

*The clouds—dark clouds—gather.
The air scents of tension.
Cold heartbeats, imperfect,
Thump-pain on their way home.
But how can I go home
When are the walls carved?
The roads are wrong.
The sun sinks low.*

*The orange horizon—an artist
Painting loneliness.*

*I walk the long path of it.
I long for that scent;
that sweaty touch,
The sighs and groans.*

*The tears, once dried from weeping,
The pillows soaked again.*

*I run around the corner to the bench on the street where we used to sit.
Still, you are not there.*

*Only the mirage of your shadow.
The loud silence.
No humming of your songs.
They say time heals.
But why does healing take time?
~ Babu*

CHAPTER ONE

Anaya sat on the edge of the bed, as if the mattress would collapse under the weight of her thoughts. Her shoulders were hunched inward, tiny, and defensive. Both hands were covering her face, palms pressed against skin that felt too tight and exposed. Still, tears streamed through her fingers and fell to the floor, darkening the wood in uneven dots.

The room was silent in the way that only late nights can be: as if it were holding its breath.

The bedside stand sat faithfully beside her, its surface cluttered with reminders of a decision she had been debating for far too long. The bottle of pills sat there, half-opened, its cap tilted as if someone had interrupted it in mid-sentence. When the air shifted, a few tablets rattled softly, making a louder sound than necessary. Next to it was the letter, creased once or twice, with her signature at the bottom still too fresh and the ink slightly smudged where her hand had trembled.

The light from the hallway lamp was dim and yellow, casting tired shadows on the walls. They stretched and curled, like witnesses who had seen everything but remained silent. The small window above was partially closed, allowing a sliver of pale, cold moonlight to cross the floor, stopping just short of her feet.

Everything inside her chest vibrated at the same time.

She thought, *She didn't intend for it to become so overwhelming*. It was never one big thing, just a thousand small ones that kept piling up.

Her breath caught, and she inhaled as if relearning to breathe.

I really tried. I really tried. I stayed. I smiled even though it was easier to disappear. I reminded myself that tomorrow would make sense of today. However, the finish line is moving forward every day.

Her hands eventually dropped from her face. Her eyes were red, swollen, and glassy, indicating exhaustion rather than grief. She looked at the bottle and the letter as if they belonged to someone else—someone braver and more confident.

I'm so tired of explaining myself to people who don't listen—tired of being strong in rooms that quietly break me. I'm tired of surviving things I was never meant to go through alone.

Another tear fell, following the familiar path down her cheek.

If I leave, perhaps the noise will stop. Perhaps the pain will eventually loosen its grip. I can have a moment where nothing is expected of me.

The room seemed to get closer, the silence thickening and pressing against her ears. Even the clock on the wall had stopped ticking, or maybe she had simply stopped hearing it. Time seemed to stand still, as if the world was waiting for her to make a decision before daring to move forward.

Anaya curled her fingers around the hem of her shirt, clutching the fabric as proof that she was still alive. Still breathing, still aching.

And in that fleeting moment, between the letter and the pills, between despair and whatever came next, the night held her—not kindly, but honestly—as she sat trembling on the edge of herself.

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***** ***** *****

Charged.

Anger.

Terror.

Fear.

What if? Regret.

Nothing can be done now. It's all set.

~ lolo

CHAPTER TWO

The introductions formed a loose circle near the sales floor, with chairs crowded together and coffee cups in hand. Laughter drifted easily, without appearing forced or rehearsed. The sun poured in through the large windows, bold and unapologetic, making the morning seem later than it was. It was only ten a.m., but the day felt alive already.

Names and roles changed quickly.

"Hi, this is Byron from Enterprise Accounts."

"Lydia manages renewals. She'll save you time more than once."

"Sam is our numbers guy. If you need a forecast, he is your guy."

Each person shared a joke, a grin, and a casual welcome, making the room feel less like a work environment and more like a rhythm in motion. Anaya smiled when it was appropriate and nodded when their gazes met, her posture both attentive and relaxed.

Okay, she reminded herself. This feels... regular. Good, actually.

She listened intently, observing faces and tones and calculating how much space she could occupy among them. The comfort unsettled her slightly, but not negatively, like sunlight after too many cloudy days.

Don't overthink it. You're supposed to be here. They wouldn't have hired you otherwise.

The manager's voice broke through the chatter.

"Anaya, you will be joining one of our major accounts. You'll collaborate closely with Seth."

A tall man approached with an easy grin, as if the room had personally invited him to feel at ease there. He was lean, dark-skinned, and broad-shouldered without attempting to intimidate. His laughter was quick and warm, the kind that made others feel at ease without even realising it. However, when he looked at her, his eyes revealed something else. Not necessarily heaviness, but rather precision. The expression of someone who had earned his place inch by inch.

Oh, Anaya wondered. You've seen things.

Seth held out his hand.

"Welcome to the madness," he stated casually. "Don't be worried; we only cry on Mondays."

She laughed and shook his hand.

"That's comforting. I was concerned that I had missed orientation on emotional breakdowns."

"Nah, we'll ease you into those," he responded. "I'm Seth. I'll be your partner in crime on the account. Or your therapist. Depends on the quarter."

"I'm Anaya," she said, her smile widening. "I appreciate the warning."

As the team broke up into groups, Seth pointed to an empty desk nearby. "Come, I'll show you where the magic, or chaos, happens."

They sat, and he opened the account dashboard, fingers moving with practiced ease.

"This is a big client," he explained. "High volume, high expectations, and limited patience. They will put you to the test, but they are well worth it. Rule one: never overpromise. Rule two: document everything. It did not happen unless it was written down."

Anaya nodded, already jotting down notes. "You make it sound manageable."

"It is," he replied, glancing at her. "Especially if you listen more than you speak. Being loud is not a requirement in sales. It's about being sharp."

She met his gaze briefly, taken aback by the calm certainty in his tone.

"Any questions so far?" he asked.

"Just one," she replied. "How long did it take you to become this good?"

He chuckled and leaned back. "I'm still working on 'good', but I know what not to do now."

Anaya felt something strange settle in her chest as he instructed her on tactics, how to read client hesitation, when to push and when to pull back.

She realised that he does not perform knowledge. He carries it.

He lacked arrogance and did not feel the need to assert himself. Just confidence gained through practice, mistakes made, and lessons learned. He spoke as if he had failed loudly once and decided not to waste the pain.

This is what competence looks like, she thought. Quiet. Efficient. Earned.

When he joked about a disastrous pitch that somehow turned into a win, she laughed again, but this time sincerely.

She admitted silently that she expected to learn a lot from him.

And perhaps I landed exactly where I was supposed to be.

By early afternoon, Anaya had been led to her workspace, a small corner desk on the seventh floor next to a large window. It wasn't particularly large, but it was clean in a deliberate manner. A pristine white desk. A black swivel chair that squeaked softly as she sat. A narrow row of drawers beneath the tabletop, their handles cool against her fingertips. Her monitor was facing inward, towards the sales floor, and the window on her right side was wide and unobstructed.

Seth's desk was right next to hers, separated only by a low partition that barely reached shoulder height when they were seated. Close enough to share a glance. Close enough to overhear each other's sighs.

The office felt alive around them.

Keyboards clattered in erratic rhythms, some frantic, others contemplative. Phones rang in short, sharp bursts before being silenced by practiced greetings and lower voices. A printer hummed, coughed, and spat out pages behind Seth. The chairs rolled and came to a halt. Someone chuckled near the coffee machine. The air conditioner whispered steadily overhead, carrying a faint aroma of paper, cologne, and warm electronics.

Her window provided a view of the city in layers.

The highway below pulsed with movement, cars streaming in both directions like restless veins, their colours blurring in the midday sun. Buses drove in and out of lanes. Motorcycles darted ahead impatiently. In the distance, the skyline rose with confident lines of glass and steel, catching and reflecting light in the sky. Promising messages were displayed on billboards. The construction cranes hovered like patient insects. Life, busy and unapologetic, continued without interruption.

Anaya was thinking about the seventh floor. High enough to feel detached. Close enough to feel like you still fit in.

Seth leaned back in his chair and stretched after their account briefing. "So," he said, tapping the side of his monitor, "welcome to your command centre." She smiled as she ran her hand across the desk.

"I like it. It's... quiet."

"For now," he replied with a grin. "Give it an hour."

They both stared at their screens, a soft glow illuminating their faces. Minutes went by. Then more.

Anaya sensed it before she saw it: the subtle sensation of being watched. She lifted her gaze just in time to see Seth look over. Their eyes met.

Her response was immediate and unguarded.

She quickly returned to her screen, lowering her chin as heat filled her face. Her fingers froze on the mouse as she pretended to scroll through a page she'd already read twice. She heard Seth chuckle from the corner of her ear, a low, amused sound barely audible above the office hum.

"Are you okay over there?" he asked casually.

She nodded quickly, without meeting his gaze, and her lips formed a small, polite smile.

"Yes. All good."

"Alright," he replied, still smiling to himself.

"Just checking."

Several minutes later, it happened again. Another quick glance. Another unintentional meeting of eyes. This time, he raised a playful brow. She quickly bowed her head, her shoulders tightening slightly as if she'd been caught doing something she couldn't justify.

He chuckled. "I promise," he said in a low voice, "I don't bite. Unless it's commission season."

She let out a soft laugh, her gaze still fixed on the screen. "Noted."

The office kept a steady rhythm around them, with phones ringing, someone tapping a pen repeatedly, and the distant ding of a lift opening and closing. Outside, a truck honked faintly but persistently, reminding her of the world beyond the glass.

Anaya dared to look out the window again, this time grounding herself in the city's movement. The skyline steadied her. The traffic reminded her that everything was moving forward, even if it wasn't quite sure where it was going.

Seth resumed his work next to her, but every now and then, she sensed his presence in the quiet space they shared between keystrokes. She smiled to herself, small and private, and her fingers moved confidently across the keyboard.

Maybe she thought this corner, this view, is where something begins.

CHAPTER THREE

Anaya sat motionless at her desk, the early light filtering through the tall window beside her and bathing the room in a pale, forgiving glow. Her computer screen hummed softly, bearing witness to the chaos of her thoughts. Five tabs were open at the top: research articles, a half-written email, the company dashboard, a weather page she couldn't recall opening, and an empty document that blinked expectantly.

She wasn't reading any of them.

Her gaze was drawn to something beyond the glass, beyond the buildings across the street, beyond the morning itself. The office was still half-asleep when Seth walked in, loosening his tie with one hand and holding his coffee with the other. He paused in the middle of a step.

Anaya?

She had never arrived so early.

A slow smile curved across his lips, half amused, half intrigued. He looked at her from a distance for a moment. She didn't stir. Didn't blink. Didn't notice the soft thud of the door closing behind him.

He approached quietly, taking care not to disturb the fragile state in which she appeared to be suspended. He drew up beside her desk and followed her gaze to the window, but all he saw was traffic and a restless sky.

"Morning," he said gently. There was no response.

His brow furrowed, not in irritation, but in concern. He leaned slightly to look at her screen. The tabs were arranged like abandoned thoughts. Nothing cohesive. Nothing finished.

His eyes shifted downward.

A yellow sticky note lay beside her keyboard, its ink slightly smudged at the edges, as if her fingers had lingered there too long. He picked it up carefully, almost reverently. Her handwriting curved delicately across the page.

*At the corner, no banner.
Just a charmer.
Or my imagination, I wonder.*

He read it once.

Then again.

Something unreadable flashed across his face. Curiosity first, followed by recognition. A quiet realisation that he had not anticipated the change in her over the previous few days.

"Poetry before 8 a.m.?" he mused. She stirred.

Anaya blinked. Once. Twice. As if returning from a faraway place. Her head slowly turned towards him, and for a brief moment, confusion washed over her features before awareness returned.

"Seth." Her voice was faint and slightly hoarse. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I noticed," he said, holding the note between his fingers. His eyes met hers, steady and not accusatory. "You seemed far away."

Her gaze fell to the sticky note in his hand. A flush spread up her neck.

"You weren't supposed to see that."

"Why not?" he asked lightly, but there was nothing light about the way he studied her. "It's good."

She shook her head, reaching for it. "It's nothing. Just scribbles."

He didn't let go immediately. Their fingers brushed. The contact was brief, possibly accidental, but neither withdrew immediately.

"Is it?" he asked quietly. "So, you think I'm a charmer?" He teased subtly. But beneath it, something else. Something sharper. Anaya's lips parted. Her composure faltered for a fraction of a second.

"It's just a line," she explained, reclaiming the note and placing it face down beside her keyboard. "You're reading too much into it."

Seth leaned against the edge of her desk and folded his arms loosely. "I usually do."

Time seemed to crawl. The office lights flickered overhead. The world was officially awake. Something remained suspended between them. Unfinished. Unnamed.

He looked at her again, this time with a gentler expression. "You arrived early."

"You did, too."

"I always do."

She didn't respond. Instead, she minimised the blank document on her screen and clicked aimlessly between tabs while pretending to be productive. He took another look at her before straightening up.

"Well," he said, his voice softer now, "if your imagination is working so hard before breakfast, we might actually impress the client today."

That earned him the smallest smile. Barely there. But real. And as he walked to his desk, he couldn't stop replaying the verse in his head.

No banner. Just a charmer.

He wondered.

Was he standing at the corner? Or had he arrived too late?

The office was completely awake now. The phones rang intermittently. The keyboards clicked with urgency. Conversations were conducted in restrained corporate tones.

Anaya attempted to refocus on her screen.

"Morning, team."

The voice was calm, controlled, and confident. Heads turned.

Jessy stood in front of the department office as if she owned it. Tailored navy blazer. Structured heels. Tablet tucked under her arm. Her posture alone could have secured her a promotion. Jessy wasn't easily overlooked. Actually, it was difficult to ignore her.

She carried herself with the confident poise of someone who is used to being watched. Her face was softly plump, giving her an almost disarming warmth that contrasted with her intimidating office reputation. A light complexion reflected the overhead glow, giving her skin a quiet radiance that colleagues frequently envied but rarely admitted aloud.

Her smile arrived unexpectedly and refused to go unnoticed: wide, sensual, and bright enough to temporarily halt conversation. When she smiled fully, she revealed a striking set of white teeth separated by a small upper gap, which made the expression more memorable than imperfect. It was the type of smile that people remembered long after the meetings had ended.

Jessy dressed with purpose, choosing tailored silhouettes that accentuated rather than concealed her generous curves. Nothing about her appearance was an accident. Every detail seemed designed to reinforce her quiet authority. It was no surprise that she frequented the kitchen during coffee breaks.

Some people admired her confidence. Others speculated on her rapid rise. A few people tried unsuccessfully not to stare as she passed by. Naturally, Jessy was aware of this. She moved through the office as if she understood the impact she had and saw no reason to diminish it.

Seth greeted Jessica with an easy smile. That smile did not go unnoticed.

Jessy's gaze shifted briefly to Anaya before settling on Seth. "You arrived early."

"So is everyone today," Seth said lightly.

Jessy stepped forward, her heels clicking with deliberate rhythm. She put a folder on Seth's desk. "The manager has just reassigned the Kairo account." She paused. "To me."

Of course he did. Several colleagues exchanged knowing looks. "That's a big one," Seth commented.

"It is." She smiled softly, satisfied. "He says it needs a specific... finesse." Her gaze shifted, eventually settling on Anaya.

"And you must be the newest addition."

"Anaya," she replied calmly, holding out her hand.

Jessy took it with a strong grip. The pressure was measured. A silent evaluation. "Jessy. Senior Account Lead."

The title was chosen with purpose. "I heard," Anaya said with a polite smile.

Jessy's lips curved slightly. "I'm sure you have." The air shifted, barely noticeable but lingering. Seth coughed and cleared his throat. "Anaya has been assisting with the preliminary analytics for the Westbridge file."

Jessy's eyebrow lifted. "Already?"

"She's good," Seth added.

Jessy's heartbeat quickened. Jessy looked at him longer than necessary.

"I'm sure she is."

The compliment didn't land as one. Anaya felt a subtle tightening beneath civility.

"Well," Jessy continued smoothly, turning back to Seth, "if you're available later, I'd like to hear your thoughts on the Kairo projections privately."

The word lingered. Seth nodded, unaware of the undercurrent. "Sure." Jessy adjusted her blazer. "Good."

As she walked away, her expression changed for a split second, and the composed mask thinning. Anaya noticed. For the first time, she wondered whether the verse she had scribbled that morning had been foolish.

He must be quite a charmer.

Perhaps she wasn't the only one who wondered. Jessy cast a single glance back across the room. This time, it wasn't imagination.

Later in the afternoon, the glass-walled office at the far end of the corridor had transformed into its own small island. Outside, a low hum of conversation filtered through the door, punctuated by the occasional ripple of laughter. Not overly loud or inappropriate. Just enough to be noticed.

Jessy sat at the oval table, one leg gracefully crossed over the other, the tablet resting on her knee. Seth leaned back in his chair opposite her, sleeves slightly rolled, his expression thoughtful but relaxed, indicating that he was not easily rattled.

"You're underestimating the margin," Jessy commented, tapping the screen. "If we increase the premium tier, they will bite."

"They're conservative," Seth responded evenly. "If you push too hard, they might retreat." Jessy smiled slowly and deliberately. "That's why you allowed me to do the pushing."

He laughed quietly.

Outside, a pair of junior associates passed by, exchanging looks. Then the doorknob turned.

The manager, a bulky, plump man who was always slightly out of breath, pushed open the door and poked his head inside.

He paused.

Jessy's confident gaze met his, firm and unwavering. Seth turned his head more slowly, his familiar aloof expression settling on his features.

"Both of you are here?" The manager enquired, surprised yet pleased. Jessy nodded, partially smiling. "Projection alignment."

"That's fantastic," he exclaimed, stepping fully into the room. His eyes shone with something resembling pride. "I enjoy initiative."

His eyes shifted between them, calculating.

"I'd like to add someone else," he continued. "Her contributions are quite... unravelling."

Jessy raised an eyebrow slightly at the choice of words. The manager motioned to the hallway. A slender silhouette waited behind the frosted glass. Seth straightened unconsciously.

The door opened wider.

Anaya stepped in.

The air changed for a second.

She appeared composed, but there was a slight hesitation in the way her eyes adjusted to the surroundings. She took in Jessy first. Then Seth. Jessy's smile did not falter.

"Oh," she said smoothly. "Of course."

The manager clapped his hands once. "Anaya's analysis of Westbridge was excellent. A fresh perspective. I believe this trio has the potential to deliver something truly exceptional."

Trio.

The word felt heavier than it was intended to.

Anaya approached the table and carefully placed her notebook down. "I didn't realise this was a strategy session."

"It is now," Jessy replied lightly.

Seth's gaze lingered on Anaya a moment longer than professional decorum required. "We were just reviewing positioning."

"I read the Kairo background brief," Anaya explained, her voice steady. "They are diversifying into secondary markets. They will be more likely to respond if we position it as a growth partnership rather than a premium upsell."

A minute passed.

Jessy's fingers stilled on her tablet. "That's... interesting," Jessy said.

The manager's face lit up. "You see? This is what I mean. Unravelling."

"Unconventional," Jessy clarified gently, her tone remaining polished. "We'll put it to the test, however."

Anaya met her gaze. Not confrontational. Not submissive. Just steady. Seth watched the exchange with quiet interest. Two different energies. Jessy commanded rooms. Anaya unsettled them.

"Good," the manager said, clearly proud of himself. "I anticipate synergy." He exited, closing the door behind him.

Silence lingered.

Jessy leaned back in her chair slowly. "It appears that we are a team." Her smile broadened in a brilliant flash.

Seth loosely folded his arms. "Should be productive." Anaya flipped open her notebook. "It will be."

However, beneath the civility, currents were shifting. Jessy had felt at ease and confident. Now there was a variable she hadn't accounted for. For the first time, she felt a tightening beneath her calm exterior.

Not fear. Competition.

Seth cast a glance across the table at them. The room suddenly felt much smaller, for reasons he couldn't fully explain.

Later that evening, Anaya lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it made slow, indifferent circles. Her father's voice echoed with unsettling clarity.

"You think life is a playground, Anaya?" he had said, hands clasped behind his back like a headmaster pronouncing a verdict. "Education is not for decoration. It is for elevation."

"I know that, Dad."

"Do you? Drifting is not a plan. Passion does not pay the bills." She had suppressed her anger at the time.

"I don't just want to climb ladders someone else built." Silence.

His expression did not convey anger. It was...disappointment, and she could tell. "You are too intelligent to gamble your future on 'flow'."

She rolled onto her side and hugged her pillow. He had sacrificed too much to raise her. Long hours. Strict discipline. A structured life. He believed education was salvation, the key to many locked doors. She believed life was an exploration. Diving into the flow and riding the undertow.

The schism between them had grown gradually over the years, not due to a lack of love, but due to an excess of expectations. Her phone buzzed softly beside her—it was a work message. Her stomach tightened, irrationally hoping for Seth. It wasn't. She exhaled.

"Maybe I'm drifting," she murmured into the darkness.

Perhaps she was simply afraid of taking a path that wasn't entirely her own.

Seth leaned against the railing of his small balcony, Nairobi's city lights blinking in the background. He was scrolling through his contacts.

Mum ♥

His thumb hovered. He hadn't told her yet. Regarding the desire for something unique. About feeling... unsettled.

Inside, the apartment was quiet. Too quiet. He could almost hear her voice, as if she was standing beside him. "My son", she would say gently, "peace first. Money second."

She had raised five children with hands that never seemed to rest—a woman who had survived the humiliation of a polygamous marriage without allowing bitterness to poison her sons.

She taught him dignity and restraint. He learned to work twice as hard and complain half as much. He admired her strength, but he feared being trapped in survival mode like she had been. He wanted more than just stability. He sought meaning.

And lately...

His mind drifted to a quiet desk by the window, to a girl who wrote poetry before 8 a.m. He exhaled sharply and locked his phone.

Certainly not tonight.

He wasn't ready to tell his mother that his future seemed less certain, or that it might include someone he hadn't planned for. The sky above him was wide and indifferent. For the first time in years, Seth felt something change.

Not dramatic. Not loud.

Just enough to unsettle certainty.

And somewhere across the city, Anaya lay awake too, circling questions they dared not to ask aloud.

Yet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anaya sat at her small study table near the window, laptop open and a mug of untouched tea cooling beside her. The flat was surprisingly quiet. A kind of silence that felt like permission. At least she wouldn't have to deal with Jessy's piercing gaze today. Jessy's eyes had an ability to measure, weigh, and calculate.

And then, there was Seth.

What was with his constant stares?

She exhaled sharply, shaking her head at herself.

No.

She was reading too much into it.

He probably stared at everyone.

The file she had initiated began to download slowly, with the progress bar crawling across the screen. She leaned back in her chair, her fingers resting lightly on her lap.

And just like that, her thoughts shifted.

Her father's laughter echoed in memory, deep and full, rare but distinct. When she was little, he would lift her onto his shoulders. He insisted on checking her homework, even after long workdays. His eyes softened when she received her first academic award.

Despite being one of three children, she was always aware that she was his favourite. Not because he said it. But because he expected more from her.

Is that why he's so hard on me?

She stared at the ceiling.

He should cut her some slack on expectations. She had met them for years. Top grades, scholarships, and carefully chosen internships, like stepping stones laid by someone else's design.

It was choking her.

Wasn't it?

Perhaps this restlessness was simply rebellion. The kind that blooms quietly when freedom feels scarce.

Her phone buzzed on the desk. She jolted upright.

The screen lit up.

Dad.

Her heart skipped, not from fear exactly but from the weight that came with his name.

Why was he calling?

She hesitated, her thumb hovering over the screen before finally answering.

“Dad!” she said brightly, a half-smile forming almost instinctively. “Hello, Daddy.”

“Anaya”, his voice came through, steady and warm. “You sound surprised.”

“I am. You don’t usually call mid-morning.”

“I can’t call my daughter?”

She smiled properly now. “You can.”

There was a pause, not uncomfortable, just searching. “How are you?” he asked.

“I’m good. Actually...” She straightened slightly. “I started a new job.”

“Yes, your mother mentioned.”

“It’s good, Dad. Better than good.” Her voice brightened. “I’m already working on one of the key accounts. First week.”

“Hmm.” A soft hum of approval. “That is impressive.”

She could hear it: the pride carefully tucked beneath composure.

“They like my input,” she continued, unable to stop herself from adding, “The manager added me to a strategy session yesterday.”

“That is what happens when preparation meets opportunity,” he said. There it was. The proverb. The “*I am proud of you*” philosophy.

She rolled her eyes affectionately. “I know, Dad.”

“I hope you understand,” he continued, tone shifting just slightly, “these opportunities are not accidents. You must build on them. Be deliberate. Do not allow distractions.”

Her smile thinned. “Dad...”

“I am only saying this because—”

“If you start lecturing me,” she interrupted, gentle but firm, “I will hang up.” A silence followed.

Then, to her surprise, he laughed. “Stubborn girl.”

“You raised me.”

Another pause. This one was a little softer. He said quietly, “Even when I sound... firm.” Her throat tightened unexpectedly.

“I know.”

“But,” he added, hesitation creeping in, “I still worry that you are trying to outrun something instead of running toward it.”

She looked down at her hands.

“Maybe I just want to figure things out my way.”

“And if your way leads you astray?”

“Then I’ll learn.”

He sighed, not out of frustration but out of reluctant acceptance. “You have always been strong-willed.”

“And you’ve always been impossible,” she teased lightly. “Hm.”

They both knew the conversation could again tilt toward expectation, toward warning, toward the familiar battlefield of ambition versus autonomy.

Neither of them pushed.

After a few more casual exchanges, the call wound down. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

“You too, Dad.”

The line disconnected.

Anaya remained still, phone in hand.

He loved her fiercely. He didn’t know how to love her without steering her.

The room felt quieter after the call ended. Too quiet.

Anaya placed her phone face down on the desk and sat for a moment, staring at nothing in particular. The download notification chimed softly on her laptop, but she ignored it. Her chest felt tight, not from anger, but from restraint.

She reached for the small notepad that lay beside her keyboard. The same one she carried to work. The same one Seth had discovered that morning. She flipped the page and let the words fall without overthinking.

Pace.

A beautiful face.

A role that’s placed me in the race. The manager’s grace.

My senior loves the chase.

She paused, the pen hovering over the page.

Jessy’s smile flashed across her mind. Seth’s steady gaze followed. She continued.

This project might unravel the puzzle or quietly close the case.

She leaned back, rereading it.

The race.

Was it about performance or recognition?

About Seth?

Or about proving, once again, that she could live up to expectations? Her fingers traced the last line.

Unravel the puzzle. Or close the case.

Either way, something was shifting. And for the first time, she wasn't sure whether she was running toward something...

Or being pulled into it.

Across the city, her father stared at his own phone a moment longer than necessary. Both of them were holding on to emotions; neither was willing to yield. And somewhere beneath pride, beneath rebellion, beneath all the words unsaid, they were more alike than either cared to admit.

CHAPTER FIVE

The trio fell into a rhythm faster than anyone expected. What began as polite collaboration quickly proved to be far more layered. Jessy was sharp and instinctive. She saw angles others missed.

She understood client psychology almost theatrically, anticipating objections before they formed. Anaya, however, was surgical.

She dissected numbers with unnerving clarity. Patterns bent to her scrutiny. What Jessy intuited, Anaya proved.

Seth sat between brilliance and fire.

Day one was structured. Day two turned into friction.

“Your premium-tier projection is too optimistic,” Anaya said, eyes fixed on her screen. Jessy didn’t look up. “It’s aspirational.”

“It’s risky.”

“It’s persuasive.”

Anaya finally lifted her gaze. “Only if the client trusts the framing I suggested.” “And they will,” Jessy replied coolly. “If we control the narrative.”

Seth leaned back in his chair, watching the exchange like a referee who wasn’t entirely impartial. “They both work,” he said at last. “Different levers.”

Jessy’s jaw tightened slightly.

Anaya returned to her spreadsheet.

On the third day, the presentation was due. Something unexpected happened. Their combined model, Jessy’s aggressive positioning layered over Anaya’s grounded analysis, created something neither could have built alone. The projections were bold. The risk buffers were thoughtful. The market expansion narrative felt... compelling.

Unravelling, indeed.

Even Seth had to admit it.

“You two are dangerous,” he muttered at one point, half amused, half unsettled. Jessy smirked.

Anaya didn’t.

The boardroom air felt heavier. The manager sat at the head of the table, fingers interlocked, visibly pleased with himself for assembling what he clearly believed was a dream team.

Jessy stood to present.

She owned the room from the start. Her voice was steady, her smile deliberate, and her confidence effortless. The slides moved with precision. Her explanation of market-penetration strategies was commanding.

Seth watched her with admiration. She was built for rooms like this. Then came the projections slide.

Jessy gestured toward the screen. “As you’ll see, our premium-tier adoption rate—” Anaya’s eyes narrowed.

The phrasing was off.

It implied certainty where they had agreed to signal probability. Jessy continued.

“—positions the client for a 28% revenue increase within the first two quarters.” Anaya felt it before she fully processed the statement.

That wasn’t the agreed framing.

She leaned forward slightly. “Projected increase,” she interjected gently. “Based on conservative adoption modelling.”

The room stilled. Jessy paused.

A fractional pause.

Then she smiled. “Projected, yes. Though our scenario mapping suggests a strong likelihood.” Anaya rose halfway from her seat and walked toward the screen. “If I may.”

The manager’s eyebrows lifted, amused. “Go ahead.”

Anaya pointed to the lower quadrant of the slide. “We layered behavioural trend data over the expansion markets. The 28% projection holds if client onboarding maintains a steady 60% retention rate, which is achievable if the positioning is framed as a growth partnership rather than a premium upsell.”

Jessy watched her closely. Anaya’s tone wasn’t combative. It was precise.

Seth felt the tension ripple across the table.

Two different styles. One was commanding, and the other was convincing. Somehow, together, they were seamless.

Jessy regained control smoothly. “Exactly. Which is why our dual framing strategy allows flexibility without compromising ambition.”

The manager leaned back in his chair, visibly entertained. “This,” he said, gesturing between them, “is what I call synergy.” The presentation ended with nods.

Not polite nods. Impressed ones.

When the final slide faded, the room felt charged. The results were undeniable.

Bold.

Strategic.

Unravelling in the best way.

As they stepped out of the boardroom, the manager clapped Seth on the shoulder. “Good instincts for bringing them together.”

Seth almost laughed. He hadn’t brought them together. They had collided.

The hallway was quieter now. Jessy adjusted her blazer slowly. Then she turned to Anaya. “That was smooth,” she said.

“Correcting you?” Anaya asked, unsure whether to brace herself. Jessy’s lips curled.

“Complementing me.” A pause.

Then, in a lower, softer voice, she added, “You’re sharper than I anticipated.” Anaya studied her.

“So are you.”

Jessy stepped closer, lowering her voice.

“In this office,” she said casually, “it’s better to have the enemy close.” Anaya’s brow lifted. “Enemy?”

Jessy smiled wider, the small upper gap flashing.

“I’m kidding.”

Maybe.

She extended her hand. “Coffee later?”

Anaya hesitated only a second before shaking it. “Sure.”

Across the hallway, Seth watched them. For the first time, he wasn’t sure whether he was witnessing an alliance or the beginning of a very elegant war. Inside, something shifted in Jessy. Competition still lived there. So did curiosity. And somewhere beneath it all—

A quiet decision.

If she couldn’t eliminate the variable... she would study it. Closely.

The applause had barely settled in Seth’s mind when his inbox chimed. He stayed seated in the boardroom for a moment after everyone dispersed, scrolling absently until a subject line caught his eye.

From: Westbridge – Primary Contact

Subject: Urgent Clarification

He opened it.

I need to finalise the premium and marketing reach.

Short. Direct. Pressing.

Seth exhaled slowly through his nose.

Of course.

He glanced toward the hallway where Jessy and Anaya were speaking in hushed tones. He stood and stepped out.

“Anaya.”

She turned, her expression still carrying the faint afterglow of the presentation. “Yes?”

He gestured toward his desk. “Can we talk for a second?”

Jessy’s eyes flicked between them before she turned toward the elevators, phone already in hand. Seth lowered his voice once Anaya stood beside him. “Westbridge just emailed. They want to finalise the premium structure and marketing reach.”

Her shoulders straightened instinctively. “That was fast.”

“They’re interested,” he said. “Which means we can’t afford ambiguity.” He studied her face for a moment.

The presentation had demanded more from her than she’d let on. He’d seen the slight tremor in her hand as she corrected Jessy. The way she’d held herself steady afterwards.

“We’ll have to schedule a meeting overnight,” he continued. “Our account needs urgent work. And...” he hesitated, softening his tone. “I can see the presentation weighed you down a bit. Is that okay with you?”

For a moment, she looked at him. He noticed things too easily. Anaya sighed—not dramatically. Just the exhale that releases pride.

“Okay,” she said, giving a small nod. “I’ll schedule it for ten.” “Ten works.”

She offered a thin, professional, controlled smile. “I’ll refine the projection notes before then.” “Thank you.”

She turned and walked back to her desk. The office was thinning. The hum was quieter. Conversations faded into elevator chimes and departing footsteps. Anaya carefully shut down her system, one window at a time. The screen’s glow dimmed. Her shoulders dropped slightly. She slipped her notebook into her bag, the one with the scribbled verses tucked between pages, zipped it closed, and stood.

One productive day, she thought.

Quite the drama, though.

Jessy's confident smile. The manager's amusement. Seth's steady gaze. She shook off the thoughts and slung her bag over her shoulder. As she walked past Seth's desk, she paused. "Ten," she reminded him.

"I'll send the invite," he replied without looking up, already typing.

She nodded once and headed toward the exit. The glass doors closed behind her with a soft sigh. Seth remained.

The office lights above his desk cast long shadows across the floor. He reread the Westbridge email, then began drafting the meeting request carefully and precisely. Outside, the city slipped into the evening. By then, it would no longer be just about projections.

Later in the evening, Seth and Anaya were engrossed in premium projections and potential adoptions by the client. By half past eleven, they were down to the details and concluded the meeting. The call should have ended ten minutes ago.

"Alright," Seth said, glancing at the final slide on his screen. "That should cover the revisions."
"Mm-hmm," Anaya replied.

Neither clicked *Leave*.

The blue glow from their laptops lit their rooms—two separate spaces linked by a thin digital thread.

"You can log off," Seth added lightly. "It's late." "So can you."

A faint smile touched his lips.

There was a pause. Not awkward. Just unguarded. "You always work this late?" he asked.

"Only when I'm avoiding something."

The honesty slipped out before she could filter it.

Seth leaned back in his chair. "What are you avoiding?"

She hesitated.

"My dad," she admitted.

On the other end, he went quiet, not dismissive but attentive.

"He called me the other day," she continued. "He's proud. Always proud. But it comes with... conditions."

"Expectations?" Seth asked.

"Blueprints," she corrected softly. "He built a future for me before I knew I could choose it." The words hung in the space between them.

"He sounds invested," Seth said carefully.

“He is.” Her voice softened. “He believes education is salvation. That discipline guarantees success. Drifting is dangerous.”

“And you?”

“I don’t want to drift,” she said. “I just don’t want to suffocate.” Silence again, but this one felt heavier. Seth exhaled slowly. “My mom is the opposite,” he said at last.

Anaya shifted slightly, resting her chin on her hand. “She raised five of us,” he continued. “Mostly alone.” She didn’t interrupt.

“He was there,” Seth added, meaning his father. “Technically. But polygamy spreads presence thin.” There was no bitterness in his tone—just a fact.

“She never complained. Never let us feel less than.” A faint chuckle. “She used to say, *'We may not have abundance, but we have dignity.'*”

Anaya smiled at that. “She sounds strong.”

“She is.” His voice dropped. “Strong enough that I sometimes feel I don’t have the right to be... uncertain.”

“About what?”

“My future.”

The admission surprised even him.

“I have stability,” he went on. “A solid job. Respect. But sometimes I wonder whether I chose it... or ran toward what felt safer.”

Anaya’s chest tightened at the familiarity of that feeling.

“I think,” she said gently, “when you grow up with sacrifice, you feel guilty for wanting more than survival.” He went still.

“That’s exactly it.”

For the first time since the call began, neither of them pretended to be composed professionals. They were just two people shaped by strong parents. Two adults are still trying to honour their parents’ love without becoming trapped by it.

“My dad thinks I’m trying to outrun structure,” Anaya said softly.

“My mom thinks I overthink peace,” Seth replied.

A quiet laugh escaped her.

“Do you ever feel,” she asked slowly, “as if you’re living for their approval even when they’re not in the room?”

“All the time.”

The words were immediate. Certain. Something shifted. Not attraction; recognition. “Maybe,” Seth said after a while, “we’re not rebelling.”

“No?”

“Maybe we’re just trying to build something that feels like ours.” Anaya swallowed.

“That sounds terrifying.”

“It is.”

“But also freeing?”

“Maybe.”

They slipped into a comfortable silence—the kind that doesn’t beg to be broken. Outside Seth’s balcony, the city hummed faintly. In Anaya’s apartment, the clock ticked steadily toward midnight.

“I’m glad you stayed on,” she said at last.

“Me too.”

Another pause. Lighter now. “Goodnight, Anaya.”

“Goodnight, Seth.”

Neither ended the call immediately. When they finally did, the rooms felt less empty. Across the city, two children of strength lay awake—not burdened tonight, but understood. And that, quietly, was far more intimate than romance.

CHAPTER SIX

Jessy chose a café two streets from the office. It was quiet enough for conversation yet polished enough to suit her aesthetic. Soft amber light poured over marble-topped tables, bathing everything in a comforting glow. The café had a faint aroma of roasted espresso beans and warm vanilla, layered with the buttery scent of fresh pastries behind a curved glass display. The city's muted rhythm was framed by floor-to-ceiling windows, with rain tracing slow, deliberate paths down them like private conversations. Gold-rimmed mirrors stretched the space, reflecting quiet sophistication, with muted jazz humming through hidden speakers, ceramic cups clinking lightly against saucers, and the low murmur of conversations kept at a civilised volume.

The waiters and waitresses glided across the polished floor with the precision of a practised waltz. Their footsteps were measured, unhurried, and almost silent. Black aprons, neatly tied at their waists, swayed subtly as they moved between tables, balancing trays with effortless grace. They leaned just enough to refill water glasses without disrupting conversation, withdrew before laughter could fully bloom, and appeared to anticipate needs before they were expressed. Their choreography gave the café its own rhythm, one that was controlled, elegant, and composed, much like a stage where nothing chaotic was allowed to emerge.

Anaya noticed Jessy remove her blazer the moment they sat down, as though shedding armour.

"Do you take a cappuccino?" Jessy asked.

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Jessy smirked. "You answer as you analyse." Anaya laughed softly.

"Occupational hazard."

They ordered.

Between them, the small round table resembled more of a negotiated border than furniture. Their smiles came a little late and lasted a little too long. Every sentence was tested before being released, polished in midair, and carefully placed between them, as if it could detonate if mishandled. Even their laughter was measured, soft, and controlled, never erupting into wild abandon. They made eye contact for just long enough to convey confidence, then looked away quickly enough to avoid surrender. It was diplomacy masquerading as casual conversation.

Their bodies mirrored the restraint. Jessy sat up straight, ankle crossed precisely over her knee, fingers curled elegantly around her cup, as if anchoring herself in place. Anaya leaned forward at regular intervals, then back again, recalibrating the distance without appearing to. When one revealed something slightly personal, the other responded in equal measure, no more, no less. Compliments were neutral. Curiosity was subtle. Neither crossed into territory the other had not first entered. It was a quiet duel of awareness, with each woman mapping the invisible lines the other had drawn, both determined not to appear threatened while also refusing to concede ground.

For a moment, the conversation centred on safe topics like office politics, workload, and the manager's dramatic vocabulary.

Then Jessy surprised her.

“You handled yourself well in there,” she said, stirring her coffee. “Most new hires don’t interrupt me.”

Anaya blinked. “I wasn’t trying to interrupt.”

“I know.” Jessy’s tone softened. “That’s what made it... impressive.” There was no edge in her voice.

Only honesty.

Anaya studied her more closely now. Without the structured blazer and boardroom posture, Jessy appeared younger and less intimidating. The sharp edges became softer up close. A loose strand of hair had slipped out of her carefully arranged bun, curling against her cheek as if it, too, had grown tired of discipline. Fine lines at the corners of her eyes, barely visible in the fluorescent office light, revealed themselves as a result of long nights and increased responsibilities. Her lipstick had faded to a more natural shade, and her jaw had relaxed, allowing her mouth to settle into a thoughtful, almost vulnerable line. The armour was gone, and in its place sat a woman who had learned composure the hard way.

The way she held her cup with both hands, as if drawing warmth from it, reflected a quiet resignation. Acceptance, rather than defeat. Acceptance of someone who has weathered storms; no one praised her for it. Her gaze, when it drifted to the rain tracing the window, carried the weight of memories filed away, decisions made, and unspoken sacrifices. This was not the intimidating strategist who oversaw conference rooms. This was the woman who had rebuilt herself multiple times. Unguarded. Unfiltered. A survivor who had mistaken strength for solitude and solitude for safety.

"I thought you hated me," Anaya confessed lightly.

Jessy laughed openly. A full-bodied, unfiltered sound that drew attention two tables away. It rang warmly against the café’s amber-lit walls, overpowering the soft jazz and careful clink of porcelain. Even one of the servers gave a faint smile as she resumed her quiet glide across the floor. Anaya blinked, momentarily stunned. She had never heard Jessy make that sound. She had never seen her tilt her head back slightly, eyes crinkling without thought, shoulders relaxing as if an invisible weight had slipped off. The woman across from her seemed suddenly unfamiliar in the most disarming way, not intimidating, not composed, but alive and startlingly free.

“I don’t hate you.” She paused. “You unsettled me.”

“Why?”

Jessy held her gaze.

“Because you’re good. And because Seth notices.” There it was.

Direct.

Anaya felt warmth creep up her neck. “I haven’t—”

“I know,” Jessy cut in gently. “You’re not scheming.” Her fingers traced the rim of her cup. “I just don’t like losing ground.”

Something in her expression shifted for a moment. Anaya leaned forward. "You don't seem like someone who loses."

Jessy smiled faintly. "I don't."

But the confidence didn't fully reach her eyes.

Over the next week, coffee became a familiar ritual. Familiarity turned into confession. Anaya learned that Jessy was the eldest of four sisters. She'd been "the second mother" long before she'd learned to be a teenager. That ambition had been about survival, not vanity.

"Being soft was never an option," Jessy admitted one evening as they walked out of the office together. "If I wasn't strong, everything fell apart."

"And now?" Anaya asked.

Jessy shrugged lightly. "Now I don't know how to turn it off."

It was the first time Anaya saw her clearly, the woman beneath the composed exterior. The longing was not for romance but for companionship. For someone who didn't need her to lead.

The friendship started casually.

"Come over Friday," Jessy texted. "Wine. No spreadsheets." Anaya almost declined. Then Jessy sent her a sad-eyes emoji. Then Anaya didn't.

Jessy's apartment was carefully curated. It was modern, restrained, and nearly editorial in its neatness. Soft grey walls framed abstract art pieces that appeared expensive but impersonal, as if selected to impress rather than reveal. A spotless glass coffee table sat in the centre of a cream rug. The couch was structured and upholstered in deep charcoal fabric, with metallic cushions that reflected the warm glow of recessed lighting. A discreet diffuser in the corner gave off a faint scent of sandalwood.

The floor-to-ceiling curtains muffled the city lights outside, transforming the space into a cocoon of controlled elegance. Everything had its place. Everything suggested a woman who valued order.

However, beneath the polish, there were indications that something had recently been rearranged. Something had been removed from the console table, leaving a faint rectangular outline. An empty lower shelf with decorative baskets arranged slightly too symmetrically. Jessy never mentioned a closed door down the hallway, but she subtly positioned herself in front of it whenever Anaya's gaze lingered too long. No toys. No photographs. No stray drawings on the refrigerator. If there had ever been evidence of a child's laughter echoing in those rooms, it had been meticulously erased. What remained was the version of her life she showed the world: sophisticated, unattached, and unburdened.

They ordered too much takeout. They watched a ridiculous rom-com, which Jessy pretended to criticise but secretly enjoyed. They laughed at scenes that hit too close to home. By the second glass of wine, Jessy's laughter had become more spontaneous.

"You know," she said, pointing lazily at the screen, "men love confident women until we become confident."

Anaya giggled. “That’s unfair.”

“It’s accurate.”

That evening, both had their hearts full. It was no surprise that they both suggested spending another Friday afternoon together. Anaya planned to sing karaoke at a rooftop bar. By Thursday, they were looking forward to the weekend. They agreed on a date at The Curve, a popular pub in the CBD. The city glittered beneath them like scattered diamonds, and the wind tugged on their hair as neon lights flickered above the rooftop stage. Jessy had sworn she would not sing. “I don’t perform for free,” she said, sipping her drink with executive poise. Ten minutes later, she was clutching the microphone and belting out an off-key love ballad as Anaya doubled over in laughter.

“You’re flat!” Anaya shouted between giggles.

“I’m passionate!” Jessy corrected, pointing accusingly before dragging her into the chorus.

They ended the night barefoot near the railing, heels left under the table, laughing too loudly about nothing in particular. It felt natural for Jessy to wrap her arm around Anaya’s shoulders to keep her balance. Natural.

Days later, they were almost used to spending weekends together. They went to see a movie together one Sunday. They sprawled across Jessy’s couch, cartons of noodles open and cushions displaced in a comfortable mess. The rom-com on screen had its predictable third-act misunderstanding.

“Oh, please,” Jessy scoffed. “No grown man sends a grand-gesture text like that.”

Anaya raised a brow. “You sound personally offended.”

“I’m critiquing narrative laziness.”

But when the male lead ran through the airport, breathless and desperate, Jessy fell unusually quiet. Anaya noticed.

“See? You love it.”

Jessy tossed popcorn at her. “Shut up.” They didn’t change the film.

The following day, work went smoothly. It was almost 8 p.m., and the office lights were dimmed to half power. Most of the employees had left. Anaya sat cross-legged in her chair, reviewing slides. Jessy leant over her shoulder, closer than usual, her perfume mingling with the sterile atmosphere of the workplace.

“You’re overcomplicating this chart,” Jessy commented.

“I am not.”

“You are. Look.”

She reached for the mouse, and their fingers brushed briefly. Neither pulled away at once. Jessy simplified the graph by making two quick edits.

Anaya stared. "Okay. That's annoyingly good."

Jessy smirked. "You're welcome."

They ordered coffee from the downstairs security desk and spent nearly an hour discussing nothing work-related. With each passing day, they got closer. When the manager used corporate jargon inappropriately, both exchanged glances. The quiet giggles.

Seth noticed the shift.

The whispers at Anaya's desk. The occasional burst of laughter. Jessy now casually rested her elbow on Anaya's table as they discussed reports.

One afternoon, as the three of them stood reviewing projections, Jessy gave Anaya a gentle nudge. The nudge was deliberate.

It was familiar.

And that familiarity had grown slowly, deliberately, beautifully. "Tell him," she requested.

"Tell me what?" Seth asked.

"That your retention framing was correct," Jessy responded smoothly. "I adjusted my deck."

Seth raised an eyebrow.

Anaya smiled shyly. "It was collaborative," Jessy smirked. "Sure."

But there was no hostility anymore. Only something unexpected. Alignment. Soon, their presence became a topic in its own right during coffee breaks.

"They're inseparable now," someone whispered. "Jessy? Sharing space?" another murmured.

And yet there they were, leaning against the counter, giggling over something on Anaya's phone. Beneath the strong demeanour, the commanding presence, and the sharp competitiveness, Jessy had found something she hadn't realised she'd missed.

Sisterhood.

And Anaya, who had always navigated expectations alone, found comfort in a woman who understood strength as both armour and burden—neither said it aloud. But the alliance had shifted.

Not enmity. Not rivalry.

Something far more wholesome. Real friendship.

And somewhere in the background, the realisation that whatever this dynamic was becoming... was no longer simple hit both of them.

It was one of those slow Thursdays.

Anaya had claimed the small pantry corner early, her sleeves rolled slightly as she prepared two lunch boxes

— one mildly spiced for Jessy, and one safer for herself. The office hummed lazily.

Jessy walked in mid-call, speaking in her efficient, measured tone. She ended the call with a crisp “We’ll review tomorrow.”

She placed her phone down.

“That smells unfairly good,” she said.

Anaya smiled. “You complain every time, yet you still finish everything.”

Jessy rolled her eyes fondly and leaned against Anaya’s desk, waiting. That’s when she noticed the notepad. It lay half-open beside Anaya’s laptop, its pages slightly crumpled from being turned. Ink was pressed harder in some lines than in others.

Jessy didn’t mean to pry.

But she saw that her name wasn’t written. And yet—

She picked it up. To glance.

To skim.

*When your gaze lingers,
When your lips whisper, I am blown,
By the feelings unspoken, No promise, no token
Can name the unknown.*

Jessy’s jaw tightened. She read it again. It didn’t say, Seth. It didn’t need to. There was only one person in the office who fixed his gaze on Anaya like that. Only one person, Anaya, had paid close attention in meetings. Only one person’s approval made her cheeks flush. Jessy felt a sharp sensation crawl up her spine.

Not sadness. Not hurt. Heat. Possessive heat.

“Find something interesting?” Anaya’s voice broke the silence.

Jessy didn’t look up immediately. She caressed the notebook carefully. “You write,” she said evenly.

Anaya blinked. “Sometimes.”

“For yourself?”

A pause.

“Yes.”

Jessy held her gaze. “It’s about him, isn’t it?” Anaya froze.

“What?”

“Don’t insult me.”

The air thickened. Anaya’s first instinct was denial. Her second was silence. That silence confirmed it all. Jessy inhaled slowly. She surprised herself with how much it stung.

It wasn’t just jealousy. It was displacement.

In recent weeks, Jessy had let her guard down. Shared things she didn’t share. Laughed too freely. Allowed Anaya into the softer spaces of her life. And somewhere in that intimacy, Jessy had unconsciously believed she was more important.

Not romantically. But centrally.

Now she saw it clearly. Anaya’s attention was still focused on Seth. To the man who always seemed to be the gravitational pull in any room. Jessy hated that she cared. Hated that the poem made her feel like a secondary figure.

Again.

“Lunch is getting cold,” Anaya said quietly. Jessy stepped back.

“You should give it to him,” she replied.

The words came out colder than she intended. Anaya’s eyes widened. “It’s for you.”

Jessy smiled sharply and controlled herself. “I’m not hungry.”

Jessy folded the notepad shut, but the words lingered long after the ink had disappeared from view. She walked out before Anaya could answer. At her desk, Jessy tried to focus on spreadsheets.

But the lines echoed.

When your gaze lingers, when your lips whisper.

She pressed her lips together. It wasn’t just that Anaya liked Seth. It was that Seth would never have to fight for attention as she always had.

And somehow—

She had convinced herself that she did not need to compete with Anaya. Now the old instinct returned. Guard up. Distance recalculated. Not cold. Not hostile, but no longer open. Anaya, standing alone in the pantry with two lunch boxes, felt the shift immediately. It was neither loud nor dramatic; it moved like a draft through a barely opened window. The fluorescent lights hummed indifferently above her, while the microwave beeped into the silence she hadn’t realised was forming. The space that had, just moments ago

held the warmth of shared anticipation now felt oddly staged, as though she had rehearsed a scene with the wrong script. One lunch box remained open on the counter, steam curling upwards and dissipating into the no longer shared atmosphere. The other sat untouched beside it, lid sealed, reflecting. She stared at the notebook, its pages suddenly heavier than paper, and realised with quiet clarity that something invisible had shifted between them.

That evening, Jessy left earlier than usual. No goodbyes, no teasing remarks tossed over her shoulder. Just a quiet exit. By the time she got home, the city had begun to soften. The moment the door clicked shut behind her, she exhaled. Her heels came off first. Then the smile she never wore at work slipped onto her face.

“Mum!”

A small figure ran into her arms, laughter filling the tiny apartment. And just like that, Jessy was someone else entirely.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Did you miss me?” Jessy asked, dropping to her knees.

The boy nodded seriously, then wrapped his arms around her neck again. “You said you’d come before dark.”

“And I did,” she whispered, pressing her lips to his hair. “See? Superwoman.” He pulled back, unimpressed. “You’re not super. You’re just *Mum*.”

Jessy laughed wholly—a sound that had never existed within office walls. “Just Mum is better.”

She stood, carrying him to the small couch. The apartment was modest yet neat. A stack of files rested on the dining table beside the colouring books. A laptop. Crayons. Two worlds overlapping.

“Did you finish your reading?” she asked.

He nodded, pointing to a sheet of paper on the table. A drawing. Three stick figures. Jessy’s breath stilled for half a second. One tall. One small. One in between.

“That’s us,” he said proudly. “And Daddy.”

Jessy’s smile did not falter, but something in her eyes tightened. “Is Daddy coming this weekend?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied gently. “He said Saturday.”

The boy grinned and ran off towards his room. Jessy remained seated. Her gaze drifted to her phone on the table. A message notification blinked.

Message:

I’ll come by Saturday afternoon. Let me know if he needs anything.

No heart emoji. No tenderness. Just logistics. Jessy typed back:

He’s fine.

She looked at the screen for a moment longer before locking it. Later that night, after dinner and bedtime stories, the apartment fell quiet. Jessy stood at the kitchen sink, sleeves rolled up, water running over the untouched dishes. Her mind wandered where she didn’t want it to.

The poem.

When your gaze lingers, when your lips whisper.

Her jaw tightened.

She had once believed that about someone, too. She drifted back two years ago. A new position. Hungry. Determined.

The manager had noticed her early. He praised her strategy, lingered after meetings, and provided mentorship that blurred the lines. She convinced herself it was professional. Her soul knew it was not. Two months of late-night presentation reviews. Shared dinners disguised as "performance planning". Compliments that switched from work to appearance. She had felt chosen.

Special.

When it happened, it didn't feel transactional. It felt like a victory. She had finally arrived. Then she missed her period. Then came the quiet conversation in his office — blinds half-drawn.

"I can't afford scandal," he had said, voice calm. Measured. "We'll handle it privately."

Handle it?

The word lodged itself deep in her chest.

Jessy stood there, spine straight, chin lifted, absorbing the sentence in the same way she absorbed quarterly losses internally, efficiently, and without spectacle. Inside, however, something fragile had splintered. She had not anticipated romance. She was not naïve. However, she had anticipated... recognition. A flicker of concern. A question about her feelings. Instead, she was reduced to a situation—a complication to be dealt with.

She desperately wanted him to walk around the desk and hold her. Say her name softly. To find out if she was afraid. She wanted to be chosen over optics. She wished the manager would say, "We'll figure this out together." Not "privately". Not clinically.

But Jessy had spent her entire adult life maintaining her composure, competence, and unwavering confidence. Tears felt like weakness, and weakness felt like leverage that someone else could exploit.

So, she nodded.

Because nodding meant control.

If she didn't crumble in front of him, she could at least pretend she wasn't crumbling. And beneath the ambition, beneath the desire to advance within the company, beneath the polished exterior, lay a much quieter need, one she rarely acknowledged even to herself: to matter beyond performance. Being loved without strategy. To be seen without calculation. To have someone stay not because it was convenient or discreet but because she was enough.

She did not cry as she left his office that day. Not in the hallway.

Not in the elevator.

Not even when she reached her car.

She waited until she was alone in her apartment, back against the door, heels still on before allowing silent tears to fall.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Simply the quiet grief of a woman who realised she had mistaken attention for attachment.

The year-end party was three weeks away. She was barely showing, but she was still modest enough to wear looser dresses. She hadn't told anyone besides him. She had yet to decide what she wanted.

The music was loud. The lights were low. That night, Seth had behaved differently. Less controlled. Laughing too easily and drinking more than usual. She hadn't intended to stay so close to him, but he had drawn her into a conversation about ambition, pressure, and how exhausting it was to always be the dependable person.

For a moment, she had felt seen as a person.

When he touched her waist to steady himself, she didn't pull away. When she helped him upstairs to one of the company's reserved guest suites, she told herself she was making sure he was okay. She stayed longer than she should have. Loneliness is dangerous when mixed with admiration and alcohol.

It had been brief. Intense.

Wordless.

And in the morning, Seth barely remembered. She remembered everything.

A honk from the neighbour's gate next to her brought her back to reality. Jessy turned off the tap abruptly. She looked at her reflection in the kitchen window. The child sleeping in the hallway was not Seth's. She was aware of the timeline. The dates. The doctor's confirmation. The little boy's veins carried the manager's bloodline. But the night with Seth —

It had not been meaningless to her.

And now...

Now Anaya was writing poetry about him. Jessy pressed her palms against the countertop. What unsettled her wasn't just jealousy. It was the possibility that Seth might look at Anaya the way he had looked at her that night.

Soft.

Unfiltered. Real.

And Jessy didn't know which part of it frightened her more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two weeks after Jessy stumbled upon Anaya's notebook, the manager summoned her to the office — a summons delivered with corporate politeness that felt far too deliberate to be casual. Seth and Anaya were invited as well. The calendar notification was sterile and vague: *Strategic Review — 3:00 PM*.

Jessy knew better.

The office was noticeably colder than usual. The blinds were partially drawn, dividing the afternoon light into narrow, interrogating lines across the conference table. The manager sat at the head, fingers curled, face professionally neutral. Seth initially stood by the window, but later decided to sit down. Anaya arrived last, clutching her notebook, her confusion barely hidden.

No one brought up the real subject right away.

They spoke of projections. Of departmental optics. Of "alignment". The words were stacked carefully, hollow yet heavy. Jessy felt it — the choreography of avoidance. Every sentence circled something sharp.

Then the tone shifted.

The manager's gaze fell on Jessy with a softness that was not kind.

"There are concerns," he began. "Perception matters. We cannot afford... distractions."

Distractions.

Jessy kept her face composed. She had perfected that expression over time. The attentive executive, receptive to feedback, remained unthreatened. Inside, her pulse thudded against her ribs as if trying to escape.

Seth did not look at her.

Anaya did.

And in that fleeting, stolen glance, Anaya understood more than was said.

The rest was delivered in careful language, addressing internal transfers, temporary leave, and reputational risk. Everything was framed as an opportunity. As protection. As something generous. But each word was a silent severance. The meeting was brutal. The partner's email was projected across the screen.

"...deactivating subscription effective immediately due to discrepancies in projected margins..."

Jessy sat up straight, her expression neutral, but her fingers trembled beneath the table. "It was a forecasting error," she explained evenly. "We can renegotiate."

The manager's face hardened.

"A forecasting error at your level?" His tone was sharp, controlled anger, worse than shouting.

“I’ll fix it.”

“You already had the chance to fix it.” Silence.

Then Anaya spoke.

“Sir, if we restructure the retention offer and waive the Q1 penalty fee, we might recover at least partial engagement.”

The room shifted. The manager looked at her. “That’s proactive,” he said. “Draft it.”

Jessy felt the subtle displacement. The silent approval. The praise that once would have been hers. Seth nodded in approval. “Good thinking, Anaya.”

By the time the meeting ended, Jessy had not raised her voice, defended herself, or asked the manager to speak. She nodded.

Again.

The account, however, did not return. Outside, Jessy walked quickly towards the restroom. Anaya followed halfway.

“Jessy—”

“I’m fine,” she said. She wasn’t.

The words came too quickly and smoothly, like a door slamming shut before anyone could pass through. Her smile and posture remained intact, but her fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around the files, her knuckles paling from the strain of restraint.

Anaya had noticed the drift since Jessy came across her poem notebook, with its slim, worn pages. Anaya had tried to tuck away too quickly. The raw verses. The unpolished grief. The woman who wrote about longing and loneliness with candour that was not common in boardrooms. After that day, something had shifted. Jessy had begun retreating in inches. Fewer late-night texts. Shorter lunches. Laughter that ended half a second too early.

Anaya noticed it.

But she did not insist. She understood pride. Understood survival stitched together with silence. So instead of pressing, she adjusted. Supporting Jessy without cornering her, offering presence without interrogation. It was the kind of care that did not demand confession. And Jessy, who had become accustomed to handling crises on her own, felt the same way. Somehow, it made it harder to pretend she was fine.

Inside the restroom stall, she clamped her hand over her mouth—one mistake.

One miscalculation.

And suddenly she wasn't indispensable. She wasn't the sharpest strategist. She was replaceable. Back in the office, the manager stopped by Anaya's desk.

"Well handled," he said. "That initiative will be noted."

Jessy watched from her screen. She watched as Seth stepped beside Anaya and gently patted her back. "It was smart," he said quietly.

That gesture. Small.

Casual.

Intimate in a way only someone observant would catch. Jessy felt the floor tilt. Once, that hand had steadied her. Once, that voice had lowered for her. Now it lingered near someone else.

And she—

She had just failed.

Later in the evening, the office emptied slowly. Jessy didn't leave immediately. Neither did Seth. He sat at his desk, sleeves rolled, reviewing something on his laptop. She lingered longer than necessary before walking towards him.

"You have a minute?"

He looked up. Concern flickered. "Yeah, of course."

The concern sharpened when he really saw her. Her eyes were bloodshot. Not dramatically swollen, but unmistakably rimmed in red, as if she had been crying hard and then forcing herself to stop. A faint sheen of moisture clung stubbornly to her lower lashes, as if her body had not fully accepted her decision to remain composed. Even her usually precise eyeliner had been reapplied in a hurry; he noticed a slight unevenness near the corner.

She had cried. Recently. And he suspected alone.

His posture changed immediately, and he forgot about his laptop. "Jessy... what happened?"

They stepped into the smaller conference room. The glass walls reflected the city lights outside. Jessy didn't sit. She remained standing with her arms loosely crossed, unaware that she had formed a defence.

"I lost that account," she admitted quietly.

"It happens," Seth replied gently. "You've managed bigger portfolios than anyone here."

"That's not the point."

He studied her. "Then what is?"

Her composure cracked. For the first time in years, her voice trembled. "I'm tired of fighting to be enough."

The words surprised even her. Seth softened.

“You don’t have to fight with me.”

That was the opening. That dangerous, unguarded opening. Jessy swallowed. “You remember the end-of-year party... two years ago?”

His brows knit slightly. “It was... messy.” She gave a faint, shaky laugh. “Yes. It was.” Silence thickened.

“I never told you anything.” His posture shifted. Alert now. “What?”

Her heart pounded so loudly she could hear it in her ears. She could still walk away. She could still stop. But then she remembered:

The manager’s anger.

The praise directed at Anaya—a pat on her back.

The feeling of being replaced.

And beneath it all—

Fear.

“I have a son,” she said quietly. Seth blinked.

“You... what?”

“I got pregnant around that time.” The air shifted.

His face was drained of colour. "Jessy".

She forced herself to hold his gaze. “He’s two now.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Measured. Impossible. Seth shook his head slightly. “The timing—”

“It matches.”

She didn’t give him time to calculate.

“You don’t remember that night clearly,” she continued, her voice fragile but steady. “I do.” His breathing changed.

“You’re saying...?”

Her next words felt like stepping off a cliff.

“He’s yours.”

The room went completely still.

He stared at her, as if attempting to discern truth from shock. It gradually and visibly spread across his face. First, the stillness, as if his mind had temporarily emptied; then the tightening of his jaw, a reflex against something he hadn't anticipated; and finally, the slight widening of his eyes, not dramatic but undeniable, like a crack forming in glass. His fingers, which had been resting loosely against the edge of the mahogany table, curled inward as if bracing for an unseen blow. The colour appeared to drain subtly from his face, leaving behind a stark realisation that this was no longer hypothetical, no longer manageable in spreadsheets or strategy meetings. This was real. Immediate. And irreversible.

"That's not... why didn't you tell me?"

"I was trying to secure my position," she explained, which was partially correct. "I didn't want a scandal. I didn't want you to feel trapped."

He ran a hand through his hair. "And now?"

Her eyes glistened.

"Now I can't keep carrying it on my own."

That part was also accurate. She was tired of having to carry everything by herself. He sat down slowly. "Does anyone else know?"

"No."

Another lie by omission.

The manager knew, but not this version of the story.

Seth looked shaken. He attempted to calculate timelines, refresh his memory, and weigh options. His gaze was unfocused, drifting slightly to the side, as if an invisible calendar had appeared in the air in front of him. You could almost see the arithmetic flashing behind his eyes. The dates ran concurrently; that night at the party, fragments of conversation played out in quick succession. His lips parted and then pressed together again, the muscle in his cheek ticking as he ran through the possibilities with silent urgency. One hand moved absently to the back of his neck, rubbing as if he could physically separate clarity from confusion. It was the expression of a man attempting to regain control by channelling emotion into logistics, but the tremor in his breathing betrayed him.

"I need to see him," he said quietly.

Jessy's heart lurched. This was real now. She had pulled him into it. "He looks like you," she remarked softly.

A strategic cruelty.

Seth closed his eyes briefly. "Jessy... This changes things."

He thought of Anaya. The endless FaceTime calls that lasted past midnight, the screens glowing in dark rooms, voices reduced to near-whispers as if the silence itself were sacred. Of the way they spoke about

everything and nothing, skirting what they were becoming without ever quite naming it—the soft laughter. The pauses lingered a second too long—the almost-confessions.

He reflected on their careful restraint, how they had both paced around the world as if it were fragile glass. The desire had been clear and mutual, but so had the caution. Timing. Optics.

Complications. They had told themselves they were being mature.

Strategic.

Now the strategy felt flimsy. It was no longer theoretical after Jessy's confession, with her eyes still rimmed red. It was no longer something to postpone until emotions were neatly sorted out. The whispered romance suddenly gained weight. And weight demanded a choice.

“Yes,” she whispered. “It does.”

Her legs felt weak as she walked out of the building. She sat in her car and gripped the steering wheel.

What had she done?

She hadn't planned it. It spilt out, born of humiliation, fear, jealousy, and the need to reclaim something.

Control. Relevance. Connection.

But beneath the manipulation was something more fragile: she wanted someone to choose her. Not because she was efficient. Not because she was ambitious. But because she mattered. Now the lie lived between them. And lies, once spoken, demand maintenance. Seth became quieter over the next few days. Not cold. Not distant. Just... measured and not dramatically withdrawn; dimmed. His usual quick wit in meetings was reduced to polite nods. He replied to emails with clinical brevity. Even his laughter seemed delayed, as if he needed to remember how to laugh.

He watched Jessy differently in meetings. He paid closer attention to Anaya when she laughed. He watched himself. Every time Anaya leaned over his desk to explain something, he felt that spark. The lightness. The sense that life could be expansive and unscripted.

With Jessy, things were different. There was history. Shared ambition. Late nights spent building strategies. That one night that now refused to be “just a mistake”.

And a child.

A child who might be his. The weight of that possibility settled into his chest like an anchor. And beneath that weight, another fear stirred — older, quieter, more personal.

Jessy was formidable. Controlled. Strategic. Built of sharp edges, softened only when she chose. She reminded him, in ways he tried not to examine too closely, of his mother—strong-willed, decisive, emotionally self-contained—a woman who ran the household like a boardroom and expected compliance disguised as harmony.

And his father?

Present, yet perpetually diminished. A man who mistook obligation for love. Who stayed because leaving would have been scandalous. He surrendered pieces of himself in increments so small that no one noticed until there was very little left.

Seth had sworn, silently and stubbornly, that he would never become that man. However, he now felt as if the loop was continuing with him.

Responsibility.

Expectation.

A powerful woman.

A child binds the narrative into permanence.

Was he being drawn into a story already written long before him, or was he stepping towards Jessy's inevitability – or inheritance from his father?

Like father, like son! He scoffed.

And what, then, was Anaya?

When he was with her, he didn't feel cornered by legacy. He felt chosen. Awake. As if he were authoring something rather than inheriting it. Laughter came more easily. The air felt lighter. There were no echoes of his parents in the room when she smiled at him.

Was it leaning towards Anaya's courage, or was it an escape?

A rebellion against a cycle he feared repeating? The questions unsettled him because they refused to yield clean answers.

Love. Duty. Pattern. Choice.

Somewhere between them, Seth stood — trying to decide whether he was stepping into manhood... or simply running from a mirror. Anaya noticed immediately. She always did. The late-night FaceTime calls were shorter. The familiar silences between them became unfamiliar, tinged with something unspoken. She didn't know whether to ask for peace or to give him peace. Part of her wanted to gently approach him and say, "Talk to me." The other part dreaded the answer. So she chose restraint, reminding herself that maturity sometimes required patience. That interrogation is not required on every shift.

What unsettled her more was Jessy.

Jessy was acting the same. Still composed. Still sharp in meetings. Still resting her elbow casually on Anaya's desk as they discussed reports. If anything, she seemed steadier than usual, almost deliberately so. The karaoke jokes continued. The light teasing. The effortless competence. It was too seamless.

The symmetry of their silence — Seth quieter, Jessy unchanged — felt like choreography rather than a coincidence. And Anaya, who stood between them in conference rooms and corridors, felt her chest tighten.

Was it proof of the severance she was seeking? Was it an accusation about their relationships? Or maybe just her instinct. She thought.

Seth met Jessy three evenings later in a quiet park near her apartment. “I need to see him,” Seth said.

Jessy’s fingers tightened around her handbag. “You will,” she replied gently. “But not like this.”

“Not like what?”

“Not in confusion.”

He exhaled. “Jessy, he’s my son—” She cut in, her voice soft. “Lower your voice.”

The word 'son' hung between them.

“I’ve thought about telling Anaya,” Seth admitted. Jessy’s expression changed instantly.

A flicker of alarm. “No.”

“I can’t build something real with her while keeping this hidden.”

“And what will you tell her?” Jessy asked calmly. “That you have a child from a night you barely remember?”

He fell silent.

Jessy stepped closer.

“If this becomes public, it’s not just about you.” Her tone softened, not manipulative, just weary. “The company will know. The manager will know. HR will know. Everyone will know.” She held his gaze. “And once it’s known, you don’t get to step in and out of fatherhood depending on how ready you feel.” That landed. Because she was right.

“If you claim him,” she continued quietly, “you become responsible, legally, emotionally, and permanently.”

Seth swallowed. “And if I don’t?”

“Then we handle this privately, slowly and carefully.”

She wasn’t yelling. She wasn’t accusing. She was offering a path that felt contained.

Safe.

That night, Seth lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

He imagined telling Anaya. The way her face would first go still—stunned into silence. The warmth that lived so easily in her eyes would retreat, replaced by something guarded and sharp. He could see the

softness tightening at the corners of her mouth and her shoulders drawing back as if bracing for impact. Trust wouldn't shatter dramatically; it would fracture quietly, like a thin line spreading across glass. What concerned him the most was not that she might cry or yell. It was that she might look at him differently. As if recalibrating who he was. As if realising the man she had been slowly opening her heart to was holding a truth heavy enough to tilt everything.

Again, he imagined a small boy looking at him with expectation. He imagined a small voice calling him **Dad**. The word felt enormous, heavier than any title he had ever earned. It wasn't a promotion. It wasn't a role you could gradually grow into under supervision. It was permanent. Intimate. Claimed.

Could he live up to that?

He pictured himself standing awkwardly at the edge of a life already in motion. The school runs, scraped knees, and bedtime questions he might not know how to answer. The responsibility pressed against his chest, leaving his breathing shallow. Fatherhood wasn't just presence; it was steadiness. Sacrifice. Choosing someone every day without hesitation.

Did he even deserve to be called a father?

And then Jessy's voice echoed in his mind, cautious, protective. What if forcing himself into the child's life too quickly did more harm than good? What if his sudden appearance caused confusion rather than security? He had spent years calculating risk in boardrooms. This was different. This was about a child's sense of safety.

For the first time in a long while, Seth wasn't thinking about reputation or romance. He was thinking about impact. The next day, Seth found Anaya alone in the archive room, reaching for a file on a high shelf.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," he said. She smiled. "That sounds serious."

"It is."

Her expression softened. "What's wrong?"

He hesitated.

The words hovered at the back of his throat, fragile and irreversible. For a split second, he almost let them out. He almost chose honesty over delay, confession over calculation. His fingers tightened as he clenched his fist, his pulse loud in his ears, the air between him and the decision thinning.

But then—

He heard a knock on the door frame. Soft. Controlled. Perfectly timed.

He looked up. Jessy stood there, composed as ever, one hand resting lightly against the frame. Her expression gave nothing away, no betrayal, no secrets, no visible fracture. Just poise. Intention. And just like that, the moment collapsed. Whatever he had been about to say folded back into silence.

"I need Seth for a moment," she said smoothly. Anaya stepped aside without suspicion.

“Of course.”

In the hallway, Jessy’s voice dropped. “You were going to tell her!”

He didn’t deny it.

“She deserves honesty.”

“Yes,” Jessy replied. “But honesty without stability is cruelty.” He frowned.

“You’re emotional right now,” she continued. “You just found out you might have a child.”

“Might?”

She held his gaze evenly.

“You haven’t even met him properly yet.”

The room felt smaller. Seth’s thoughts tangled. *Might?* The possibility had already taken root in him, broadening and reshaping his sense of self. He had begun to recalculate his future in quiet, terrifying ways, shifting priorities and imagining responsibilities. And now she was tempering it. Softening the certainty. Introducing space where he had already begun to forge resolve.

Was she protecting him or guiding him?

He couldn’t tell.

His mind pulled in opposite directions, towards instinct and towards caution. Towards stepping forward. Towards holding back. The emotional surge he had felt moments earlier faltered under the weight of her reasoning. She wasn’t wrong. He hadn’t met the child properly. He didn’t yet know what role he would play. He didn’t even know what the child had been told.

Jessy wasn’t arguing against him being a father. She wasn’t denying him. She was reframing the timeline by slowing his momentum with carefully chosen words and creating doubt just wide enough for hesitation to grow.

And Seth, already overwhelmed, stood in the middle of it, torn between the pull of responsibility rising in his chest and the calm, strategic caution in her gaze.

“If you tell Anaya now,” Jessy said gently, “you’re forcing her into a situation she didn’t choose.” She softened further. “And you’re forcing the boy into the spotlight.” Seth leaned against the wall.

“I don’t know what the right thing is.”

Jessy’s voice dropped to a whisper. “The right thing is to protect him...”

She let that sit.

“...and protecting yourself until you’re ready.” She added quietly.

Jessy wasn't entirely lying. She truly believed that sudden exposure would destabilise everything. But beneath that belief lay fear. If Anaya knew, she would step back. If Anaya stepped back, Seth would lean towards responsibility.

Toward duty. Toward Jessy.

And Jessy needed time. Time to secure him. Time to matter again.

Anaya noticed the shift. The private conversations. The way Seth's warmth flickered in and out. The way Jessy's composure had sharpened again. She didn't know the secret, but she felt something tightening around all three of them. And she hated not knowing what it was.

CHAPTER NINE

Things had settled into something fragile. Carefully balanced, like glass on the edge of a table. Seth had met the boy twice. Carefully. Quietly. The first time was at a park on the city's outskirts, where the swings creaked and children's laughter echoed through the air. The second time was at a small ice cream shop, which was chosen specifically for its public, contained, and safe environment.

Jessy never left them alone. Not fully.

At the park, she sat on a nearby bench, sunglasses on, her posture relaxed but alert. At the ice cream shop, she excused herself only long enough to step a few feet away for a "call," which was always within earshot and sight.

Denis was bright-eyed and quick to smile, with slightly unruly hair. He examined Seth with open curiosity, not suspicion. He was eager, not guarded.

"Mom says you work with her," Denis said the second time they met, swinging his legs off the tall shop stool.

"I do," Seth replied, trying to sound at ease. "She's very good at what she does." Denis grinned proudly.

"Yeah, she wins awards."

"I'm not surprised."

The boy took a careful lick of his melting ice cream, then tilted his head. "Are you my new dad?"

The question landed without warning. Seth felt his heartbeat in his throat. Across the shop, Jessy's posture stiffened almost imperceptibly.

"I—" Seth began, choosing each word like stepping stones across deep water. "I'm someone who cares about you. And I'm getting to know you."

Denis seemed to process this with solemn concentration.

"I already have a dad," he said matter-of-factly. "But he doesn't live with us." The air seemed to shift.

Jessy's voice cut in softly from behind them, smooth as silk. "Denis, sweetheart, remember what we talked about? Adults are still figuring things out."

The boy looked between them, confused but obedient. "Okay."

Seth nodded slowly, his chest tightening. The boy's tone was simple. No resentment. No accusation. Just truth spoken without strategy. He never fully felt like a father in those moments. He felt like a guest. Like someone stepping into a story already written in chapters he hadn't read.

But he felt responsible.

Responsible for the way the boy's face lit up when he promised to return next weekend. Responsible for the hope that seemed to cling so easily to presence. Responsible for not disrupting something he didn't yet understand.

And yet—

With Anaya, he felt alive. Light. Certain. With her, there were no calculated pauses, no monitored conversations, no invisible guardrails. Just ease. Warmth. The quiet thrill of something honest unfolding.

The contrast was impossible to ignore. He would not let fear dictate his future. Not fear of scandal. Not fear of imperfection. Not fear of stepping into complexity. If he were going to choose responsibility, it would be wholehearted. If he were going to choose love, it would be deliberate.

So, he made a decision.

And one evening, after walking past the jeweller's shop window three times, heart pounding harder than it ever had during a boardroom presentation—

He bought a ring.

He invited Jessy under the guise of “aligning expectations”. She arrived composed, elegant in navy silk.

“You look serious,” she teased lightly.

“I am.”

He took a breath. “I have something to show you...” Jessy's fingers froze around her glass for just a second.

Then she smiled. He placed the small velvet box on the table. “That's... fast.”

“It's been six months.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes.”

“I wanted to talk properly about our son. I don't want this to affect our arrangement.”

Jessy stared at the box. Her heartbeat roared in her ears. This was the moment she'd feared. Finality.

Replacement.

She opened the box. The diamond caught the light. Something inside her snapped. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

Seth frowned. “Jessy—”

She slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit. Not perfectly — but enough. Her eyes filled with tears. They caught the golden glow of the pendant lights strung across the restaurant's ceiling, turning liquid and

luminous. The place was warm, with low music and the steady hum of Friday night conversation – glasses clinking, cutlery brushing porcelain, the muted hiss of something searing in the open kitchen behind them. Outside, city lights flickered through the tall windows, blurred by the condensation of early-evening rain.

“Were you going to surprise me?”

Her voice trembled. It was not broken but brimming. The velvet ring box still lay open in Seth’s hand. The candle between them flickered, wax pooling at its base, the flame bending slightly in the draft from a passing server. The table next to them had already been noticed. A woman paused mid-sip. Her companion smiled knowingly.

Someone clapped lightly.

It spread. A soft applause, polite yet eager, the collective anticipation of strangers who loved a proposal almost as much as their own dessert.

Seth froze.

“Jessy, that’s not—” But she stood.

Overwhelmed. Emotional. Radiant.

Her chair scraped softly across the floor as she rose, one hand covering her mouth, the other reaching instinctively towards him. Tears slipped free, unchecked, tracing clean lines through carefully applied make-up. She looked at him as if he had just rewritten her entire future in a single gesture.

The room leaned in.

And Seth, caught between correction and consequence, felt the fragile architecture of everything he had tried to control collapse under the weight of assumption.

“He finally did it!” she laughed shakily. A few guests cheered. Phones came out.

Seth’s brain scrambled. This was spiralling too fast. Jessy turned to him, her eyes glossy, vulnerable.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she murmured, her voice trembling just enough. “I know this is complicated.”

Complicated.

He hesitated.

The applause swelled softly around them, buoyant and warm, with strangers smiling into their wine glasses as if witnessing something pure. Candlelight flickered across Jessy’s tear-streaked cheeks, making her glow. She looked incandescent, laughing through emotion, breathless, one hand pressed to her chest as though her heart might burst with happiness.

Correcting her now would humiliate her in public. She had already endured enough in front of others. He opened his mouth, then closed it. In that brief silence, Jessy stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. She held him tightly. Too tightly.

To anyone watching, it was joy. Relief. A woman overwhelmed by love that had finally become visible. She trembled convincingly, burying her face against his shoulder, her fingers gripping the fabric of his jacket as if she were afraid he might disappear.

Yet against his collarbone, he felt the precision of her breath steadying. He felt the subtle shift of her weight, positioning them just enough and angling the open ring box towards the room. Towards the phones now discreetly raised in neighbouring hands.

Jessy hugged him. Someone recorded it. A small red light blinked in the corner of his vision. Jessy pulled back just enough to look at him, eyes shining and radiant, victorious, unreadable beneath a gloss of tears. There was joy there, yes. But threaded through it was something sharper—calculation disguised as destiny.

Seth's heart pounded, not with triumph but with disorientation. He hadn't knelt.

He hadn't spoken.

He hadn't asked.

Yet the moment had moved on without him, sweeping him into its current. Around them, applause continued. Inside him, confusion roared.

Anaya's phone buzzed repeatedly against the wooden nightstand, its vibration sharp in the quiet of her apartment. The early light filtering through her curtains was pale and indifferent, the kind that made everything feel more exposed than it had the night before.

She hadn't slept well.

The nonchalance in Jessy's demeanour lately had unsettled her more than outright hostility would have. The easy laughter. The casual touches. The way she spoke about Seth now was not intimately, not defensively, just... assured. As though something unspoken had already been settled. Claimed.

And Seth.

He had been different, too. Distracted. Careful with his words. Present, yet fractionally removed – like someone standing half a step outside a room he had once fully occupied.

It bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

She had tossed in bed for hours, sheets tangling around her legs, replaying recent conversations in fragments. Jessy was leaning against Seth's desk a little too comfortably, or Seth was cancelling a late call because he was "tired". The subtle choreography of something shifting just beyond her reach.

At some point, exhaustion had dragged her under. Now the phone would not stop buzzing.

6:12 a.m.

Too early for anything good. First, a message.

Then five. Then fifteen.

Her heart dropped.

Colleague:

Is this real???

A video followed. She opened it.

Jessy is at a restaurant holding out her hand and showing off a ring while laughing.

The video was bright — too bright for morning eyes — and shot under warm amber lights that made everything look celebratory and cinematic. She stood beside a linen-draped table strewn with half-finished wine glasses and melted candle wax. Fairy lights shimmered behind her in soft golden strands that blurred into halos around her hair. The restaurant looked intimate yet expensive, with polished wood, low ceilings, and the quiet elegance of a place people went to mark milestones.

Jessy's head tilted back slightly in laughter, her teeth visible and eyes luminous. One hand was extended towards the camera, fingers splayed just enough to centre the large, deliberate diamond, which caught the light with unapologetic brilliance. The stone threw fractured rainbows across the glassware. Her other hand rested lightly over her collarbone, as if she were still overwhelmed.

She looked radiant.

Victorious.

There was a flush in her cheeks that could have been from wine or triumph. Her dress was sleek and understated, made of cream silk that draped perfectly against her frame. Nothing about her seemed accidental. Even her joy looked composed, framed, ready for circulation.

Around her, blurred figures clapped. Someone's phone was raised in the background, and a waiter smiled politely.

And Jessy laughed with full, ringing, unrestrained laughter. One that Anaya fully recognised. As if the moment had unfolded exactly as she wanted.

Seth sat beside her. Frozen.

The caption someone had added read:

Office power couple finally engaged. 🥰

Anaya stopped breathing. Her chest felt hollow. Her phone rang out.

Seth.

She stared at it. She let it ring once, then twice.

Then answered.

“Anaya.” His voice sounded strained, thinner than usual, as though sleep hadn’t touched him either. “We need to talk.”

Her voice was ice cold. “Do we?”

They met at his apartment.

The hallway outside his unit felt longer than she remembered. Too quiet. Even the elevator’s hum had seemed intrusive, metallic, and hollow. When she stood at his door, she didn’t knock straight away. She could hear movement inside – pacing, a floorboard creaking. The faint clink of something being set down and picked up again.

When he opened the door, the air between them shifted instantly.

The apartment, usually warm with lamplight and the scent of coffee or cologne, felt unsettled. Curtains half-drawn. One lamp on, the other off. The television was dark. A coffee cup sat untouched on the kitchen counter. It looked like a room interrupted mid-thought.

He stepped aside to let her in. They did not hug.

That absence hung heavier than an argument did.

Anaya stood near the edge of the living room, arms loosely folded — neither defensive nor open. Just contained. Her gaze swept once around the space, as if recalibrating it. This was where they had laughed, where they had whispered into the early mornings, where certainty had once lived.

It felt staged.

Seth ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t know where to stand. Too close felt presumptuous. Too far felt final. So he stayed near the kitchen island, fingers braced against the marble edge as if grounding himself.

Anaya didn’t sit. “Congratulations,” she said evenly.

“I didn’t propose,” he began quickly, the words tumbling out. “That’s not what happened.” She didn’t react. The silence forced him to go on.

“She—it was a misunderstanding. The ring was—I bought it for—” She laughed once, a sharp, painful laugh.

“That line is insulting.”

Anaya’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “You bought a ring,” she said evenly.

It wasn't a question. The tension in the room thickened, invisible yet suffocating. Every sound sharpened: the faint buzz of the refrigerator, a car passing outside, the subtle shift in his breathing. He stepped towards her instinctively. She didn't step back. But she didn't meet him halfway either. The space between them felt measured now. Negotiated. And for the first time since that night at the restaurant, Seth felt something more frightening than public spectacle. He felt the possibility of losing her.

"I was going to propose to you."

Silence.

"The ring was yours."

Her expression faltered, though only slightly. "She put it on before I could explain."

The words hung there, thin and inadequate. Anaya blinked once, slowly. "Explain what?" she asked.

Her voice wasn't raised. It was searching. She was trying to piece together logic from fragments that refused to fit.

Why would Jessy assume the ring was hers?

People didn't just assume proposals. Not without context. Not without conversation. Not without... history. Unless there had been one, Anaya's mind moved quickly, retracing months in reverse—the late meetings. The private conversations had recently tapered off. The careful distance Seth had begun to keep without naming it. Jessy's newfound ease. The confidence.

Had anything already been discussed? Implied? Promised?

"You're telling me," Anaya said carefully, "that she saw you with a ring in a restaurant and just decided?"

Her eyes now held confusion, but beneath it, something more fragile.

Disorientation.

Jessy was controlled and strategic, but never impulsive. Not delusional. And Anaya — still unaware of the child and of the quiet meetings in parks and ice cream shops — was missing the central piece of the equation.

"And you didn't stop her."

"She was emotional. The whole restaurant was watching."

"So you chose to protect her dignity over my trust."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I was coming to you. I swear."

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Do you love her?"

"No."

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation. Yet it didn’t soothe her. “Then what is happening?” she whispered. Before he could answer—

The door opened. Jessy.

She had used the spare key he once gave her “for emergencies”. She stopped when she saw Anaya. For a split second, guilt flashed. Quick. Unrehearsed. A flicker that disrupted her composure before she smoothed it away. Her hand lingered on the doorknob a moment too long, as if debating retreat. Then she let the door close gently behind her.

The room shifted.

Anaya stood near the centre of the living room, Seth a few feet away, mid-explanation – his sentence still hanging unfinished in the air. The argument had been building towards something fragile, almost conciliatory. He had been reaching for context. For clarity. For the version of truth that might land softly enough to preserve something.

It hadn’t landed yet.

Now it hovered, suspended.

Jessy took in the scene at a glance: the distance between them, the tension in Anaya’s shoulders, and the way Seth’s body angled instinctively towards Anaya despite everything. Her gaze sharpened.

“I didn’t realise you had company,” Jessy said evenly.

The calm was deliberate. Anaya’s confusion deepened. Her eyes flicked from Seth to Jessy and back again. Something about this felt less like a coincidence and more like a collision.

“You have a key,” Anaya said before she could stop herself.

It wasn’t accusatory. She was stunned—another silence fell. Seth’s jaw tightened. “Jessy, this isn’t a good time.”

Jessy’s chin lifted slightly – neither defensive nor apologetic. Strategic.

“I think it is,” she replied in a soft voice.

The consolation Seth had been building dissolved in the charged air. It required privacy. It required control. Now there were three people in the room. Three narratives. And no version of the truth that could protect everyone at once. Then defensiveness.

“You didn’t answer my calls,” Jessy said to Seth. Anaya stepped back.

“This is unbelievable.”

Jessy's composure cracked, just slightly. Her voice sharpened. "You think this is easy for me?"

"For you?" Anaya snapped. "You announced an engagement that wasn't yours!"

Jessy turned to Seth, urgency flashing in her eyes. "You didn't tell her?"

Seth's voice rose, frustration breaking through his restraint. "I was trying to!"

The room erupted. The argument escalated quickly—words overlapping, accusations flying. Words collided mid-air—half-finished sentences. Old grievances dragged into the light. The careful, measured tones they had all mastered in conference rooms disintegrated into raw volume. The apartment felt too small to contain it—walls absorbing accusations, the ceiling trapping heat, breath, and blame.

And then— "A son?"

The word fell differently. It dropped into the chaos, silencing it. Anaya's face drained of colour as though someone had physically drawn the warmth from her. She blinked once, twice, recalibrating. Her gaze moved slowly to Jessy, then to Seth, searching their faces for correction, clarification, or anything that would reframe what she had just heard.

"A... son?" she repeated, softer now.

Her mind scrambled backwards, reassembling months with brutal speed. The secret meetings. The parks. The ice cream shops she had once seen on Seth's GPS history were dismissed as a coincidence. Jessy's careful timing. The sudden gravity of Seth's recent silences.

A child wasn't a detail. It was a life.

Her chest tightened, breath shortening as understanding settled in, devastatingly steady. This hadn't been a misunderstanding at a restaurant. This had been a history she was never invited into. She looked at Seth again, and this time the hurt was unmistakable. Shattered trust realigning into distance.

"You have a child," she said quietly. In that quiet, everything rearranged. "You lied to me—" Anaya whispered.

"You were going to abandon your son," Jessy accused.

"I was trying to protect him!" Seth hissed.

"From what? Responsibility?" Anaya.

Jessy moved closer to Seth. Anaya stepped forward. Amid the confusion, someone shoved. It wasn't intentional, but Seth stumbled back. He hit the edge of the console table, then the floor.

Hard.

The room went silent. Blood.

Bright lights.

White. Relentless. Clinical.

They blurred above him as the stretcher moved, ceiling panels sliding past in sharp rectangles. The smell hit first, antiseptic with a faint metallic tang beneath. Shoes squeaked on polished floors.

Voices overlapped in efficient fragments.

“Pupil response normal—”

“BP stabilising—”

“Careful with his head—”

Seth tried to focus, but the world tilted in uneven waves. The fluorescent glare fractured at the edges of his vision. Every sound felt amplified: the rustle of gloves snapping into place, the crinkle of paper beneath him, the steady mechanical beeping that seemed too calm for the violent spin of his thoughts.

Stitches.

He felt the tugging more than the pain. The precise pulls along his hairline, where the skin had split against the tiled floor. The cold sting of antiseptic. The pressure of the gauze. A nurse’s voice grounds him gently, deliberately, as though anchoring someone drifting too far from shore.

“Mild concussion”, a doctor said later, tone measured. “You’re lucky.”

Lucky.

The word felt hollow.

In the waiting area, the lighting was softer but no less harsh in its exposure—plastic chairs. A muted television mounted high on the wall was playing something cheerful and entirely inappropriate. The scent of vending-machine coffee hung heavy in the air.

Anaya paced anxiously.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Her hands were unsteady, fingers dragging through her hair before falling uselessly to her sides. Every time the emergency room doors swung open, her body jerked upright as hope and dread collided in her chest.

Jessy sat rigidly, elbows on her knees, hands clasped so tightly that her knuckles blanched. For once, there was no calculation in her posture. No strategic timing. Just fear, raw and undisguised. The fluorescent light drained the colour from her face.

Nothing fatal. But enough. Enough to shake certainty. Enough to make raised voices seem trivial. Enough to expose how quickly life could pivot from an argument to ambulance sirens cutting through the night air.

When they were finally allowed to see him, the hospital room hummed quietly; monitors blinked in a soft rhythm, IV fluids dripping at steady intervals. Seth lay propped slightly upright, a thin bandage tracing his temple.

He looked smaller somehow. Still.

And in the sterile quiet of that room, the weight of everything unsaid pressed heavier than any accusation had before. Jessy sat on one side of the room, Anaya on the other. Neither looked at the other. Seth's mother arrived an hour later. Both Anaya and Jessy left the room.

She sat in the armchair opposite Seth's bed, ankles crossed, spine perfectly aligned against the upholstered back as though posture alone could impose order on chaos. Even here — in a room that wasn't hers — she carried herself as if she belonged.

Seth's room felt suspended in the aftermath of an interruption. The curtains were half-drawn, admitting a diluted grey afternoon light that softened nothing. The faint scent of cologne lingered beneath the sharper antiseptic tang of the hospital wristband still looped around his arm. A glass of water sat untouched on the nightstand beside an unmade bed — sheets creased, pillows displaced, evidence of a night without rest.

He stood by the window now, recounting the events in measured tones. Edited. Streamlined. He omitted the sharpest words, softened the accusations, and rearranged the sequence to sound less explosive than before.

His mother listened without interrupting. Her fingers rested lightly on her knee, but her thumb moved once — a subtle, rhythmic tap that betrayed thought beneath stillness. Her expression revealed nothing overt. No outrage. No defensiveness.

Only assessment.

Her gaze shifted to her son, who stood by the window, narrating, unaware of the architectural tension of motherhood around him. His presence altered the air in the room — grounding, innocent, fragile.

Then her eyes moved to the door.

The door through which Anaya and Jessy had left earlier remained slightly ajar, as if the argument still lingered in the hallway outside. The faint echo of it seemed embedded in the walls — voices raised, truths exposed, and the sharp crack of trust strained. Her eyes lingered there a moment longer than necessary.

Calculating.

Then she returned her attention to Seth, who was still speaking — still trying to narrate the situation into something manageable. The room felt like a chessboard mid-game. And his mother, composed and watchful, seemed already three moves ahead.

"You need stability," she told him calmly.

"I need honesty," he replied weakly.

"You need your son."

He stiffened.

“You are a father first.”

His throat tightened. “And what does that mean?”

“It means you do not build a new life on uncertainty.”

His mother’s voice was calm — neither harsh nor emotional. That was what made it heavier. She did not raise her tone to persuade. She rarely needed to. She rose from the armchair and sat beside him on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping slightly under her weight. The gesture was intimate yet measured — a strategic closeness. Her perfume, subtle and expensive, settled into the quiet air between them.

“If that child is yours,” she said softly, “he comes before romance.”

The room seemed to contract around the sentence.

There is a particular silence that follows difficult truths: a dense silence. It now filled the space, pressing against the walls, settling into the folds of the unmade sheets. Even the faint city noise outside the window felt distant and muffled, as though the world had stepped back to let the words land fully.

Seth stared at the floor, his jaw tight.

He could feel the weight of lineage in the room. Expectation dressed as wisdom. Duty framed as clarity. His mother did not look at him with cruelty; she looked at him with certainty. And in her presence, it had always been difficult to argue with her.

Seth closed his eyes.

For a moment, he was a boy again, sitting at the kitchen table, listening to decisions being made in a tone of inevitability. His father’s quiet compliance echoes in memory. The way love had once been rearranged to accommodate responsibility. His chest tightened, his breath shallow. Because she wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t sure she was right for him either.

The quiet stretched.

And in that quiet, the shape of his future felt like something being chosen for him; gently, rationally, irrevocably.

“I love Anaya.”

The words sounded younger than he had intended.

“And does she deserve to marry into chaos?”

He had no answer. The question did not grow louder. It settled. Silence gathered between him and his mother like fog, slow, suffocating, and impossible to dispel. The grandfather clock in the hallway ticked with exaggerated precision. The refrigerator hummed somewhere in the kitchen, its ordinary sounds heightened by the gravity of the conversation.

He leaned back against the bed's headrest, staring at the ceiling.

When he pictured Anaya, it was never chaotic. It was warm light spilling across her living room floor. It was laughter echoing on late-night calls when neither of them wanted to hang up first. It was the quiet intimacy of shared glances across conference tables — a private world unfolding in public. It was the steadiness of her presence. The way she listened without manoeuvring. The way she chose softness, even when pride might have been easier. He remembered the first night she had fallen asleep.

Mid-conversation on FaceTime, her cheek pressed into her pillow, hair spilling across her face as he whispered her name softly, watching her stir. He remembered the first time she had fallen asleep beside him, her hand loosely curled against his chest as though trust were the most natural thing in the world. He remembered rooftop karaoke — her laughter when she forgot the lyrics, fearless and unpolished. The quiet glances across conference tables when someone misused corporate jargon, and they fought smiles like teenagers with a secret.

With her, nothing felt inherited. With her, the future had felt like something that grew naturally. Nothing felt scripted.

It felt chosen, intentional, and unforced.

Uncomplicated.

Then he pictured the child.

Small hands. Open trust. A voice asking careful questions. A life that might carry his name, his blood, or his absence if he chose wrong. Responsibility did not feel romantic. It felt heavy.

Permanent.

Jessy's presence in that responsibility loomed large – structured, determined, and already shaping the narrative of what fatherhood should look like. And his mother's words layered over it all like quiet doctrine: *A man handles what he creates.*

Was loving Anaya enough to justify bringing her into this? Would choosing her mean choosing escape?

Or was walking away from her a greater betrayal?

He felt as though he stood between two doors – one lit by love, the other by duty – and both demanded sacrifice. On the one hand: laughter, ease, and the version of himself who felt expansive beside Anaya. On the other hand, a child was a duty that might define him more profoundly than romance ever could. For the first time, he understood that adulthood was not about desire. It was about what you were willing to carry.

He felt it now — the weight Jessy had placed in his hands, reinforced by his mother with quiet conviction. If the child were his, love would no longer be about desire or compatibility alone. It would be about stability. Sacrifice. Presence without resentment.

He exhaled slowly.

Love felt bright.

Responsibility felt permanent.

He opened his eyes slowly, staring at the fading lines of sunlight across the wall.

Anaya stood at the door, stunned. She had heard enough through the thin hospital walls.

You need your son. You are a father first.

She leaned against the wall. The paint behind her felt cold against the thin fabric of her blouse. Her chest ached with slow, heavy pulses. The corridor outside the hospital room was too white and clean. The fluorescent lights hummed faintly overhead, creating no deep shadows to hide in. Nurses walked by wearing soft-soled shoes, their murmurs clinical and detached. Life continued in measured routines.

Her chest ached. It wasn't anger any more. It was grief.

Over the future she had built in secret – the soft architecture of shared mornings, the imagined arguments over paint colours, and the way she had already pictured placing her books on his shelves for good. She had allowed herself to believe in something steady. Chosen. Earned.

And now it felt like she had been auditioning for a role already cast. She realised something devastating:

Even if the ring had truly been hers... She would always come second to a secret she never asked to share. A child wasn't a mistake you corrected. It wasn't a misunderstanding you clarified. It was a living truth that would forever outrank her place in his life. Every holiday. Every emergency. Every decision. She would be the adjustment. The accommodation. She was hurt that he had carried the secret alone. He had let her fall deeper while keeping something this large behind his ribs.

What hollowed her out further was that she had loved Jessy too, fiercely. Loyally. The way women sometimes love each other when the world feels sharp, competitive, and unkind. Jessy had been her mentor. Her confidante. Her late-night takeout companion. The one who had laughed freely at candlelit tables and shared fragments of vulnerability in casual remarks.

She had called her *sister* once. She trusted her with the soft parts of herself she didn't offer easily.

Had Jessy known how deeply she felt for Seth?

Of course, she had. Jessy had known. The hidden meetings. The withheld truth. The fact that she had stood in rooms with both of them – laughing, trusting, and loving – while something fundamental lay beneath her feet, undisclosed.

That was the fracture.

Jessy had looked her in the eye. She had rested her elbow on her desk. She had let her believe they were safe together. She had known about Seth's quiet closeness with Anaya. She had seen it forming, felt it. And still, she had let Anaya stand in that tainted reality, unaware of the deeper truth waiting beneath the surface.

It wasn't just an omission. It was a cover-up.

It allowed her to fall in love without full information. And sincerity, she was learning, did not protect you from being the last to know. The betrayal from Seth cut one way: intimately, romantically, and destabilising.

The betrayal by Jessy cut deeper. It fractured a friendship. Sisterhood. Solidarity. She had loved them both. Somehow, they had chosen each other in silence first.

She had not just lost a proposal. She had lost certainty. The version of love that felt mutual and transparent. The sisterhood she thought was real. The cruellest aspect was that she still loved them. Walking away from both of them felt less like strength... and more like tearing something living from her own chest.

Her mind replayed Jessy's radiant and triumphant laughter from the restaurant video. Anaya had previously admired that strength. That composure. Now it felt like a choreography she had not been invited to understand. She pressed her palm against her sternum, as if she could physically hold the ache there. Tears slid down in silence. She wiped them away before walking away. However, something inside her had already taken a step back.

CHAPTER TEN

Anaya didn't go back into Seth's room straight away. She stood by the vending machines, staring at nothing. Her phone felt heavy in her hand. There was only one person she wanted to hear from.

She scrolled. Pressed call.

"Dad?" Her voice broke on the first syllable.

On the other end, her father straightened at once. She could hear it — the shift in his breathing, the scrape of a chair as he likely rose from wherever he'd been sitting.

"Anaya? What happened?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Everything."

A pause. But not the kind she needed. Not the kind in which a parent hears the fracture beneath the words. Instead, his tone softened with anticipation, almost buoyant.

"I was going to tell you once it was finalised," he said gently. "But maybe now is the right time."

There was a rustle of papers on his side. The faint clink of a teacup being set down. He sounded... pleased. Energised. He was oblivious to the tremor still lingering in her voice.

Her brow furrowed. "Tell me what?"

"The scholarship."

Silence.

"The one you applied for last year? The international leadership programme?" Her heart skipped.

"In the UK?"

"Yes. It came through. Full sponsorship. Accommodation covered." Her knees felt weak.

"You got it, Anaya," he said. "I didn't want to say anything too soon," he added, warmth threading through every word. "But it's official now. The scholarship has gone through. You're growing. This is big, Anaya. Bigger than I expected."

She closed her eyes.

He mistook her silence for suspense.

"I've been waiting to share it with you," he added, almost laughing. "You always said this would happen."

He was excited. Proud. Completely unaware that his daughter was stranded in a hallway, her mascara drying faintly beneath her eyes, her heart quietly splitting open.

She swallowed. "Dad..."

But he was already mid-thought, mid-celebration — narrating visas, timelines, and opportunity, his joy filling the line without noticing her grief shrinking beneath it.

For a moment, she let him. Let him be happy. Let him remain untouched by the mess of her unravelling. Somehow, explaining that the future she thought she had was collapsing felt heavier than simply listening to his good news. So she stood there, phone pressed to her ear, absorbing one more reminder that life does not stagger its revelations. It delivers them all at once.

She leaned against the wall. “When?”

“They need confirmation this week.” The timing felt almost cruel or divine.

“I didn’t want to pressure you,” her father continued. “You seemed settled, so I thought perhaps you’d chosen to stay.”

Chosen?

The word settled heavily in her chest.

Had she chosen?

Or had she clung to what was offered?

Her mind drifted back — to the night Seth first kissed her under a sky thick with clouds, when everything between them felt reckless and inevitable. Mornings in his kitchen, sunlight slicing through the blinds as he made coffee too strong and called it perfect. The way Jessy used to wrap her arms around her from behind, laughing into her shoulder and calling her “sister” as if it were sacred.

She had built a life here, in fragments of intimacy. In borrowed rooms. In whispered plans. She remembered the proposal to be his girlfriend – not the moment itself but the feeling that followed. The quiet hesitation she had swallowed. The flicker of doubt she had told herself was only nerves.

Had she mistaken intensity for security?

If she stayed, what would she be staying for?

For Seth — who loved her, yes, but who carried storms in his pockets. Who was already being pulled towards something heavier, darker, something she could feel but never fully see? For Jessy — who had shared secrets with her, braided her hair when she cried, and sworn there would never be anything they couldn’t say to each other and yet had held back the biggest truth until it detonated.

Staying meant forgiveness. Staying meant accepting that she would always be near something hidden.

But leaving...

Leaving meant surrendering the version of herself who had dared to imagine permanence. It meant packing away the apartment with the pale blue curtains she had chosen. It meant walking away before knowing whether love could survive the truth.

Leaving meant choosing herself.

And that terrified her more than betrayal ever had.

On the other end of the line, her father was still speaking — about timelines, visa processing, and how proud he would be to have her back.

Back.

There was safety there. Familiarity. A future untainted by secrets. But there was also a sense of retreat. She opened her eyes and stared down the empty hallway.

Was it a show of strength?

Or was leaving the first real choice she would make for herself?

For the first time, the question felt less about Seth and Jessy and more about who Anaya would become if she stopped orbiting everyone else's gravity.

"Dad," she said softly, her voice steadier now. This time, she wasn't breaking. She was deciding. "I'll go," she said.

There was relief in her father's exhale. "Good. Come home. We'll sort everything."

Home.

The word landed differently now, as inevitability. When she finally stepped back into Seth's hospital room, she was composed. Too composed. The hallway smell followed her in — antiseptic and something metallic beneath it. The fluorescent lights flattened everything, drained warmth from skin tones, and softened nothing. Jessy was there, sitting close to the bed, her fingers loosely wrapped around Seth's hand — too close. Close enough to signal history. His mother stood by the window, arms folded, gaze fixed on the parking lot below, as if watching for threats that no longer existed.

Three people.

Four, if you counted the machines.

The monitor beside Seth blinked in steady green pulses. A heart translated into geometry. A life reduced to rhythm. Seth looked smaller in the hospital bed. The bravado that usually lived in his shoulders had been stripped away by gauze and exhaustion. A faint bruise shadowed his temple; stitches curved like a cruel smile along his hairline. His eyes lifted as she entered.

"Anaya."

She stepped closer but didn't touch him.

Hope flickered there—dangerous, fragile hope. Anaya felt something inside her tighten.

Distance.

She stepped fully into the room, the door clicking shut behind her with a finality that sounded louder than it should. Jessy noticed it first — the stillness in Anaya's posture. The absence of a tremor. Her back was straight. Her chin level — no red-rimmed eyes. No accusation. Jessy's expression was confusion threading through concern. Seth's mother turned from the window and assessed her. Anaya had always been the soft one. The mediator. The one who reached out instead of drawing lines. But now she looked carved from something steadier. Something colder.

"I spoke to my dad," she said. Her voice did not tremble.

The monitor continued its indifferent beeping. Seth swallowed. "And?"

Anaya looked at him. At the man she had almost promised to spend forever with. At the chaos stitched invisibly into his life. At the secret that had lived in the room long before she knew it existed.

"I'm leaving," she said quietly. The words didn't echo.

They settled.

Jessy's grip on Seth's hand tightened involuntarily. His mother inhaled sharply. Seth stared at her as if she'd spoken a language he didn't understand. For a split second, something wild flickered in his eyes—panic, defiance, and love colliding all at once. But Anaya didn't move towards him.

She didn't step back either.

She stood exactly where she had been — composed, deliberate, and no longer orbiting anyone else's gravity.

"Leaving... the hospital?" Seth tried weakly.

"The country."

Silence filled the room. "For how long?" he asked.

"Two years. Maybe more."

His face drained. "You're not serious."

"I am."

The words didn't rise. They didn't crack. They settled.

Seth stared at her as if she'd just tilted the axis of the world. After a moment, he shifted painfully against the pillows and glanced towards his mother. A subtle motion. A slight lift of his fingers.

Privacy.

His mother understood at once. She crossed the room without a word, her heels soft on the tile. She gently touched Jessy's shoulder.

"Come," she murmured.

Jessy hesitated—her eyes darting between Seth and Anaya, searching for something she couldn't name. An apology? Permission? Control?

Anaya didn't look at her.

Seth's mother took Jessy's hand and led her out. The door clicked shut behind them. The room exhaled. For a moment, neither spoke. Seth pushed himself up a little higher despite the strain.

"You don't mean that. Is it because of what my mother said?"

"It's because of everything."

"Because of this?" His hand gestured vaguely, referring to the bandages, the accident, and the secret that neither of them had properly identified. "Because of Jessy? You can't simply walk away," Seth explained.

Anaya met his gaze. He dragged a hand down his face, wincing as it brushed the stitches.

"Anaya, we can fix this."

"We?" she asked softly. "You were about to build a life that already had foundations."

"That's not fair. And yes, we." His voice cracked. "I love you. That hasn't changed."

The words would once have undone her. Now they pressed against something already scarred. "I know," she said.

"Then don't do this." His breathing quickened, frustration bleeding into desperation. "Don't run when it gets hard."

"No," she agreed quietly. "It isn't. I'm not running," she replied evenly.

"You are. You always do this. When things get complicated, you retreat into a version of strength and call it independence."

He was now grasping and fighting with whatever weapons he had left. Anaya stepped closer to the bed — not to comfort him, but so he would hear her without shouting.

"I stayed," she said quietly. "Through the awkwardness, through the half-truths. I felt I was auditioning for a place in your life that was already crowded. I loved you," she said.

Past tense.

It landed like a blow.

"I still do, but love shouldn't feel like a competition with ghosts and obligations."

"That's not fair."

"Neither was finding out the way I did."

His jaw tightened. Silence flickered between them again, but this time it was edged with tension. “I was going to tell you,” he insisted.

“When?” she asked. He had no answer.

The machine filled it for him. Beep. Beep.

Seth reached for her hand. She let him hold it for a second, then gently pulled away. “Two years?” he whispered. “You’d throw us away for two years?”

“I’m not throwing us away,” she said. “I’m choosing myself.”

His grip tightened. “And what am I supposed to do? Just wait?”

“That’s not for me to decide.”

It was the calm that frightened him most—the resolve.

“I can’t lose you,” he said, and now it was laid bare — no pride, no performance. “Not like this.”

She felt the plea move through her, familiar and magnetic. It would be easier to fight. Easier to scream. Easier to let emotion blur the edges of the choice she’d made in the hallway. But she was tired of fighting for clarity amid chaos.

“You didn’t lose me,” she said softly. “You just didn’t protect what we had.”

The words were not intended to wound. “I hope you work out what kind of father you want to be.”

He leaned back against the pillows like the effort of arguing had cost him something physical. “So that’s it?” he asked. “You’re just... done.”

She searched for hesitation. For a crack. There was sadness. There was love. But no doubt. The hallway argument must have frayed whatever restraint Jessy had left. The door burst open hard enough to ricochet off the stopper. Jessy stood there, breath uneven, eyes too bright – as if she’d been holding herself together with sheer will, and it had finally snapped. Seth’s mother’s voice followed her, sharp and low. “Jessy—”

But Jessy was already inside.

The air shifted instantly. Anaya didn’t turn around at first. She felt it—the disruption, the heat of it. The old familiarity of Jessy’s presence was now edged with volatility.

Seth straightened instinctively in the bed. “Jess—”

“No,” Jessy cut in, stepping forward. “No, I’m not standing out there while she—” Her voice faltered, then hardened. “While this happens.”

“I leave in three weeks,” she said. She didn’t look at Jessy when she said it.

Her gaze locked onto Anaya. They were both hurt. But beneath the hurt was something sharper. Possessive. Desperate. Anaya turned slowly. Jessy looked different up close. Mascara smudged faintly beneath her eyes. Hair pulled back too tightly, as if she'd needed control somewhere. Her hands trembled, but her chin was lifted in defiance.

"You're leaving?" Jessy demanded. The monitor's pace quickened slightly.

"Yes," Anaya answered.

"You can't just decide that."

"I already did."

Jessy let out a humourless laugh. "So that's it? You get to walk away, and the rest of us just... what? Clean up whatever this becomes?"

Seth's mother stepped in now, closing the door carefully, as if containment might soften the explosion. "Jessy," she warned gently.

But Jessy's eyes never left Anaya.

"You said you loved him," she said, her voice cracking. "You said you loved us."

The word 'us' trembled between them – layered and complicated. Anaya felt the ache of it. She had loved them both in different ways and had trusted them differently. She had built herself around their laughter and their promises.

"I did," Anaya said quietly.

"Then stay."

It wasn't a command. It was a plea.

For a second, Jessy looked younger. Smaller. Like the girl who used to braid Anaya's hair on lazy Sundays. Like the sister she had chosen. Seth's hand clenched in the bedsheets. Anaya stepped back, creating space without meaning to. His eyes closed briefly, as if absorbing the impact. When he opened them again, the pleading had dulled into something quieter—a realisation.

"That's not enough anymore," Anaya said. Jessy's composure fractured.

"This is because of me," she accused, her voice rising. "Because of what you found out."

"It's because of everything, Jessy," Anaya replied. "Not just you."

"That's a lie."

"It's not."

Jessy's jealousy flared then – raw and ugly, born from fear.

“You think leaving makes you better than us?” she shot back. “You think running makes you brave?”

Runner.

The word had followed Anaya her whole life. Seth shifted uncomfortably but didn’t interrupt this time. Anaya’s expression didn’t change.

“I’m not better,” she said. “I’m just done competing with a ghost.” The room stilled.

Jessy’s expression flickered — guilt, recognition, and denial colliding in real time. “You were never competing,” Jessy whispered.

Anaya held her gaze. “I was.”

The monitor continued its steady rhythm.

Seth looked between them — two women he loved in entirely different ways, both slipping through his fingers for reasons he could no longer control. Jessy’s shoulders sagged slightly, but her eyes still burnt.

“If you walk out that door,” she said, quieter now, “don’t expect everything to be waiting for you when you come back.”

Anaya nodded once. “I won’t.”

And somehow that was what finally broke the room open. Anaya left. At home, she folded the dress she had planned to wear for their date night and put it at the bottom of her suitcase. Her phone buzzed repeatedly.

Seth.

She didn’t answer.

Instead, she typed a message.

I don’t want to be chosen out of guilt. If you ever choose me, let it be when you are free of doubt. Until then, let me go.

She turned her phone off.

Her father had arrived earlier. He was shocked by the beaten state of his daughter. He hugged her tightly.

“You’re sure?” he asked. She nodded.

“I need to become someone who doesn’t shrink for love.”

He smiled sadly. “You already are.”

Seth was discharged two days later. The apartment felt emptier than before. The ring box remained on the kitchen counter.

Still open.

Jessy stood by the window as he entered. “She’s gone,” he said flatly.

Jessy didn’t respond immediately. She hadn’t fully expected this. “I didn’t mean for it to—”

“I know,” he cut in.

But something had shifted. He looked at her differently now, with a sense of distance. “You should focus on your son,” she said softly.

He met her gaze. “Yes,” he replied.

But not the way she hoped.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Two weeks later, at the office, rain pelted the building's glass façade. The sky hung low and grey, mirroring the mood that had settled over the floor since Seth's hospitalisation. Anaya moved quietly between her desk and a cardboard box.

Files.

A framed photo.

A small potted plant.

Colleagues pretended not to stare. Whispers travelled anyway. Jessy watched from across the room. Composed. Controlled. Impeccable in white. When Anaya sealed the box with tape, Jessy stood.

"Can we talk?"

Anaya hesitated for a moment, then nodded. The office balcony doors slid open with a muted hiss. A cold

Wind rushed in, carrying the scent of rain. Water had pooled in thin sheets across the tiled floor. They stepped outside. The glass wall behind them reflected the silhouettes of curious colleagues pretending to work. For a moment, neither spoke. Rain pounded the metal railing. Jessy finally broke the silence.

"You're really leaving."

"Yes."

"You didn't fight."

Anaya's voice was calm. "Not everything is meant to be fought for."

Jessy tilted her head slightly. "You're angry."

"I'm tired."

That answer unsettled Jessy more than anger would have. She stepped closer. "You know he needs stability."

Anaya didn't respond.

"He needs his family," Jessy continued softly. "You saw how his mother reacted." Anaya fell silent. Jessy's tone shifted – almost gentle.

"Let him go, Anaya. Let us build what we already started."

The words were careful. Possessive without sounding possessive. Anaya finally met her gaze. "You mean the lie you started?"

Jessy's eyes flickered. She recovered quickly. "We all did what we had to."

The wind pushed rainwater further across the floor. Inside, silhouettes shifted closer to the glass. Watching, always watching. Jessy deliberately softened her expression.

“I don’t want us to end like this,” she said. “We are friends.” Anaya’s lips trembled.

“We were,” Anaya corrected.

Jessy stepped forward, opening her arms.

“Let’s not make this ugly.”

Anaya hesitated. Then, resigned, she stepped into the embrace. From the outside, it looked like reconciliation. Two women hugging in the rain.

Closure. Maturity.

Cameras lifted subtly behind glass. Jessy deliberately tightened her arms, holding them longer than necessary. Her lips brushed Anaya’s ear. In a voice too low for anyone else to hear, she whispered:

“I always win.”

Anaya stiffened. Jessy’s grip tightened ever so slightly.

“I warned you,” she breathed. “Keep your enemies closer.” The words hit like a bucket of ice water. Anaya pulled back abruptly.

“What did you—”

Jessy released her. But the tiles were slick. Jessy’s heel skidded. Anaya’s box, which was still in one hand, tipped sideways, causing time to fracture. Jessy’s body tilted backwards. Anaya reached out with her free hand. Jessy’s eyes widened, but she wasn’t sure if it was from shock or calculation. Anaya’s fingers grasped at air. The railing caught Jessy’s hip, but her momentum propelled her over. A scream erupted from her throat. Sharp. Terrified.

Then—

Silence.

The scream shattered the glass. Chairs scraped violently. Someone shouted. Anaya stood frozen. The rain continued to pour, as if angry at the deception. Anaya’s breath was shallow. For one suspended second, she did not move. Then chaos erupted. Employees rushed towards the balcony. Someone called out for security. Another screamed for an ambulance. Anaya stepped slowly towards the railing. Her hands trembled now — genuinely. She lowered her gaze. Whatever she saw drained the colour from her face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There are moments in life that last less than a second yet rewrite everything: the cost of a minute—the slip.

The scream.

The blur of white, rain, and railing.

And then—

Impact. Fatal. Enough for sirens. Enough for blood. Enough for witnesses to conclude the facts. Anaya remembered hands gripping her shoulders. Voices overlapped. Someone shouted, “She pushed her!” She didn’t even know who had spoken first. But once it was said, it stuck, like the truth. Jessie lay below on the lower terrace level – unconscious, bleeding, alive or not.

And Anaya—

Anaya stood on the balcony, soaked by the rain, shaking. “I didn’t—” she tried.

No one heard.

Or perhaps no one wanted to. They had seen the shove. They had seen Anaya push away from the embrace. They had seen Jessie fall. That was enough. The same colleagues who once giggled with her over coffee now avoided her eyes. Phones buzzed. Rumours outran ambulances

“She snapped.”

“It was over, Seth.”

“I always knew she was too quiet.”

No one mentioned the whisper. No one heard it.

“Did you push her?”

“No.”

“Were you arguing?” “I— We—”

“Were you jealous?”

Silence.

Her hesitation was taken as a confession. The same sterile lights. The same metallic scent. But this time she stood alone. Seth arrived minutes later.

His face when he saw her—judgement.

Fear.

Disbelief.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“She slipped,” Anaya whispered.

But behind him stood the manager. And behind them, the murmurs.

“She pushed her.”

“She was unstable.”

“She couldn’t handle losing.”

The narrative had already chosen its villain. Anaya stood before a circle of judgement. “I didn’t push her intentionally,” she said.

The word *intentionally* betrayed her.

Why intentionally?

Why not simply deny it?

She tried again.

“It was an accident.”

But the more she explained, the guiltier she sounded. Jessy remained unconscious. Unable to confirm. Unable to deny. And silence, silence, is the most dangerous witness. Rain continued to fall outside the office windows. Somewhere in the city, a suitcase still lay half-packed. A scholarship acceptance email waited unread. A ring remained in its velvet box. Seth stood torn between a woman lying, splattered, on the ground floor and a woman no one believed.

Anaya felt it then.

The weight of collective judgement. Heavy. Final. Unforgiving.

She realised something devastating: Truth does not always win.

Sometimes—

The person who tells the story first does so. And somewhere, faintly, almost like an echo carried on the rain—she heard it again: *I always win.*

-END-