of delight a welcome distraction from the impending doom I felt.

- (Leo) You guys sure about this? It's not too late to fake a sudden, debilitating illness.
- (Kate) Don't tempt me.
- (Sam) You'll be fine. Just remember, you're in control. And if she says anything out of

line, you have our full permission to flip the table and walk out.

- (Nathan) Noted. Thanks, Sam.

We left the house, the sound of our children's laughter a bittersweet symphony in our ears. The drive to the mall was silent, the air thick with unspoken words. We had decided on a neutral, public location: a McDonald's. It was sterile, impersonal, and blessedly free of any emotional baggage. No one could cause a scene at a McDonald's, right?

We spotted her as soon as we walked in. She was sitting at a small table in the corner, her hands clutching a paper cup of coffee. She looked smaller than I remembered, more fragile. The years had not been kind. She looked up as we approached, her eyes wide with a mixture of hope and fear.

- (Jeanne) Kate. You came.

- (Kate) We... came.

I gestured to Nathan, who was standing beside me, a quiet, steady presence. He extended his hand to my mother.

- (Nathan) It's nice to finally meet you, Jeanne.

- (Jeanne) You too, Nathan. Thank you for... for everything.

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. We sat down, the silence stretching between us, thick and uncomfortable. I stared at the table, at the salt and pepper shakers, at anything other than my mother's face.

- (Jeanne) You look good, Kate. Motherhood suits you.
- (Kate) It does.
- (Jeanne) I... I was so sorry to hear about Olivier.
- (Kate) You were? Didn't seem like it.

The words were out before I could stop them, sharp and bitter. My mother flinched, her face clouding with a familiar, wounded expression.

- (Jeanne) He is your brother, Kate.
- (Kate) He was a monster. And you let him be.
- (Nathan) Kate...

He placed a hand on my arm, a gentle, grounding touch. I took a deep breath, the anger that had been simmering just below the surface threatening to boil over.

- (Kate) I'm sorry. I didn't come here to fight.
- (Jeanne) Neither did I. I came here to... to try and understand. To try and make things right.
- (Kate) I don't think you can. Some things... some things are broken beyond repair.
- (Jeanne) I know. But I have to try. I have to know... are you happy, Kate? Truly happy?

I looked at Nathan, at his kind, handsome face, at the unwavering love in his eyes. I thought of my children, of their laughter, of the chaotic, beautiful life we had built together.

- (Kate) I am. I'm happier than I ever thought I could be.
- (Jeanne) I'm glad. I truly am. I just... I wish I could have been a part of it.

- (Kate) You could have been. You chose not to be.
- (Jeanne) I was scared. I was weak. I know that's no excuse, but it's the truth. I was so afraid of your brother, of what he would do. I was so afraid of losing you. And in the end, I lost you anyway.
- (Kate) You didn't lose me. You two almost threw me away.
- (Jeanne) I know. And I have regretted it every single day for the past ten years. I have missed you so much, Kate. More than you can ever imagine.

The admission was a whisper, a crack in the armor I had so carefully constructed around my heart. A single tear slipped down my mother's cheek, and for the first time, I felt a flicker of something other than anger. It was a faint, fragile thing, but it was there. A tiny, microscopic seed of... forgiveness?

- (Nathan) We have three children, Jeanne. Lily, Luca, and Charlotte. They're beautiful, and smart, and funny. And they deserve to know their grandmother.

My mother's head snapped up, her eyes wide with a shocked, disbelieving hope.

- (Jeanne) You... you would let me meet them?
- (Kate) I... I think so. But we have to take it slow. There are... there are things they don't know. Things they don't need to know.
- (Jeanne) Of course. Anything. I'll do anything.
- (Kate) No more secrets. No more lies. And you have to respect my choices. My life. My family. And you will not talk about my past, about who I was before. They know

me as their mother, and that's all they need to know. If you ever bring up the past, you will never see them again. Do you understand?

- (Jeanne) I... I understand. I promise.

We talked for a long time after that. About the past, about the present, about the future. It was awkward, and painful, and messy. But it was also a start. A small, tentative step towards something new. Something that might, one day, resemble a family.

We left the McDonald's, the sky outside still grey and overcast. But for the first time in a long time, I felt a tiny, flickering ray of sunshine in my heart. The road ahead was long and uncertain. But for the first time in a long time, I felt a glimmer of hope.



The ride home was quiet, but it was a comfortable silence, a shared respite from the emotional turbulence of the afternoon. I rested my head against the cool glass of the window, watching the city lights blur into a stream of color. Nathan reached over and took my hand, his thumb stroking the back of it.

- (Nathan) You okay?
- (Kate) I think so. It was... a lot.
- (Nathan) You were amazing. You were strong, and you were honest, and you stood your ground. I'm so proud of you.
- (Kate) I couldn't have done it without you.
- (Nathan) Yes, you could have. But you didn't have to.

We pulled into our driveway, the familiar sight of our home a welcome balm to my weary soul. The kids were already in bed, the house was quiet. Sam and Leo were on the couch, watching a movie.

- (Sam) So? How'd it go?
- (Kate) It didn't explode.
- (Leo) A promising start.
- (Nathan) It was good. It was a good first step.
- (Kate) We'll see.

I wasn't ready to share the details, not yet. I needed to process it all myself, to let the fragile tendrils of hope take root before exposing them to the light of day. I gave Sam and Leo a hug, thanking them for their help.

- (Kate) We're going to head to bed. Thanks for everything.
- (Sam) Anytime.

We went upstairs, the silence of our bedroom a welcome embrace. I changed into my pajamas, the soft cotton a comfort against my skin. I crawled into bed, and Nathan wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close.

- (Kate) I love you.
- (Nathan) I love you too.

I turned in his arms, my body pressing against his. The emotional upheaval of the day had left me raw, vulnerable, but also strangely open. I needed to feel him, to connect with him on a level deeper than words. I tilted my head back, and he met my gaze, his eyes dark with a question he didn't need to ask. I answered it with a soft, searching

— (Kate) I need you.

His mouth found mine, a gentle exploration that quickly deepened into something more. It was a kiss of reassurance, of possession, of a love that had weathered storms and emerged stronger. His hands moved over me, not with frantic urgency, but with a slow, deliberate tenderness that made my breath catch in my throat. He rediscovered the curves and valleys of my body, his touch a silent language of love and devotion.

I responded in kind, my hands tracing the hard planes of his chest, my fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck. I wanted to pour all the love, all the gratitude, all the fierce, protective adoration I felt for him into this one, perfect moment. He was my anchor, my sanctuary, my home. And in his arms, I was completely safe.

We came together in a slow, sweet rhythm, a dance as old as time. It wasn't about passion or release, but about connection, about reaffirmation, about the quiet, profound joy of two souls becoming one. And as the last vestiges of tension melted away, replaced by a deep, boneless contentment, I knew that whatever the future held, we would face it together. And that was all that mattered.

I closed my eyes, the events of the day replaying in my mind. It was a beginning. A messy, complicated, uncertain beginning. But a beginning nonetheless. And as I drifted off to sleep, wrapped in the safety of Nathan's arms, I allowed myself to feel a flicker of something I hadn't felt in a long, long time: peace.



The fragile peace I had found was a delicate, tentative thing, a young seedling in the scorched earth of my past. The meeting with my mother hadn't magically healed the wounds of a decade, but it had cracked open a door I thought was sealed forever. We had exchanged a few hesitant texts since our meeting, our conversations were stilted and awkward, like two strangers learning a new language. But it was a start.

A few weeks later, a Saturday dawned bright and sunny, a stark contrast to the grey gloom of our last family outing. The kids were a whirlwind of energy, their laughter echoing through the house. They were growing so fast, their clothes perpetually too short, their shoes too tight.

- (Nathan) We need to get them new clothes.  
All of them.
- (Kate) I know. I've been putting it off.  
The thought of taking all three of them to  
the mall... it's daunting.
- (Nathan) We'll make it a special trip.  
We'll get them ice cream. We'll make it  
an adventure.
- (Kate) An adventure, huh? You're an  
optimist.

But his enthusiasm was infectious. And so, armed with a diaper bag the size of a small suitcase and a healthy dose of trepidation, we piled into the car and headed to the mall.

The mall was a chaotic symphony of sights and sounds, a sensory overload that immediately sent my anxiety levels

skyrocketing. But the kids were in heaven. Lily was pointing at everything, her eyes wide with wonder. Luca was clutching Nathan's hand, his serious expression a mask for his own quiet excitement. And Charlotte was babbling happily in her stroller, her tiny hands reaching for the colorful displays.

We managed to find a children's clothing store that wasn't too crowded, and the chaotic dance of shopping with three small children began. Nathan, ever the patient one, took on the task of wrangling Lily and Luca, while I focused on finding clothes for Charlotte.

I was holding up a tiny, frilly pink dress, a wave of maternal love washing over me, when a voice, hesitant and trembling, cut through the din of the store.

- (???) Kate?

I froze, the pink dress slipping from my fingers. I knew that voice. It was the same voice that had haunted my dreams for years, the same voice that had called me out of the blue just a few weeks ago. I turned slowly, my heart sinking into my stomach.

It was my mother. And she wasn't alone.

Standing beside her was a person I barely recognized. The angry, resentful boy who had been my brother was gone. In his place was a young woman with the same emerald green hair, the same sharp features, but with a new, fragile softness in her eyes. She was wearing a simple, elegant dress, her hands clutching a purse, her posture a mixture of

nervousness and a quiet, defiant pride. It was Olivier.

– (Kate) Mom. Olivier.

The names were a choked whisper, a ghost of a life I had left behind. My mother looked from me to the stroller where Charlotte was sleeping, her eyes welling up with tears.

– (Jeanne) Is that... is that one of them?

– (Kate) Yes. This is Charlotte.

Nathan, who had been trying to convince Luca that he did, in fact, need new shoes, saw the scene unfolding and immediately came to my side, his hand finding mine, a silent, steady support. Lily and Luca trailed behind him, their eyes wide with curiosity.

– (Nathan) Jeanne. Olivier. It's... good to see you.

The lie was a small, necessary kindness in a moment that was anything but. Olivier wouldn't look at me, her eyes fixed on the floor, her jaw clenched. My mother, however, couldn't take her eyes off my children.

– (Jeanne) They're beautiful, Kate. Just... beautiful.

An awkward, heavy silence descended upon us, a thick, suffocating blanket of unspoken words and years of pain. It was Lily, in her infinite, childlike wisdom, who finally broke the spell, pulling on my hoodie.

– (Lily) Mommy, who are they?

– (Kate) This is... this is your grandmother, sweetie. And this is... Your aunt.

The word "aunt" felt strange on my tongue, a foreign, unfamiliar sound. But it was the only word that fit. Olivier's head snapped up, her eyes wide with a shocked, unreadable expression.

— (Kate) We should... we should go somewhere else.

I looked at Nathan, a silent plea in my eyes. He understood immediately.

— (Nathan) There's an A&W in the food court. We could go there.

My mother nodded, her eyes still fixed on my children. Olivier just shrugged, a small, noncommittal gesture that was a stark contrast to the storm of emotions I could see raging in her eyes.

And so, our strange, broken, beautiful little parade made its way to the food court, a chaotic jumble of strollers, shopping bags, and the heavy, unspoken weight of the past. The familiar, greasy smell of A&W filled the air, a strange, surreal backdrop to a reunion I had never thought would happen. We found a large booth in the corner, and as we all slid onto the plastic seats, I couldn't help but wonder if this was a new beginning, or just another, more painful, ending.



The A&W was noisy, a cacophony of sizzling burgers, crying children, and the low hum of conversation. It was the perfect place to be invisible, to have a private conversation in a public space. The kids immediately clamoring for fries. My mother and Olivier

slid in opposite us, a chasm of vinyl and formica separating us.

Nathan, my ever-calm and capable husband, took charge. He ordered a mountain of food, his easy smile and friendly banter with the cashier a stark contrast to the tense silence at our table. When he returned with the trays, the simple act of distributing burgers and fries felt like a peace offering, a fragile bridge across a vast divide.

The kids, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension, dug in with gusto. Charlotte, propped up in her high chair, happily gummed a limp fry, her face a mess of ketchup and drool. Luca, my serious little man, was meticulously dipping each fry in a small puddle of ketchup before eating it. And Lily, my social butterfly, was chattering away, telling a long, rambling story about her day to anyone who would listen.

My mother watched them, a look of pure, unadulterated adoration on her face. She was drinking in the sight of her grandchildren, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Olivier, however, was a closed book. She picked at her fries, her gaze fixed on the table, her body language a study in defensive posture. She hadn't said a word since we left the store.

- (Jeanne) They're... they're wonderful, Kate.  
You've done such a good job.
- (Kate) I have a good partner.

I smiled at Nathan, and he squeezed my hand under the table, a silent, reassuring pressure. My mother's gaze shifted to Olivier, a flicker of sadness in her eyes.

— (Jeanne) Olivier has been.. making some changes.

I looked at my sibling, at the dress, the purse, the carefully applied makeup. The pieces were all there, but they didn't quite fit together. It was like looking at a familiar stranger.

— (Kate) I can see that.

Olivier finally looked up, her eyes meeting mine for the first time. The anger and hatred that had once burned so brightly were gone, replaced by a deep, weary sadness.

— (Olivier) I'm trying.

The words were a quiet, raw admission, a crack in the armor she had worn for so long.

— (Kate) Trying what?

— (Olivier) To... to be a girl. To be like you.

The confession hung in the air, a shocking, unexpected revelation that stole the breath from my lungs. I stared at her, my mind reeling. This was the last thing I had ever expected. The brother who had despised his female body, who had raged against his fate, was now... choosing it?

— (Kate) Why?

— (Olivier) Because... because I was so angry. So full of hate. I hated you because you got what you wanted. I hated myself because I was stuck in a body I didn't want. And I thought... I thought if I could just be a boy again, everything would be okay. But it wasn't. I was still miserable. And then... I don't know. I just... I got tired of fighting it. I got tired of being angry all the time.

I heard about you from mom, of the life you had built, and I heard that you were happy. And I thought... maybe I could be too. Maybe... maybe it wasn't a curse.

She looked down at her hands, her voice barely a whisper.

– (Olivier) It's not easy. I don't... I don't know what I'm doing. I feel like I'm playing dress-up in someone else's clothes. But I'm trying. I'm really trying.

The confession, so raw and vulnerable, hung in the air between us, a fragile truce in a war I thought would never end. I looked at my sibling, at the stranger who was my brother, my sister, my blood. The anger that had been my constant companion for so long was gone, replaced by a hollow ache of... something. It wasn't forgiveness, not yet. But it was a start.

– (Kate) I... I don't know what to say.

– (Olivier) You don't have to say anything. I just... I wanted you to know.

Nathan's hand found mine under the table, his grip a silent, steady reassurance. He was giving me the space to feel, to process, to react. I looked at my children, at their innocent, happy faces, and then back at Olivier. The path she was on was not an easy one. I knew that better than anyone.

– (Kate) It gets easier. It takes time, but it gets easier.

– (Olivier) How? How do you just... become someone else?

— (Kate) You don't. You just... become yourself. And you learn to love that person. Flaws and all.

The words were a pale imitation of the storm that had raged inside me for years, but they were the only ones I had. Olivier looked at me, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes. Hope? Fear? Or maybe just a reflection of my own conflicted emotions.

We finished our meal in a strange, surreal silence. The kids, their bellies full of fries and their energy levels waning, were starting to get restless. Nathan, forever the master of social situations, started to gather our things, his movements a clear signal that it was time to go.

— (Nathan) Well, it was... it was good to see you both.

My mother's eyes were shining with unshed tears. She looked at me, her gaze a silent, desperate plea.

— (Jeanne) Can I... can I hug them?

I hesitated, my heart a battlefield of conflicting emotions. But then I looked at my children, at their bright, curious faces, and I knew I couldn't deny them this. I couldn't let my past poison their future.

— (Kate) If they want to.

My mother's face crumpled with relief. She knelt down and opened her arms, and Lily, my brave, fearless girl, walked right into them. Luca, more hesitant, followed his sister's lead. My mother held them close, her body shaking with silent sobs. It was a messy,

complicated, beautiful moment, a collision of past and present, of pain and hope.

Olivier watched from a distance, her arms wrapped around herself, a solitary island in a sea of emotion. I walked over to her, my steps hesitant.

- (Kate) Thank you for... for telling me.
- (Olivier) I'm sorry, Kate. For everything.

The apology, when it finally came, was a quiet, broken thing. It wasn't enough to erase the years of pain, but it was a start.

- (Kate) I know.

We stood there for a long, silent moment, the ghosts of our past swirling around us. And then, I did something I never thought I would do. I reached out and hugged her. It was awkward, and stiff, and over in a second. But it was real.

We left the A&W, our strange, broken family unit dissolving back into the chaos of the mall. My mother and Olivier went one way, and we went the other. As we walked away, I didn't look back. I didn't know what the future held. I didn't know if this was a new beginning or just a temporary truce. But I felt a sense of closure. The war was over. And maybe, just maybe, we could all find our way back to peace.



The drive home was a quiet hum of the engine and the soft breathing of our sleeping children. The emotional rollercoaster of the day had left me drained, a hollowed-out feeling in the pit of my stomach. Nathan

reached over and squeezed my hand, a silent acknowledgment of the weight of the day.

We carried the kids inside, their small, limp bodies a precious weight in our arms. We tucked them into their beds, the familiar ritual a comforting anchor in the swirling sea of my emotions. Lily, with her mess of white hair spread across the pillow. Luca, curled on his side, his thumb tucked in his mouth. Charlotte, in her crib, her tiny chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. They were my world, my safe place.

After the kids were settled, Nathan started the bath, the sound of the running water a soothing melody. He added a few drops of lavender oil, the scent filling the small bathroom with a calming aroma. He helped me out of my clothes, his touch gentle, his eyes full of a deep, unwavering love.

We sank into the hot water, the heat a welcome relief to my aching muscles. I leaned back against Nathan's chest, his arms wrapping around me, his chin resting on top of my head. We sat in silence for a long time, the only sound the soft lapping of the water against the sides of the tub.

And then, the tears came.

They started as a silent trickle, a slow, steady release of all the pent-up emotions of the day, of the past ten years. The anger, the grief, the confusion, the fragile, flickering hope. It all came pouring out of me in a torrent of hot, salty tears.

I sobbed, my body shaking with the force of it. I cried for the brother who had tormented

me and the sister who was now a stranger, her apology a fragile peace offering in a war that had left deep scars. I cried for my mother's weakness, standing by and watching him tear me apart. I cried for the hope of a future that felt both terrifyingly close and impossibly far, a future where "family" wasn't a synonym for pain.

Nathan just held me, his arms a strong, steady presence in the storm. He didn't say a word, he just let me cry, his hand stroking my hair, his lips pressing soft, gentle kisses to my temple. He was my anchor, my rock, the one solid thing in a world that had been turned upside down. And in the safety of his embrace, I finally, finally, let myself fall apart.



The water grew cold around us, the last of the steam dissipating into the cool night air. My tears had subsided, leaving a hollow, fragile calm in their wake. Nathan gently squeezed my shoulder.

— (Nathan) Let's get you to bed.

He stood, the water cascading off his body, and reached for a towel. He wrapped it around me, his movements slow and deliberate, as if I were something precious and easily broken. He dried me with a tenderness that brought a fresh wave of emotion to the surface, a deep, profound gratitude for this man who was my husband, my friend, my everything.

He led me to our bedroom, the familiar space a welcome sanctuary. The sheets were cool against my skin as I slid into bed, my

body heavy with a bone-deep weariness. Nathan slipped in beside me, his warmth a comforting presence in the darkness. He didn't say anything, just pulled me against him, my back to his chest, his arm a protective weight around my waist.

I could feel the steady, rhythmic beat of his heart against my back, a soothing lullaby that slowly, gently, began to quiet the storm in my mind. His hand moved from my waist, his fingers tracing a slow, lazy pattern on my stomach, a silent question in the darkness. I shifted, turning in his arms to face him, my answer in the soft press of my lips against his.

The kiss was soft, a gentle exploration that held no demands, no urgency. It was a kiss of pure love, a silent promise of safety and comfort. His hand cupped my cheek, his thumb stroking away the last of my tears.

— (Nathan) I love you, Kate.

His voice was a low murmur in the quiet of the room, a sound that wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

— (Kate) I love you too.

I whispered the words against his lips, my voice thick with an emotion I couldn't name. It was more than love, more than gratitude. It was a recognition of a bond that had been forged in fire, a connection that was unbreakable, unshakeable.

He made love to me with a reverence that was almost holy. Every touch, every kiss, every movement was a testament to his love, a

gentle reassurance that I was cherished, that I was safe. It wasn't a passionate, fiery encounter, but a slow, soulful communion, a quiet, intimate dance of two people who were so much more than just husband and wife. They were two halves of the same whole, two souls intertwined.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, our bodies slick with a thin sheen of sweat, our breathing slow and even. He held me close, his lips pressed against my forehead, his hand stroking my hair. The hollow ache in my chest had been replaced by a warm, glowing ember of peace. The ghosts of the past were still there, but they were silent now, their power diminished in the face of a love that was so much stronger.

I fell asleep in his arms, the steady rhythm of his breathing a comforting lullaby. My dreams were not of the past, but of the future. A future that was bright despite the hurdles, and full of hope, and filled with the quiet, profound joy of a love that had conquered all.

## Ch. 12: Peace.

The encounter with my mother and Olivier had been a turning point, a quiet, profound shift in the tectonic plates of my life. The anger that had been my constant companion for so long had finally, blessedly, begun to recede, replaced by a fragile, tentative peace. It wasn't forgiveness, not yet, but it was a start.

In the weeks that followed, a new sense of calm settled over our home. The ghosts of the past, while not entirely banished, had retreated to the shadows, their power diminished. My nights were no longer haunted by dreams of what was lost, but filled with the quiet, profound joy of what I had found.

One evening, after the kids were asleep and the house was finally quiet, I found myself curled up on the sofa, a book open in my lap, but my eyes were fixed on Nathan. He was sitting across from me, sketching in a notebook, the focused intensity on his face a familiar, beloved sight. The soft glow of the lamp cast him in a warm, golden light, and my heart swelled with a love so fierce it was almost painful.

He looked up, as if sensing my gaze, a slow, easy smile spreading across his face.

— (Nathan) What are you staring at, beautiful?

— (Kate) You. I'm just... happy.

He put his sketchbook aside and came to sit next to me, his arm wrapping around my shoulders, pulling me close. I rested my head on his chest, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat pounding against my chest.

— (Nathan) I'm happy too.

We sat in a comfortable silence for a long time. The air between us was thick with unspoken words, with a deep, abiding love that needed no voice. I tilted my head back, and he met my gaze, his eyes dark with a familiar, tender fire.

I didn't need to say a word. He leaned in and kissed me, a slow, sweet kiss that was full of all the love and history we shared. It was a kiss that spoke of forgiveness, of healing, of a future that was bright and full of promise.

He led me to our bedroom, his hand in mine, and we came together not with the frantic, desperate passion of our youth, but with the slow, deliberate tenderness of a love that had been tested and had emerged, unbreakable. It was a quiet, soulful communion, a dance of two souls who knew each other completely. Every touch was a prayer, every kiss a benediction.

We laid tangled in the sheets, my head on his chest, his fingers tracing lazy circles on my back. A strange, unfamiliar thought drifted into my mind, a tiny, nascent suspicion that I almost dismissed as a fleeting fancy. A subtle shift, a faint, almost imperceptible change in the rhythm of

my own body. It was a feeling I knew well, a quiet whisper I had heard three times before. I pushed the thought away, not ready to give it voice, not yet. For now, I just wanted to bask in the warm, quiet glow of this perfect, peaceful moment.



### *Six Years Later*

The quiet, peaceful moments became a distant, cherished memory. Our home, once a sanctuary of calm, was now a chaotic, beautiful whirlwind of noise and energy. Six years had passed in a blur of scraped knees, lost teeth, and bedtime stories. Lily, now a bright, inquisitive girl on the cusp of her teenage years. Luca, my quiet, thoughtful boy, his father's shadow in every way. Charlotte, our sweet, bubbly girl, her laughter a constant, joyful melody in our home. And then there was Naomi.

My little surprise.

The suspicion I had felt that night six years ago had, of course, been true. Naomi, our fourth and final child, had arrived with a shock of black hair and a pair of bright, curious eyes, completing our family in a way I never could have anticipated. Four children. We had four children. The thought still made me laugh, a sound of pure, incredulous joy.

A typical weekday morning was a masterclass in controlled chaos.

- (Kate) Lily, have you seen your shoes?
- (Lily, her voice muffled from her bedroom)  
I'm looking!

- (Nathan, trying to coax a reluctant Charlotte to eat her breakfast) Just one more bite, sweetie. For Daddy.
- (Luca, already dressed and ready, sitting at the table with a book) Mom, can you quiz me on my spelling words?
- (Kate, juggling a squirming Naomi on her hip) In a minute, sweetie.

It was a constant, dizzying dance of packing lunches, signing permission slips, and mediating sibling squabbles. But through it all, there was a deep, abiding sense of rightness. This was my life. This was my family. And it was more wonderful, more chaotic, and more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.



#### *Twelve Years Later*

The years continued to fly by, each one faster than the last. The chaotic energy of four young children slowly, imperceptibly, gave way to the new, more complex chaos of four teenagers. The house was still noisy, but now it was a symphony of slammed doors, loud music, and endless, dramatic phone conversations.

And then, one by one, they began to leave.

Lily, my firstborn, my bright, ambitious girl, was the first to go. She left for university with a car full of books and a heart full of dreams, leaving behind a silence that was both deafening and heartbreaking. Luca, my quiet, thoughtful boy, followed two years later, his departure

a quiet, understated affair that was no less painful.

And now, it was Charlotte's turn. My sweet, bubbly girl, all grown up and ready to take on the world. We had just returned from dropping her off at her dorm, the car strangely, unnervingly empty on the drive home. Naomi, our youngest, would be leaving next year. The thought was a constant, dull ache in my chest.

The house was quiet. Too quiet. The silence that I had once craved, that had been so rare and precious, was now a heavy, oppressive weight. I wandered through the empty rooms, the ghosts of my children's laughter echoing in the stillness. Lily's room, still smelling faintly of her perfume. Luca's, his books still lining the shelves. Charlotte's, a single, forgotten sock lying in the middle of the floor.

I found myself standing in the doorway of the living room, watching Nathan. He was sitting on the sofa, staring into the fireplace, a look of quiet contemplation on his face. He looked up as I entered, his eyes meeting mine, and in their depths, I saw my own sadness reflected.

I went to him, and he pulled me down onto his lap, his arms wrapping around me in a familiar, comforting embrace. I buried my face in his neck.

- (Kate) It's so quiet.
- (Nathan) I know.

My voice was a choked whisper, thick with unshed tears.

— (Kate) I miss them. I know it's silly, they're just off living their lives, as they should be. But the house feels so... empty. I feel a bit lonely.

He held me tighter, his hand stroking my hair.

— (Nathan) It's not silly. It's normal. We've spent the last two decades with a house full of noise and chaos. This... this is a big change.

I looked up at him, at the man who had been my constant, my rock, my everything for so many years. The man who had stood by me through everything, who had loved me at my worst and celebrated me at my best.

— (Kate) What are we going to do with all this quiet?

— (Nathan, a slow, gentle smile spreading across his face) I have a few ideas.

He leaned in and kissed me, a slow, tender kiss that was full of all the love and history we shared. It was a kiss that promised a new beginning, a new chapter in our story. The children were gone, but we were still here. Together, as I melted into his embrace.



#### *Decades Later*

The quiet that had once felt so oppressive had become a comfortable, familiar blanket. The years had softened the sharp edges of our empty nest, filling the silence not with loneliness, but with a deep, abiding peace. Our home, once a chaotic symphony of childhood, was now a quiet sanctuary for two.

The silver in Nathan's hair had long since overtaken the black, and my own hair was a matching shade of white. His handsome face was a roadmap of our life together, every line a memory, every wrinkle a shared laugh. My own reflection was a stranger I had grown to love, a woman who had lived, and loved, and lost, and had emerged, whole.

We were sitting on the porch swing, a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the old oak tree we had planted when Lily was born. The sun was setting, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. Nathan's hand, warm and familiar, was holding mine, his thumb stroking the back of it in a gesture as natural as breathing.

A lifetime had passed since the day I had met him, a lifetime of love, and laughter, and tears. A lifetime of raising four beautiful, strong, independent children who now had children of their own. Our house, once so quiet, was now often filled with the joyous chaos of grandchildren, a new generation to fill the rooms with occasional laughter.

I leaned my head on his shoulder, the familiar comfort of his presence a steady anchor in the ever-changing tides of time.

- (Kate) I was thinking today... about my life.  
About everything.
- (Nathan) And?
- (Kate) And I wouldn't change a thing. Not a single, stupid, reckless, beautiful thing. I don't regret leaving my old life behind. I don't regret the pain, the anger, the

years of confusion. Because it all led me to you. It all led me to this.

I looked out at the sprawling lawn, at the tire swing hanging from the oak tree, at the faint outline of the fort we had built for the kids so many years ago. I thought of our children, of their beautiful families, of the legacy of love we had created.

— (Kate) I used to be so afraid. Afraid of who I was, of what I was. Afraid of not being loved. But you... you taught me how to love myself. You gave me a family. You gave me a home. You gave me a life more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

A single, happy tear slipped down my cheek, and Nathan reached up to wipe it away, his touch as gentle as it had been the first time he had held me.

— (Nathan) You did all of that, Kate. I was just lucky enough to be along for the ride.

I smiled, a real, genuine smile that reached my eyes.

— (Kate) It's been a good ride.

— (Nathan) The best.

We sat in a comfortable silence, watching the last of the sun dip below the horizon. The first stars began to appear in the twilight sky, tiny, glittering diamonds scattered across a velvet canvas. A lifetime of memories washed over me, a warm, gentle tide. And in that moment, surrounded by the quiet beauty of our life, with the man I loved more than life itself by my side, I knew a

peace so profound, so complete, it felt like coming home.

The End