All That Is Left Behind

Lyv Aiken

STORYPDF

Complete English text · A4 reading edition

Contents

— Chapter One — 5

— Chapter Two — 9

— Chapter Three — 12

— Chapter Four — 17

— Chapter Five — 23

— Chapter Six — 26

— Chapter Seven — 30

— Chapter Eight — 33

— Chapter Nine — 37

— Chapter Ten — 42

— Chapter Eleven — 45

— Chapter Twelve — 48

— Chapter Thirteen — 52

— Chapter Fourteen — 56

— Chapter Fifteen — 59

— Chapter Sixteen — 63

— Chapter Seventeen — 67

— Chapter Eighteen — 71

— Chapter Nineteen — 74

— Chapter Twenty — 77

— Chapter Twenty-One — 82

— Chapter Twenty-Two — 86

— Chapter Twenty-Three — 89

— Chapter Twenty-Four — 93

— Chapter Twenty-Five — 97

— Chapter Twenty-Six — 100

— Chapter Twenty-Seven — 104

— Chapter Twenty-Eight — 108

— Chapter Twenty-Nine — 111

— Chapter Thirty — 114

— Chapter Thirty-One — 119

— Chapter Thirty-Two — 122

— Chapter Thirty-Three — 125

— Chapter Thirty-Four — 128

— Chapter Thirty-Five — 131

— Chapter Thirty-Six — 134

— Chapter Thirty-Seven — 137

— Chapter Thirty-Eight — 140

— Chapter Thirty-Nine — 144

About this edition

This StoryPDF reading edition contains the complete English text, with its original paragraph and section order preserved.

Newly typeset with selectable text, a linked contents section and chapter bookmarks. Copyright rules can differ by country. Corrections and rights enquiries: liuxinglianxue@gmail.com.

Read online: StoryPDF / All That Is Left Behind.

Reading edition: 2026-10-28. Typography: Crimson Text (SIL Open Font License).

— Chapter One —

We all have this ideal of what normalcy is, and generally, all see ourselves as normal. I was this way once. It's only halfway down a downward spiral that you start to realise what's really going on. It's only when the uncredible as occur that it sinks in how mundane it can be. It's to the simplest people that the wildest stories occur, but you only learn this once you live it.

It was late when I came home.

After I walked the dog, ate, and changed clothes, I went to my tiny studio and looked at the unfinished painting.

I sat on my stool and spent half an hour mixing paints and trying to get back exactly the colours I had been using. Then I looked back to my original sketch, did a few tweaks, and went back to touching up on the water at the bottom left of the canvas. It took me nearly a full hour to get my creative juices flowing, and I had no more than half an hour of actual productive painting, until I had to but everything down, close the tubs, wash the pan and brushes. In the end, I took nearly as much time setting up and cleaning after, than I had time to actually paint, and I was wasting so much paint, by washing so often, but I was working two jobs, seven days a week, and I didn't have anymore time to give to my passion.

I actually dropped painting altogether for months, until I whipped myself back into shape and started again, to burn out a month or two later, until I'd force myself to do it again, repeating in an endless circle.

If I didn't discipline myself, I would have stopped completely, but every time this thought came, it terrified me, as I realised how few little happiness I allowed myself.

This city was ridiculously expensive, and my small apartment was still beyond my means. I had managed to find one with this tiny room that I rented out from time to time to help pay my bills, and would use it as a makeshift art studio in between roommates.

I would then move my painting supplies to my own small bedroom, but then it would smell like paint day and night.

Still, I had been lucky with this apartment, it was a former storage facility that had been transformed into a flat, and it was more space than I would have been able to afford if I had a good view, or cross breeze, or luminosity. But there was a nice little park nearby and the block was relatively safe, even late, and there were plenty of public transportation options.

But I still needed the two jobs to pay for the rent, and food, and all the essentials, leaving me with little spare money, and my painting hobby was becoming a little too expensive for my means. No matter how much good bargain paints I manage to snatch, or that I made my own canvas.

I didn't date, I didn't go to bars, I shopped my clothes in second-hand stores, and furniture on Craigslist in the donation section. I would scrooge every cent I could, yet it was barely enough to stay afloat, and I was left with mostly two options, leave the city for somewhere cheaper to live in, but with less work opportunity, or find some better paying job and stay here.

My knees creaked painfully as I got up, and my legs, swollen like sausages, were painful and clumsy. It was what happened when I sat on a tiny uncomfortable stool for nearly two hours after working on my feet for ten. It was terrible for my blood circulation. I should find something better than this stool, but I had to surf the internet for ages to find something free and decent that wasn't too far for me to go and pick it up using public transport. People would not like me to move a love seat through the metro system.

I felt old.

I walked gingerly and I finished washing in the sink.

I had to shower, but my legs didn't feel like they could manage a shower, and I decided to indulge in a bath.

The tub was much too small, but at least I had a tub, which was impressive in this section of the city, without needing a six-figure salary to pay for rent.

I let myself soak long enough for part of the swelling to go down, then walked the dog again, and went straight to bed.

I had changed a shift with one of my colleagues that needed a day off for some appointments, so on Monday I had done a fourteen-hour shift, but, that meant that today I only had a half shift.

It had been a really long time since I had been able to enjoy the afternoon sun, and I decided to indulge in a rare moment of luxury as I took my dog to the park and sat down on a blanket to scribble.

I liked observing life around me. It was my best drawing exercise and I used to draw two to ten pieces every day of people and things I observed. While doing this, I had improved tremendously, and it had been one of my gateways to art.

If I could start my days, scratching paper for at least half an hour, I would feel better all day long.

I had promised myself, I would keep that habit for the rest of my life as it became my daily therapy session, but life had other plans.

When you first go to college, you leave with your head full of dreams and ideas of what the adult world is. A lot of it is an idolised version of reality. We want to save the world and make it a better place. We've been told all our youth that if you applied yourself enough, you can do anything.

And then reality smacks you on the forehead pretty hard. Bills, responsibilities, and trying to make your social life survive the clash with school and work.

It's a bit of a tough awakening, and it takes a little while to sink in, but it eventually does.

I knew how hard the reality of the life of an artist was supposed to be, but I went to art school regardless. I thought I could find some work as a graphic designer or something along that line and paint in my off time, marry the two for a while until I could focus on the latter some more.

The reality was that the more I did boring logos and uninspiring projects, the more I grew to dislike what had been my raison d'être for so long.

And then images stopped appearing in my head. I drew nothing but blanks.

I had the skills to do this, and the pay was a bit better than retail, but not by much, and I grew more and more tired of it.

Growing to dislike art was the worst for me, and I decided that I preferred doing less of it, and having less income at a more boring job, than just doing various font choice for a construction business logo.

It was not an unworthy job, it was a good job, just not one for me.

So I quit, and now, technically, I have a degree that has led me to no additional income, which so many had warned me of. But deep down I didn't regret studying art. It had, actually, been some of the best years of my life, despite everything. It was an experience that I could not forsake, but it had been an expensive one, and now I was paying for that choice.

Maybe I should have become a doctor or something.

I was considering going back to school, maybe taking evening classes in something that would take me six months to a year of studies to get me a relatively decent job, maybe not a doctor's level of income, but at least better than this.

It would be a good start, and my frugality has allowed me to pile a bit of money aside. Plus I had managed to sell two paintings on Etsy, money that I hadn't touched so that I could do something better out of my life.

I wanted something more, not just financially, but saving every penny didn't make social life easy, nor dating.

When you keep telling 'no' to people because you can't afford the activities they're proposing, after a while, you stop getting propositions, and there are only so many things one can do without spending money.

Today, I was doing one of those, clearly not the best for my social life, but it was great for my mind and soul.

I drew faces of passersby, I drew my dogs frolicking in the grass joyfully, I drew a building, and whatever else I could find to draw. Not all the most interesting subjects, but at least working my drawing muscles a bit.

It was as I was silently observing the world that I notice a lone child, going in circles and looking around in desperation.

— Chapter Two —

I took my dog in my arms, and I made my way to the boy. I was no older than four of five, and there was absolute distress written all over his face.

I made sure to have a good grip on my dog as he could get exited easily, and I knew a lot of people, including children, are easily intimidated by dogs, especially the overly expressive ones.

“Hey there,” I said.

The boy didn’t even look at me.

“Are you lost?” I asked him.

He didn’t turn around, but I knew he heard and understood me as he pointedly put his back to mine. There were silent tears in his eyes, but contrary to most children I’ve encountered, he wasn’t expressing his sadness very openly, which I found quite strange.

“You see,” I began. “My dog is named Miki, and he kept asking me to come around here. I really don’t know why. Do you? Maybe there’s a tennis ball hidden here somewhere. Would you help me look?”

He finally turned around, but his eyes were automatically drawn to Miki.

Miki gave him a doggy grin and waved his tail so hard, his little booty went side to side in my arms.

The boy had brown hair and gorgeous large brown eyes. He was wearing good clean clothes too that fit him perfectly. And he looked at the dog, hypnotized.

“Do you want to pet him?” I asked.

He said nothing, but I knew he heard me. He didn’t look at me, still glued to Miki.

“Here, let me show you how.” Then I spent the next minute showing the boy how to pet a dog.

“Do you want to try?” I asked him.

He finally dared look at me. It was brief, and he returned his gaze automatically to Miki. It gave me the strange vibe you get with autistic children. He had problems looking in my eyes, but clearly none in looking in a dog’s eyes, so I used this to try to open a channel of communication.

It took him a few minutes, and we finally both sat on the grass, I sat Miki in between us, keeping my hand on him to make sure he would not get too close to the kid and spook him, whom eventually caved and gave the first pet. It was short and just one finger on the forehead for maybe two seconds, then he pressed his hands together on his chest and kept looking at the dog.

I repeated the exercise a few times, and he did more and more every time.

I wanted to question him more about his parents or why he was alone, but I wasn't even sure he talked, and given how he ignored me when I started with this line of questioning, I decided not to push on too quickly as I feared he'd stopped communicating altogether.

Granted this communication method was pretty rudimentary, but at least it was one.

He was not crying either, and as minutes went by and he interacted more and more with the dog, his expression slowly melted into one of pure childish glee.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

His smiled disappeared as he looked briefly at me.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I'm Mila. I live with Miki not far from here. Miki loves parks very much, so we came here for a bit of fun."

I thought that if I shared information first it could make me sound more trustworthy, but I wasn't sure if this technique worked with children.

I dug into my bag, and next to my drawing pad, I found a little bag.

Miki realised right away what was going on, and suddenly ignore the kid and turned to me.

I took a treat out slowly, making him sit.

Miki could hardly contain his excitement and sat, shaking his weight from his left paw to his right.

I held the treat above his head and made him lie down. I had to say it twice until, his desire for the biscuit overcame his excitement and then I gave it to him.

The child looked at this scene in pure fascination.

"Do you want to try it?" I asked.

He nodded.

I did an internal 'yoop' as I managed to make the kid say something. Silently, but still, it's an achievement.

"You have to tell him to sit though," I said as Miki was now back on his paws going in circles and then sitting, but going back up and putting his paws on my legs to tell me he was still down for more treats.

It took a lot of coaxing out of me to finally make the kid talk. I guessed that if he was more interested in the dog than me that he might be more willing to talk to him rather than me.

It took a few minutes for him to get the gist of what had to be done, but he worked it out faster than I expected. So the kid was intelligent enough.

He ended up feeding five treats in a row to Miki.

I would normally not encourage so much feeding, but it was working really well, and I had heard the boy say at least four words now, and they were not as hard to get out of him than they had been at first.

Once the treats were all gone, he looked at me expectantly.

“Do you know what Miki loves?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

“He loves to hear stories.”

Which wasn’t untrue. The moment you talk to a dog, the moment he realises he’s the center of attention, it’s like the greatest moment of his life, or at least, this is how my dog rolls.

“You can tell him about your day if you want,” I said.

He hesitated, probably too shy, and I went ahead and demonstrated how it’s done. I began by telling Miki what I had been doing today and how I was doing, looking at him and giving him all my attention, which he craved and got overly joyful. So much so that I had to tell him off a few times so that he would not lick my face.

It made the boy laugh every time.

It took a few times, but eventually he began talking.

At first it was disjointed words, that, out of context, made no sense to me. But it slowly grew into coherence.

He was here with his father. He didn’t mention his mother, so she was probably not here with him. He said his father travels, so I considered that maybe he’s from out of town. He mentioned a few places that I couldn’t pinpoint, and then he turned his attention to me.

“Pee,” he said.

“You need to pee?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Do you want to come to my and Miki’s house to go to the bathroom?”

He nodded again, moving his weight around, clearly struggling with his bladder.

“Okay,” I said.

I took one of my earpods out and put it in my ears, signalled 911, put the phone in my bag, then grabbed the leash in one hand, and the kids hand in my other and we walked to my place.

— Chapter Three —

“911, what is your emergency?” asked the operator.

“I found a lost child at Mont-Royal’s Park, he doesn’t talk much so I don’t know his name yet, but he needs to pee so I’m taking him to my place.” I gave her the address and a description of the child, and every other information I had managed to get out of him. I also promised to bring him to a police station after, and gave them my phone number, just in case.

He followed me quietly, holding my hand all the way until we reached my apartment.

“Do you need help, sweetie?” I asked him.

He shook his head and closed the door behind him.

I smiled and let him do his thing.

I put my bag down and grabbed my purse so that I would have my ID and everything I could need at the police station, and googled the closest police station.

“KITTY!” he screamed.

I jumped out of my skin.

I didn’t even realise he was out.

“Kitty,” he told me loudly, pointing at my cat.

“Don’t scream, please. You will scare her,” I said.

He smacked his hands on his mouth. “You can talk softly, though. Her name is Lily and she’s really sweet.”

“Can I pet Lily?” he asked.

I think it’s the longest sentence he ever addressed directly at me.

“Yes, you can,” I said. “But I think you scared her a little when you screamed. Do you want me to find her and bring her here so you can pet her?”

He nodded and I complied.

We sat in my small living-room, and I let him pet Lily for a little while.

“What is your name?” I asked.

He said nothing and continued to caress Lily’s head carefully.

“You know the name of Lily and Miki, but they don’t know your name.”

“Eloim,” he admitted.

“Do you know your last name?”

He said nothing.

Well, at least I had a first name.

“There is someplace we should go to, Eloim.”

He shook his head.

“I think your family is looking for you.”

“No.”

“You don’t think they’re looking for you?”

“No, I pet Lily.”

“Lily really likes you, you know.”

He looked up at me.

“Miki likes you too.”

He looked at the dog that was sitting right next to my thigh and looking at the scene joyfully.

“I’m sure there are a lot of other people who like you too.”

He frowned.

“Do you like me?” he asked.

“I do,” I replied.

He put one hand on Lily and another on Miki and tried to coordinate his double petting.

“We could go on this trip together if you want.”

“Later,” he said.

I nodded. “We can wait a few more minutes.”

“I’m hungry.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Spaghetti,” he replied with determination.

I couldn’t help it, I smiled.

“How about, you play with Lily and Miki, while I prepare some spaghetti, and then once you’ve eaten we can go and take a walk together?”

He frowned, thinking.

“We could walk with Miki, he adores walks.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

I nodded, grabbed some of the pet’s toys and lend them to Eloim, got up, and went to the kitchen.

He was an instant success with both pets and I could hear him laugh enthusiastically.

I put water on the stove and scrounge up some quick homemade sauce as I had nothing ready.

The pasta was nearly cooked, and the sauce underway when I heard knocks on the door. Miki barked, but Eloim didn’t stop playing and laughing.

I had my suspicions that were confirmed as I opened the door, dog in hand so that he would not rush into the corridor and try to impress the cop.

“Hello, Miss. You called for a lost child at Mont-Royal?” the policeman asked me. He was tall and kind-looking. Behind him was a handsome man in a blazer looking anxious.

“Yes, gentlemen,” I said moving aside. “He’s here. We were about to go to the police station in a few minutes. He’s playing with the cat in the living room.”

The man rushed inside the room straight to Eloim and hugged him talking softly.

The policeman stood aside next to my door so that I could close it.

I put my dog down, and told him, “Sit.” As I didn’t want him to bother the men, and took a treat from one of my drawers to give it to him.

“No,” I heard from the living room.

Eloim extricated himself from whom I assumed was his father and came to me. I understood what he wanted and gave him the treat so that he would give it to Miki.

“Lie down,” he told Miki, who complied immediately.

Then he gave the treat.

“Another,” he told me.

“No, Eloim. Miki has had too many treats already. This will be enough for today.”

Eloim pouted, and behind him, his father got back on his feed with wide eyes.

“Are you ready to go back home?” I asked the child.

“No,” he said. “Spaghetti.”

I looked apologetically to his father.

“I’m sorry. He told me he was hungry and I promised him spaghetti before going to the police station. I don’t mind if he eats it first,” I said. “Or not.”

The man looked really strangely at me.

“Spaghetti,” boomed Eloim, as he went back to playing with Lily.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, looking between the cop and father. He looked at his son then back at me, puzzled.

“Maybe I will take you on your offer and let him eat first,” he told me.

I nodded.

“Do you still need me?” asked the policeman.

“No, thank you officer,” the father said, shaking his hand.

The policeman then looked at me, aiming his question at me too. I was about to be left alone with a stranger in my home after all.

“I will be fine,” I said, and shook his hand in turn. “Thank you.”

He left and we were left alone.

“I’m Mila,” I told him, extending my hand.

“Xander.” We shook hands. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make him talk.”

“He’s shy isn’t it?” I asked.

“Erm,” he hesitated.

“He didn’t want to talk to me at first, but he seems to have a passion for pets. Then I went from there.”

He frowned at me, clearly trying to piece certain things together, and I went back to the stove before anything burnt.

“Will I be making a plate for you too?” I asked Xander.

“I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re already here and it’s dinner time anyways.”

He nodded.

“Mila, Mila,” said Eloim, rushing to me pass his father. “Lily’s toy is stuck.”

“Could you make sure nothing burns?” I asked Xander. He nodded, looking at the scene curiously and I went to the living room taking the toy out from under the commode.

I set the table not long after and served us pasta.

I found a few pillows to raise Eloim a bit higher, so that it would be easier for him to eat, and we all piled around the tiny kitchen table. It’s been awhile since I’ve had people over for dinner, and never a child in my apartment.

Miki realised the best spot in the house was sitting next to Eloim, which the kid was particularly happy about.

“Do you live around here?” I asked Xander.

He shook his head. “I came here for a few business meeting.”

“You always travel with your family?”

“I try when I can. He has issues with nannies.”

So no mom around them.

“Water, please,” Eloim asked me.

I got up to get him a glass.

“He’s said more words in a few hours that he usually says in a week,” Xander said in awe.

“Really?” I said, as I gave Eloim his glass.

“I’ve no idea what your trick is, but it worked better than psychiatrists.”

“Does he have developmental issues?”

“It’s complicated.”

I didn’t push. Their private life was none of my business to begin with.

We wrapped things up after dinner. Xander help clean everything.

“Thank you for the meal, it was lovely,” he told me.

“You’re welcome.”

“Okay, Eloim, come here, we’ve bothered the nice lady long enough.”

He looked at his father suspiciously.

“We have to go pumkin,” Xander explained.

Eloim started wailing no’s at his father and ran into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

We heard the lock click.

— Chapter Four —

“I’m really sorry about that,” said Xander a little uncomfortable.

“I think I have a screwdriver somewhere, small enough to fit in the hole there,” I said pointing at the little hole in the bathroom doorknob. “We should be able to open it this way.”

I went into the entryway closet and rummaged in there until I found my little toolbox that my father bought me when I moved into my first apartment. I haven’t used it often since, but he had said it was an essential in any household and he had been right. It had saved my ass a few times already.

I got the little screwdriver that I used to tighten the screw on my sunglasses hinges and brought it up.

Xander extended his hand and I gave it to him. I had the feeling he was feeling awful about the situation and needed to do something to make himself feel better, so I indulged him.

It took him a few seconds to find the right position and turn the doorknob, effectively unlocking it.

“No,” whined Eloim. “No, I don’t wan to go.”

“Eloim, we can’t stay here, this is not our home,” said Xander.

“It’s not our home there either.”

“We’ll be back home soon.”

“No,” he pleaded again, falling into tears.

It was heart wrenching and I was feeling bad about the whole thing.

Xander tried to pick Eloim up, and he started thrashing and screaming at the top of his lung. Xander tried to shush him, but nothing worked. Xander changed his position to have a better grip and Eloim slipped out of his clutches and ran out. I had been giving them some space, so I wasn’t there to stop him as he rushed inside my bedroom and locked that door too.

Xander came out of the bathroom, running his finger through his hair in desperation.

“This doorknob doesn’t have the little hole to unlock it, or a key,” I told him.

He looked at the door knob appalled.

“I’m really sorry,” he said, dejected.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to make him talk so I could know his name and help find his parents, I didn’t think it would backlash like this.”

“Don’t,” he said. “You actually did wonderfully. I’ve paid a lot of specialists who didn’t get through with him as well as you did in a few hours.”

“Is he okay?”

He gave me a half shrug. “It’s been a few difficult years.” He sighed and went to check on the door, but it opened from the inside, do the doorstop was on this side, making any card trick useless. Xander tried, I didn’t try to stop him, but it obviously failed, as I knew it would.

“I don’t see how to get in without damaging the door,” he noted.

“I don’t see how either unless he opens it,” I said. “My landlord won’t be happy.”

Xander looked sharply to me and opened his mouth but I stopped him.

“Don’t apologize again,” I told him. “Maybe we can try to talk to him first?”

He looked doubtful at the door.

“Eloim?” he called to him. He did so a few more time, trying to coax him, but nothing worked.

“I know I’m not his parent or anything—,” I began.

“Please be my guest,” he said agreeing before I even suggested. “If you can make him do, well, anything, then go for it.” He moved aside.

I nodded, went to the door and sat next to it.

“Eloim?” I asked.

Silence.

“It’s Mila. I’m a little bit worried about you. Your daddy is very worried about you. How about you start by telling us that you are okay so that we don’t worry so much.”

There was a knock on the door.

“It means he’s okay,” Xander told me.

“He communicates in knock?”

“Sometimes,” he said sitting on one of my kitchen chairs.

“Thank you,” I told Eloim. “We feel a lot better now, it’s really nice of you. Can I ask you why you don’t want to leave?”

Two knocks. I looked at Xander.

“Means no,” he said.

“I would really like to know. Maybe there’s something I can do.”

“I want to stay,” Eloim said.

“Is it because of Miki and Lily?”

“I want to sleep with Miki and Lily and I like your spaghetti.”

“Well, that’s really kind of you, I made that spaghetti with love, you know. And I know that Miki and Lily really like you,” I said. “How about you come and see them before you leave town and I can make you spaghetti again.”

“I don’t want to leave town.”

“Why?”

Nothing.

“Is it because of the park, or the friends, or something you like here?” I asked.

“I like it here now.”

“It is a very nice place,” I agreed. “But it’s also nice to travel and see many other places. If you had never traveled, you would have never seen this place. I’m a little jealous of you, I’d like to travel.”

“Why?”

“To see many great places, and make many new friends.”

“I don’t want friends.”

“You don’t? How about Miki and Lily? I thought you wanted to be their friends.”

“I want.”

“How about me?”

“Okay.”

“Thank you, I’m really happy to be your friend. Can I have a hug from my friend.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

Xander’s eyes rounded and he looked expectantly.

We heard Eloim fiddle with the doorknob for a while, then he opened the door very slowly.

I widened my arms. “Can I have a hug now?”

I saw his little head peek around, and he came to me to give me a shy hug.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s a very nice hug. Thank you. Do you think you can give one to your daddy?”

He looked at his father suspiciously.

“He has been very, very worried today. Can you see the little lines on the side of his eyes and on his forehead?”

Eloim squinted but eventually nodded.

“That’s worry lines. It’s not because he’s angry, but because he was afraid something bad would happen to you.”

“I don’t want bad things to happen to me,” he said hugging me hard.

I got worried and looked at Xander. The expression painted on his face was one of absolute horror. That little boy had just ripped his heart out of his chest. I don’t know what has happened, but something has, something that is haunting that man.

I was afraid for a second, when Eloim spoke that it could be a case of domestic violence, but seeing that defeated man in front of me, I had the feeling, instead, that something happened that he was not able to protect his son from.

“I know of someone who will always be there to protect you,” I told the child. “No matter what happens, your daddy will always be there.”

I felt the little head shake on my shoulder and Xander’s expression worsened. Now his heart was inside a blender and we were about to hit purée.

“I think not, because you don’t see everything your daddy does. You know, like today, you didn’t see your daddy for hours, but he was working really hard to find you, and he did. When someone really cares about you, you don’t always realise it, but he’s ready to go through everything just to be with you. Do you know how I know?”

He shook his little head again.

“Because even if he wasn’t there, he found you, he’s here now, and patiently waiting for you to be better and doing his best to make you the happiest little boy in the whole world.”

He said nothing this time.

“Do you think this deserves at least a hug?”

He nodded against my shoulder and raised his head slowly.

Xander looked about to cry.

Eloim walked slowly to him and I moved my legs out of the way, getting back on my feet in the process.

“Don’t cry daddy,” I heard Eloim mutter against his father’s chest.

“I’m not crying,” Xander promised, but he gave him a bear hug regardless.

“I don’t want to go,” he whined.

“We have a hotel room Eloim.”

Eloim shook his head.

I thought of something and signed at Xander. He looked curiously at me, but nodded.

“How about you play one last time with Lily and Miki for a little while, while I talk to your Daddy?” I told him.

He complied immediately.

“Look,” I muttered, getting closer. “I don’t want to make anything worse and if you think leaving is the best thing then do so, but I also have a room that I rent on AirB&B from time to time, it’s probably not as good as your hotel room though. I’m just suggesting in case it’s a better solution for you.”

He looked from me to his son.

“Can I see that room?”

I brought him to my little studio.

“I can get the paint stuff out. There a Murphy bed here. It’s not huge though, and again, this is not luxurious, but the essentials are here.”

“You painted this?”

“I attempted to paint this,” I corrected him.

“You got talent.”

“Thanks.”

“Look,” he said gliding his fingers through his hair. “I really don’t want to impose or make your life complicated,” he hesitated. “But to tell you the truth. I haven’t seen him progress like he’s doing now, in a long while and I’m really tempted to take you on your offer.”

“I’m not sure how much I’ll be here though, I work every day. But I can’t deny than the income from the room helps, but I’m not sure I’ll have time for babysitting. I can make meals for three though, if you want to include the food in the rent.”

He nodded.

“How long are you to stay around?”

“A week, two max.”

I nodded. “I can deal with this if you can. It’s your choice. I’m just giving you options.”

He nodded.

“I’d like to talk to him first.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll go to the bathroom, and you two talk.”

He nodded again, and I left them.

— Chapter Five —

Xander went to pick up his luggage and to cancel his hotel room during the next hour, while I cleaned my painting supply and canvas from the room. I put everything in the corner of my bedroom, trying to make sure nothing would fall on my bed, as the room was not really big.

I then opened the Murphy bed and put pillows and everything on there, and tried to make it as comfortable as possible.

As it was taking Xander a while and it was getting late, I gave Eloim one of my shirts and put him to bed. I didn't have children's books, but I found one ebook that looked nice and read him a story from my phone. Miki laid next to him and he fell asleep with his hand on his back. Lily was purring next to his head.

I got up slowly after I was sure he would not wake, and moved out of the room, closing the light and door.

Miki jumped off the bed as he never goes far from me, but Lilly stayed, purring loudly.

I was preparing for bed when I heard a knock on the door.

"Eloim is asleep," I told him. "Here," I gave him a key of the place. "Just make sure to remember to give it back before you leave."

He nodded.

"I'll have to leave early tomorrow and should be back for dinner," I said.

He nodded. "I will leave only in the afternoon and should be back before you."

"You will take Eloim with you?"

"I had chosen a hotel with a daycare service and arranged to continue to use their services. They aren't too far, it should be fine."

I nodded.

"Goodnight Mila, and thank you."

"Goodnight Xander."

When I got back from work, Xander was at his laptop, sitting at the kitchen table, typing rapidly in sharp staccatos. Eloim was sitting on the couch, watching some cartoon and petting Lily, and probably Miki too before I arrived and the dog rushed to meet me.

"Where is Miki's leash?" I asked as it wasn't where I'd left it.

"Eloim, where is Miki's leash?" asked Xander.

Eloim got up, came up to me, and gave me a hug, then he rummaged around and gave me the leash.

Xander was looking at this scene curiously. “We walked him an hour ago,” he told me.

“Really?”

“Eloim has gotten it in his head to be the caretakers of both cat and dog when you’re away.”

“Wow, that’s really kind of you,” I told Eloim giving him a hug.

So I put the leash back in its spot, clearly not needing it, and went to the kitchen to prepare something.

“Thanks,” I told Xander.

He acknowledged me, but busied at his computer.

I let him work and prepared a sauté.

We ate together and got into a sort of routine for the next following days.

I would leave early most days and return around dinner nearly every day except on Fridays and Saturdays. When I’d be back, I’d ask Eloim what he did during the day. At first he said a few words at best, but after four days, I was getting complete sentences, and after seven, I was given the full recollection, step by step, of his day.

Every time something like this would occur, I would catch Xander look at us in fascination.

There were good roommates, and we got along. I didn’t paint for that whole week, but we watched a few movies together in the evening.

“You work seven days a week, or is this week an exception?” Xander asked me one evening.

Eloim was sitting between us and he had fallen asleep, his head against his father’s side.

“I generally work seven days,” I said.

“That’s a lot.”

“I don’t have a high paying job and rent is not cheap,” I admitted.

He nodded absentmindedly while looking at the TV.

“Have you thought of working with children?”

“No, I don’t think I have what it takes.”

He looked at me incredulously.

“I would have loved to be an artist, but alas, it’s more a viable hobby than a job.”

“Your painting is pretty decent.”

“It needs to be more than decent to pay the rent. And I’d need to do more of them more often to be able to build a sustainable career, and I can’t do this while working two jobs, but I can’t sustain my lifestyle without them either. It’s a Catch-22.”

“What if you could get a job with less hours and a better pay?”

“Sure, when I find it, I’ll take it,” I said.

He was moving his arms under Eloim to move him to bed, carefully not to wake him up. Lily followed them like she did nearly every night now, but Miki stayed by my side. That dog is very dependent.

Once he was tucked in and the door was nearly closed—Lily would go to bed with him and snuggle for a while, but if we closed the door, she’d start scratching on the door nearly right away.

“Have you ever considered being a nanny?” Xander asked me when he was back in the living-room.

I shook my head. “No, I always thought it was either for a glorified babysitter with a worst salary than I already have, or for someone highly educated for a rich family.”

He shrugged. “I don’t need either, but I need someone who can get through to him, and you can. Plus, you would work from home, it could be a lot easier to mix this with something like painting.”

“Are you offering me a job?”

“I actually am,” he admitted. “I’ve watched you for nearly two weeks with him, and you’re really great. You’d be a wonderful nanny.”

At that moment, Eloim came to the door and said, “No.”

We both looked at him.

“Mila is not my nanny.”

“Why is that Pumkin?” asked Xander.

“Nanny leaves. I don’t want Mila to leave. I want her to be my mommy.”

We both stared at him in shock.

— Chapter Six —

In was early Sunday morning, I'd changed shift with a colleague and ended up with my first free day in ages. Xander had been up since the wee hours because of work and had set up shop on the dining table since, so not to awaken Eloim who was sleeping in as his father had allowed him to stay up a little later than usual to finish up a movie—which the kid enjoyed doing—because he had been so nice all day. I guessed he would probably grow into a cinephile.

I got up, poured myself a cup of coffee, and went digging for some breakfast.

"Have you eaten already?" I asked Xander.

"No," she said while typing away.

"You want eggs and croissants?"

"Sure."

I cooked in silence for a little while, not to bother him at his work, and brought the food on the table a little later.

"Thanks," he told me as he set his computer aside.

"What type of job do you do?" I asked curiously.

"Consultant in computing crisis management."

"What does that represent exactly?"

"You know how a lot of big companies, banks, cities, government, and so on, tend to have big servers and computers, infrastructure?"

"Mh-mm," I acquiesced.

"Well, sometimes those systems go down, maybe it's a virus, hacking, power shortage, human error, a variety of reasons. Well, I'm the guy they call to either setup things in preparation to those potential situation, or the one who comes in and take care of the mess afterwards, or just put some order back into the whole situation until they can return to their usual day to day."

"You do this on your own?"

"No," he said munching on his croissant. "I have a team. Sometimes I go to the location, sometimes I deal with things remotely and rely on my team to do the leg work if any is needed."

"So it's like a war-room type team only for computers."

That made him smile. "It's exactly like that. Some places even have a war-room-like setup for exactly those kinds of purposes."

"You look like you really enjoy your job."

He smiled again. "I do, I like the excitement and the adrenaline rush when there is a situation. I like the responsibility and challenges, I'm never bored with this job, and I've never been good with a routine anyways."

"I can relate, I've never been good with routine either."

"I guess having the soul of an artist tend to do that."

I smiled. "It does." I took a few more bites. "So you travel a lot?"

"I used to travel more, but I try not do travel more than once every one or two months, less if I can. It's easier for Eloim."

I nodded. "Can I ask what is going on with him?"

He took a bite pensively.

"When he was two," he told me. "Enola, my wife, left with Eloim in the car. I don't think he remembers much of it, or at least he hasn't expressed any of it. But Enola and the car had disappeared from the surface of the earth. I suspected an accident, but as the hours passed by, a few scarier possibilities began to haunt me. Enola has had some severe postpartum depression. We had bought an old house to renovate before Eloim's birth. We had been both fans of old and historial houses, but this rapidly became too much for her. Nearly everything was too much.

She had been doing a little better for nearly a month then, she was taking medication and had been seeing a therapist for a while and it was starting to show. But then she disappeared with Eloim. The cops thought of kidnapping right away, I didn't. We traced her steps multiple times, but we found nothing.

A car driver saw one evening a woman on the side of the road and stopped to see if she needed help as it was a desolate part in a dangerous bend, Btu when he got out of the car, he couldn't find her. He looked everywhere, and eventually saw a headlight reflect his flashlight, amongst the branches, down, low, in the embankment. He called the emergency services, and they found Enola's car.

It had been a little over two days since the accident had happened. Eloim was miraculously unhurt by the collision with the trees and rocks down there, but he was highly dehydrated and in hypothermia and was transported to the hospital and stayed in intensive care for a little under a week before he could return home."

"What about Enola?" I asked, my voice somber.

"She had died. Given the state of her injuries and the state of decomposition, killed on impact."

"What about the woman the driver saw?"

“No one ever found anyone. Cops speculated it was an illusion given the limited visibility, and a miracle it led someone to find the car. Eloim would not have lasted another day, especially with the low nighttime temperatures at that time of the year.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t believe in ghosts, if that’s what you’re asking?”

We took a few more bites in silence.

“It has affected Eloim regardless, hasn’t it?” I asked.

Xander signed. “Yeah, he stopped talking for nearly a full year and would go in and out of various levels of catatonic states. He started communicating again after a while. A lot of knocking, a few words, but rarely to anyone other than me or my parents. He wouldn’t look at people in the face, often keeping his back to people, and shying away from physical contact with most people.”

I nodded.

“Well, maybe not anymore.”

I looked up at him. “How so?”

“You’ve seen him for nearly two weeks. He’s chatting, playing, hugging. He adopted you pretty quickly.”

“Which is why you were so open to hiring someone with no credential as a nanny.”

“You have no idea how much of a weight off my shoulders these weeks here have been for me. I want him to have a normal life, to be happy, to go to school, make friends, have a job he loves, a girlfriend, but it’s been so hard for years. I’ve seen a lot of specialists of all kinds, he’s not been open to any of them, but he took an instant liking to you.”

“Well, it wasn’t that instantaneous,” I corrected him.

“For a child who had difficulties connecting with his own father for over a year, a few hours is instantaneous.”

I took my last croissant bite deep in thought.

“Which is why I’m considering Eloim opinion now,” he said putting his utensils back on the table.

“Which?” I asked curiously.

“Two days back. When he refused for me to hire you.”

I felt my eyes widened.

"Look, I know it's unconventional and everything, or at least in the western world, and feel free to refuse if you're against the idea, but I'd like it if you heard me out first."

I blinked a few times, but nodded.

— Chapter Seven —

“Okay, here are the pros and cons. You struggle financially, I don’t. You don’t have much time to dedicate to what you love doing, but this could give you that freedom. I have a home, well, two actually if we count the one I bought with Enola to renovate, but has never been finished. I live in another country though.

Eloim really loves you, and you seem to like him. I get that it’s not how most relationship starts in the western world, but for most of history, and in still large part of the world, arranged marriage and marriage of convenience are still a thing, and even accounting for location where religion is stopping people from divorcing, there is still a lower divorce rate than the rest of the world in arranged marriages.

The biggest reason is probably that a lot of people use love as a crutch to carry a relationship. But from experience, I can tell you that, however a relationship starts, it will face ups and down, and if the rush of lust and affection at the beginning of the relationship is all there is to it, then it’s going to crumble, sooner or later. Relationship can be hard at time, but those that enters one knowing they will have to work for it, then to keep putting in the effort, effectively make it more probable of success than others.

I refused to get myself in a new relationship where Eloim would create a bond with a new woman, just for her to leave a few years later. Separations are really hard for children, and given what he has gone through, I’m even more careful of anyone entering his life. Which means, it’s hard to know from the get go how it would go. No matter our own views of the world, dating is not seen with the same seriousness as marriage.

I’m not gonna marry on a whim though. If I do this, I do this with long terms in mind. We could see how things go, if we can’t make it work romantically, we could still see other people on the side, but it would be while keeping the family unit intact. If I do this, I’m getting Eloim a mother more than me a wife. I’m not saying this would be an inescapable prison, and as things go we could readjust along the way, but it would be with his future in mind, always.

I also know how hard it can be to start a relationship with someone who has kids. How easily it can be to grow a connection with those kids, sometimes even stronger than the partner, and how hard it can be to let them go when the relationship falls apart. Which is why a lot of people are very wary of getting into a relationship with someone with kids. This would protect you in that regard.

I know we don’t know each other that much, but what I’ve seen so far I like.

Maybe we could make this work. If things get serious and you want children of your own, I’m not against the idea, as long as Eloim is not put aside in the process. I know it’s a lot to consider, and I don’t want to rush you, but I’ve also extended my stay as long as I could here. I will need to

go to San Francisco for a little under two months, and then it's back to England. I would have liked a decision as soon as possible, but I get that something like this can't be rushed."

I nodded silently, a little numb at the shock of this proposal.

"Are you shutting me down?" he asked looking at my face.

"No, but I'm not saying yes either. I need time. Even if it was a yes, I would need time. It means leaving my job, apartment, country, everything. I have a lease, I can't quit my job without a minimum of two weeks' notice. I have pets, which I think can't cross the borders without getting their papers and vaccinations done one month prior to travelling. I need to find myself a visa. All of this would take time."

"I understand, and I can help with this."

I nodded, and took our empty plates to the sink.

"What about moving abroad? Would that be an issue?"

I shrugged as I poured water in the sink. Xander got up to help me.

My emotions were in shambles. He seemed like a kind person to me. He was handsome with his curly black hair, always dressed impeccably, and occasionally donning a suit which is pure Viagra to most women, myself included. He had this toe-curling accent, and if I'd been my younger more naive self, I would have had an instantaneous crush on him.

But now, I was older, and I had gone through more than a few bad breakups and I had been in not rush to find someone again. Even less move straight to marriage. My parents would lose their shit if I even told them this.

"I never really minded where I live," I told him. "Don't get me wrong, I love my country and culture, but I also love to explore others too. I've lived abroad in the past and have enjoyed it. I would not move somewhere where I would not be safe, or worried about my well-being though."

"Of course not," he told me. "But England is not a bad country to live in."

I nodded, "It seems so," I mused. "I would need a few months before going straight to marriage, or the next thing that would happen is my parents thinking I've been indoctrinated into some weird cult and taking a plane to drag me out of there," I said attempting for humour.

He smiled. "That could make for an eventful wedding," he conceded. "We don't have to go at top speed, but within the year."

That was not completely unreasonable, as things went.

"Have you even thought of having children?" he asked me.

"Yes. I wanted children."

“Wanted?”

“I’m not twenty anymore. I mean, plenty of women have children in their thirties, and some even in their forties, but the older, the harder it gets. Most relationships around here last a few years before kids get involved, so it would push this even further, and I’ve never been desperate enough to seek children without a significant other, and those relationships ended, and I’ve been single for a little while now. So my desired for children has grown into uncertainties.”

He nodded in silence.

“I guess this could change it,” I noted.

“It could,” he agreed.

I washed and he dried everything. Then we put it all back in their respective places in the cupboards. Eloim rush in, full of uncanny morning energy and it pretty much put a lid on that conversation.

— Chapter Eight —

I tried to think about Xander's proposition, but it was so out there, that I found it hard to wrap my mind around it at all. Logic failed me, but my hormones didn't. I had thought I'd grown to control them pretty well, but when I went to bed that night, that is not what my lady parts had in mind. So sleep came in slow.

I couldn't say that I was not attracted to Xander, because I clearly was. And I must admit that like many others before me, seeing a man being a good father made my ovaries insta-ovulate. I don't know what's going on with that, or why it's so effective. Maybe it's the fact that we are so easily surrounded by men-child that seeing someone capable of responsibilities had a deep biological effect. Maybe it's why suits are so popular too.

Either way, I was not ready to dismiss this entirely.

And Xander had been right on one account, I liked Eloim. He was adorable, and kind, and affectionate. He could very easily weasel his way into my heart, and that would have been something I would have worried about if we would have simply considered dating. Like he said, gaining a family, to then lose it, can be really rough, and I wasn't sure if I was down for that.

And I also couldn't deny his point about money. I wanted to put some money aside, save up, have something left when retirement would come, but I was only keeping afloat. I didn't have a crazy lifestyle, nor was I seeking one. I wasn't looking to find myself a sugar daddy, but not to have to worry about money, could change everything.

But then I had no idea how this part would work between us. He said he had houses, so I guess no rent, but I had no idea about the rest. He did mention the possibility for me to paint full-time, or at least, as full-time as I could, as I guess I would most probably become a stay-at-home mom, or at least until Eloim would reach school age. When would that be? Next year? The year after? When do kids start school in England?

What about the other expenses? Painting is not a reliable source of income. I could do great, but I could also do terribly. How would I pay for things then? My phone, clothes, everything else?

I had been adding millions after millions of questions to my list, so many that I was probably forgetting as many as I was getting new ones.

I was distracted all day, but the sheer realisation of being able to move away from this job, was one of the greatest moments of my day.

Don't get me wrong, I like my boss, she's kind to me and had grown to become a good friend, but I couldn't imagine myself work here for years to come.

My legs were killing me most days, and I still needed a second job to be able to pay all the bills and not accumulate any more debt.

Deep down, I needed to talk to someone about this, but it was such an outlandish proposition, that anyone would consider me insane to even think about it. I mean, who does that?

But what if it worked? What if I could be happy in that relationship? What if a few months from now I had a son and husband, and a house, and I'd be doing something that I love, and not being worried about the bills constantly. What if I could build a life for myself? Or God forbid, even fall in love?

I spend most of my day in silence whenever I wasn't talking to clients, lost in my thoughts.

I got home later than usual, to the smell of something cooking.

"No," I heard Eloim say. "That's not how Mila does it."

Miki barked happily at my arrival and Eloim rushed to hug me and tell me about his day, as it was becoming his new routine.

"Come help Daddy," he told me once he was done about his daily retelling. "Daddy is doing spaghetti wrong."

Walked into the kitchen to a smiling Xander. I beamed at him.

"So what is going on here?" I asked.

"Apparently, it has to be your recipe, and this is not it."

I looked at his ingredients, then at what was in the refrigerator.

"I have a bad news, Eloim, I don't have the exact same ingredient I'd used for the sauce, but I can promise you we can do something good nonetheless."

"Okay," he said, dismissing the whole thing completely, as he considered this issue closed.

Xander shook his head in disbelief.

"Maybe it's just the novelty of it," I suggested

"I'm not so sure."

I added a few ingredients to his, but mostly left his recipe as is. It looked quite good, actually.

"Could I ask you a few questions?" I asked, my voice lower.

"Sure."

"I mean, just to clear a few things up."

"Sure."

“Like, erm, money. I mean, you said I could paint and take care of Eloim and that would be that, but neither of those are good stable sources of income—,” I began.it took him maybe a few seconds to realise what I was talking about.

“Mila, I was ready to hire you to work full-time twenty-four-seven. That’s not cheap. I didn’t offer marriage to save up on that expense. If you can help me with my son, and can bloody well help you with your living expenses. Enola hadn’t been working in three years and we could afford that. I’m not saying I’ll buy you expensive branded stuff all the time though—.”

“That’s not what I’d been asking,” I rushed in. “It’s just that I wanted to know how bills would be divided and all that. Otherwise I’d have to find myself a job, and though I speak English, it can always be challenging abroad, and I wasn’t sure how it would have to be. I mean, when Eloim will go to school, things would change, so I’d probably get a job then, but before that—.”

Xander cut my rambling off.

“I said you could be a painter, I meant it. If you get income from it, we can see how we divide things, but if you get none, I’m still covering all the basics. You can also come back here once in a while to see your family. I’m not a millionaire, but I have a decent enough salary to support a full family on my own if need be, and pay for a few plan tickets when you want to visit your parents.”

I nodded pensively. I felt so shy to event ask about these things. It felt wrong to expect for someone else to pay for me, for anything. As if it was dirty, vain, as if I was exploiting him. My rationality told me that we were both gaining something in this, and it had been his proposition to begin with. But my emotions told me that he had a son tugging at his heartstrings and making him do things he might not have wanted to do otherwise.

“Is it only for Eloim? I mean, sure no one would ask something like that otherwise, I just mean, if things were different, I mean—,” I rambled again.

“I wouldn’t go straight to marriage if things had been different,” he admitted. “But I’m not saying I would not have considered dating you.”

Does it mean he’s attracted to me? Or does it mean I’m not terrible enough to be on his blacklist? I could have asked. It would have been the best, logical way to get answers, but obviously I was not logical right now, and I just concentrated on helping out with the preparation.

I saw Xander give me a few side looks, but he said nothing either. I guess I’m not the only one a little taken aback by this whole situation.

We set the table in silence and put the pan and everything in the sink.

“I got my plane ticket for San Francisco, it’s tomorrow afternoon, so I guess we’ll leave while you’ll be at work,” said Xander, finally, as I was wiping the counter clean. I stopped.

“I haven’t told Eloim yet. I suspect he’ll freak out.” He was clearly worried about him. He gave the boy a quick glance. Eloim was watching the television quietly, with Lily covering his little lap.

I bit my lips nervously.

So if this leads nowhere, this will be the last dinner we’ll possibly have together. I felt my heart squeeze painfully.

Xander came next to me. I looked up at him.

“What if I just tried something first, to see how it goes?” he asked.

I nodded. “What?”

“A kiss.”

I nodded and he lowered his head to mine. Our lips touched, tentatively at first, delicate caresses, but it made me feel longing, more than being apart. It had been a while since my last kiss, and my body desired nothing but to feel this sensation again, to be reminded of how good it felt.

I dipped my head further and leaned into it, pressing my lips harder against his, he replied in kind, and I instinctively reached around his neck and pulled him closer. He circled his arms around me and pressed me against him. The heat of our bodies intermingling. Our tongues lashed out and the kiss went from chaste to pure lust.

My buttock was pressed hard against the kitchen cabinets and I had to make a conscious effort not to moan. His hands knocked a spatula off the counter—which clanked on the floor—with his hands moving over my back, and we broke the kiss at the cacophony.

Xander froze as he looked up and I looked behind me. Eloim was looking at us with wide eyes.

— Chapter Nine —

We ate in relative silence. I guess everyone was unsure in how to act after that.

After we cleaned the dishes, I went to take a needed shower, and by the time I was out, Eloim was already put to bed.

I had no idea how to act around Xander now. The echo of that kiss reverberated on my skin. He used the bathroom after me, so that we didn't have much time to talk about it and it was getting late and I was getting up early tomorrow for work. Which would be the last I'd possibly see them. I changed into my PJ and prepared for bed.

It felt wrong to just end things this way. But my mind was going in circles and landing nowhere. Every time I tried to get something, I just drew a blank. I heard the bathroom door open after Xander's shower and I decided that if my mind was unable to function, then I should go with my guts. I'm not sure if relying on the organ that produces literal crap is the best way to make life asserting decisions, but I felt the clock ticking, and it annoyed the hell out of me.

"Xander?" I said as I opened my bedroom door.

He turned around, his hand on his door, clearly about to go to bed himself.

"Yes," I said.

"About what?" he asked confused.

"The marriage."

His eyes widened and he looked at me in shock.

"You didn't expect me to say yes," I guessed. "You didn't want me to say yes."

"What? No," he said, still reeling from my answer.

I bit my lip unsure of what I'd just done. Was he even serious? Was this legit?

I nodded confused and sank back into my room and closed the door.

What had just happened? I wanted to dig myself a hole to hide into, and pull the earth on top of me.

Soft knocks got me out of my downward spiral.

I tried to smooth my expression before I opened the door.

"I'm sorry about how I reacted," said Xander who was only a few feet away from me. "I didn't expect your answer, or at least not this quickly, but I did want you to say yes," he said the last few words slower.

“Your hesitating,” I noted.

“I’m—let’s just say that this is not what I expected for life a couple of weeks back.”

“Ditto.”

He nodded. “How about we just take this one step at a time?”

“Sounds very reasonable.”

He gave me a shy smile, I tried to reply to him in kind.

I saw his eyes dart to the bed behind me and I felt my heart do a triple axel in my chest.

“Daddy?” whined Eloim. “Daaaaddd.”

“Probably a bad dream,” he told me.

I nodded and he left to go to bed in his own room with his son, and I went to mine with my mind in shambles.

I woke up confused to a crying mass that jumped on me.

“What’s going on?” I mumbled.

“Eloim, let Mila get up, please.”

There were a few ruffles until I understood that Eloim had had the news that he was about to leave, and it was not sitting right with him.

I spend the next half hour rocking him in my arms, with my hair going every which way, and trying to convince him that we would see each other again.

Seeing how I was a little taken, and I had to prepare for work, Xander got me some breakfast to bed that I ate with Eloim. It was adorable.

Eloim calmed down after a while, though he was really bothered by my lack of knowledge in when exactly would we see each other again.

“I guess we won’t see each other for a while,” Xander told me as I was about to leave.

“We can still call,” I suggested.

“We should,” he agreed.

“I guess I’ll have to give my notice soon.”

He nodded. “If you can leave faster, you can join us in San Francisco, and we’ll leave for Europe together?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, unsure.

“Don’t worry about the plane tickets, I can take care of it.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for everything, Mila.”

I nodded. “I really need to go now.”

“Have a good day.”

“Have a good trip.”

I said my goodbyes to a sulking Eloim and left.

When I returned nine hours later, the apartment was eerily quiet. I signaled for my landlord and tried to negotiate to get out of my lease early. Then I made an appointment for Lily’s and Miki’s vaccinations, even though they had received them all, they needed them again in a shorter span of time for international travel.

Part of me wondered if I was not putting the ox before the cart. What if Xander changed his mind once he was away. That evening we didn’t talk, he was probably still in the plane. We didn’t talk in the morning either because of the time-zone difference, but I received a text later telling me to call him once I’d be off of work.

After I got home, I changed out of my work clothes, walked Miki quickly, ate, then called Xander.

“Hey there,” he told me.

“Hey, how was your flight?”

“Long,” he said in a little sigh. “Eloim is—well, he’s not going very well.”

“Anything I can do?”

“I don’t know, maybe we can try?” he said. “Elo, would you like to talk to Mila?” I heard Xander ask. There were a few more words that I didn’t hear well. “Talk,” Xander said, further from the phone.

“Hello?” I asked.

There was silence, so I turned facetime on and waited for them to follow suit.

The image of a quiet Eloim was on the other side of the screen, probably held by Xander.

“Hello, how was your day?” I asked.

He opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again and looked a way.

“How about I tell you about my day yesterday and today?” I suggested.

He obviously didn’t answer.

“Yesterday, I talked to my landlord, that’s the man who owns the apartment that I live in and asked him to break my lease to that I can leave, and I got an appointment for Miki and Lily to have their vaccination so that they can travel, I told my boss today that I will stop working there soon, and I started to put a lot of my stuff on Craigslist to sell it so that I can leave and come to live with you.”

Those last words registered and his eyes snapped to mine.

“Of course I would come with Miki and Lily and there is a lot of preparation to do, but I will do it as quickly as I can, so that we could see each other soon.”

“How soon?” he asked.

“It will take at least a few weeks, maybe more.”

“It’s too long,” he said and left.

Xander flipped the phone to him. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.”

“Did you do all of that?”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to find a tenant to replace me or I’ll be liable for the entirety of my lease. That’s the only way I could make my landlord release me, and I promised my boss I would train the next recruit, so it could take a little more than two weeks for that, and I’m far from done with all the stuff I have to sell.”

He nodded. “You can have some things shipped you know?”

“Isn’t it super expensive?”

“It depends, there are companies specialised in this. Things like your paintings and a few other things you can’t replace. Let’s settle for less than a container worth, and I can see to have it done.”

“That could be nice,” I admitted.

“If you join us in the US, you won’t need a visa as long as you don’t work here and are just visiting, but you’ll need one in Britain. I make a few inquiries, and I looked for private health insurance too.”

“Oh, I completely forgot about this one,” I admitted.

“We can do this together, right?”

“Right,” I said.

We talked a little more, but we were interrupted by a business call, so I left him to it. I send him my work schedule so that it would be easier for him to know when he could call me, as his

work schedule was even more hectic than mine, and I spent my whole evening taking pictures of things that I put up for sales, made a donation pile—split into one for family, one for friends, and a last one for anyplace that takes donations.

I contacted my second boss by phone to give him my two weeks' notice, as I didn't want to wait too long, just in case.

I felt strange when I went to bed that night. Things were changing.

— Chapter Ten —

It turns up, moving abroad is a lot more complicated than it seems, there was no way I could do everything necessary in a couple of weeks. Xander helped me, but he had a very taking job too, and that's on top of being a single father of a child who is dealing with a lot more than most children his age.

Could I deal with this? Was I good enough to take care of Eloim?

When he was around, I thought so, but now that I had a lot of time to think about it, I started to doubt myself.

"Don't worry so much about it," Xander told me one evening. He had called a little late as he couldn't free himself much before that, so I was in bed, in the darkness, with my phone against my ear.

"Every parent doubt themselves before having a child, and during, and I'm sure even once they're old and have left the home. It's on par for the course. But I think you'll do fine."

"Mmh," I mumbled in vague agreement.

"No one is perfect, we just have to do our best." I heard him sigh.

"Are you okay?"

"Nothing for you to worry about."

"Aren't we supposed to deal with this together?"

He snorted. "I guess we are. I'm just trying to re-create his mood at your place and it's not working. I think he's blaming me for the separation and doesn't trust us that you're coming."

I thought about it. "You know what really went pass his block when I met him?"

"What?"

"Miki, then Lily. I think pets really got to him. He wouldn't look at me in the eyes, put he would in theirs. I guess there is something safe about animals, they don't lie, they love unconditionally and make their own existence circle around yours."

"It's not a bad idea, animal therapy is a thing, but your dog is far right now."

"How about you make it more concrete for him? I mean the move. Cats are easier to deal with than dogs, they're more independent and you just have to put them once in their litter box for them to know what to do. I had two cats, but my oldest died last year, and I know Lily is lonelier since. Miki, like all dogs, makes his life circles around people more than other pets. If you're okay with the idea of a second cat, maybe getting Eloim a kitten. He really made it his

business to take care of my pets, taking care of another can be a good way to focus on something other than the gloom, and you can tell him he's caring for Lily's new little brother or sister, until they are united. That could put something solid, in his face, that would be a proof that I'm coming. I don't know if it'll work, but we could try."

He was silent for a little while. "I think it's not a bad idea, but I'm not sure—, I think he would have to hear some of this from you."

"Sure, you can explain it first, and I reinforce it. You just have to tell me when you can do this, and we sync up."

"Sure," he said. "I get that it's late on your side of the continent and you're working in the morning, so I'll leave you at that."

"Okay."

"And thanks. I think you helped here."

"Let's not cry victory too fast here and just see where it goes."

He actually followed suit the very next day, and it seemed to work. Eloim had this very serious expression on his face as he was choosing a kitten and he took it home with him, holding his father's phone all the way and showing me the kitten.

I gave him a few indications on how to care for the cat, and he listened to every word. A little later, Xander put an earpod in his ear so that he could shop for cats stuff with me on the line. It was cute, sometimes he'd borrow the phone and switch the camera on to show me different things to choose and I had to rail him in a few times, I heard Xander do the same a few others, so that the house would not be swamped with cat toys.

We talked later in the evening, Xander and I. He was in a better mood, saying how he thought the whole cat idea was working wonders.

We developed this new routine of talking every day, while I was in bed. Sometimes a few minutes, sometimes longer. He told me a bit about his family, and me about mine.

At work, Eloim started to call me secretly. I managed to make him limit this to my lunch break, so that it would not impede on my work, and soon he would call like clockwork.

It made Xander laugh when I told him, and though he offered to make him stop, I told him it was fine and I could deal with it. So Eloim had his regular calls with me around my dinner time most evenings, and his secret calls during lunch time. I think he's not angry with me anymore.

I would text Xander whenever I had a question, and he also sent me a few pictures of his town house in London, and at my request, the other house.

It was huge. He had changed the windows, and redone the roofing so there were no more leak. It was at least a few hundred years old. There are not so many houses this old around here, but

those had always triggered something in me. I always found a sort of Romanticism in old house, they have a soul. And seeing my reaction, he suggested we could finish the renovations he had put on a relative hold—doing only the basic work so to make it at least sellable—and maybe consider moving in. It got my creativity going wild. There was enough space in there that I could have my own little art studio, it seemed so extravagant and wild, but he seemed to enjoy my reactions, and arranged to have someone do a video tour for us to show where things were.

The next day, he told me he rehired a contractor and told me I could help redesign the kitchen and a few other rooms when we'd be together again, which made my mind going crazy, and I found myself waking up at night to draw a few ideas.

The idea of dating again had really sunk in by now, and I had overhauled my diet, and I started training again. A few years of celibacy had made me let go a little. It wasn't too bad, but I had been in a better shape before. I did catch Xander after he came back from the gym in his building one day.

"You train often?" I asked.

He gave me a sheepish smile. "I had let myself go lately, I getting back on track."

That made me laugh. "I started doing squats," I confessed.

It made him laugh.

I had to admit to my parents that I would be leaving. So I told them I was dating and would move in with him. They did feel like it was rushed, but as I didn't mention a marriage yet, it wasn't as bad as it could be. I could tell them later.

I began emptying my place slowly.

I sorted things to have sent out to the UK, and Xander did follow through with the shipping, helping me with it.

It took a few more weeks until I had a replacement tenant signing his lease and freeing me from mine. I had a few things shipped at my brother's place so that he could sell the few things left for me.

And after nearly four weeks of planning, I was about to board a plane for the US.

— Chapter Eleven —

Xander's contract was a little longer than originally expected and he would be in San Francisco for a few more weeks at least. The plane landed around eleven thirty. Xander arranged for a Uber, and I arrived late.

A company had taken care of my pets, which was probably better than the alternative, and I moved to the condo-hotel where Xander lived for the duration of this contract.

I knocked, and he answered. I got my luggage in and freed Miki and Lily from their cage and they went wild. I got stuck in the whirlwind of Miki jumping on me like a mad man, and my luggage everywhere and getting out of my jacket and shoes. And once everything was sorted and Miki had calmed down some, I turned properly to Xander.

"Hi," I said.

It had been weeks since we'd last seen and it seemed like an eternity.

He put his hands on either side of my face and pressed his lips to mine. I felt my back connect with the wall a few seconds later, and I clung to him in the process.

If our first kiss had been lustful, then this one was pure madness.

My fingers were tangled in his hair, and he raised my legs on either side of his body. He was warm and his hands were all over me. It took us nearly a quarter of an hour to disentangle and he took my hand and lead me to a bedroom.

My eyes widened a bit, for a brief moment understanding what was coming next, as he was about to kiss me again, he hesitated, looking at me. I gripped his shirt and pulled him to me. He smiled and complied.

I pulled his shirt over his head.

"Mmh," I muttered between kisses. "I guess you worked hard at the gym," I notice looking him up and down.

He walked closer still, his eyes burning.

"Let's see about those squats," he told me, grabbing my butt with both hands.

Pieces of clothing went flying left and right. We tried to be quiet and not to wake Eloim.

I pushed Xander on his chest and he fell on the bed in a passable state of undress. He looked up at me smiling, but his mirth turned to lust quickly as I straddled him in my underwear. I took my bra off, and he proceeded in making sure I would not get cold by moving his hand on me, and his mouth too, for good measure.

What little clothing we had still on, went off and we found ourselves moving slowly together in tangled sheets. We rolled around and kept at it for a while, until we finally fell asleep.

“MILA!” screamed a voice in my ear. I bolted upright confused, and managed to grab the sheet fast enough to be sure to be covered. I could see my blond curls in my peripheral sticking out in every direction.

“Elo,” mumbled Xander next to me. “Don’t scream, please.”

I felt myself blush as I was naked next to the equally naked father of said boy, jumping on top of us.

“Eloim, sweety, do you think you could get me my luggage, I want the big red one.”

He jumped off, excited and complied.

Xander rolled around and looked me up and down, or at least what he could see. My back was fully exposed has I was clutching the sheets to my front. He gave me a wolfish grin, a little too proud of himself, and I smacked him on the chest which made him smile even more. He ran his left hand on my back and around my midriff.

“Not in front of the kid,” I muttered between my teeth.

“He’s not here now,” he said as we heard Eloim struggle with my luggage on the other side.

Xander, grabbed me by the waist and pulled me down. I tried not to squeal, but Eloim came in the room at that moment.

“Thank you, sweety,” I said, bolting right up.

Xander got up too and grabbed his pants from the floor and put them on. Then he helped his son into setting things up on the bed so that I could have access to a change of clothes, and then dragged him out to get breakfast so that I could get changed.

He rushed back inside the room when his father wasn’t looking, and I had barely managed to get my underwear on.

“This is my kitty,” he told me, showing me the black-and-white little kitten.

I quickly pulled a shirt on, and rummaged for pants.

“Have you given him a name yet?” I asked him as I finished dressing up.

“No, I don’t know what to call him.”

“Maybe we can think about it later,” I suggested.

I went into the adjoining bathroom and splashed some water on my face, and tried to wash off the remnants of last night’s make up, and apply some fresh one. I also brushed my tangled mess. Eloim was next to me, chatting incessantly all the while.

Xander joined us a little later with breakfast in bed, we sat in a circle around the plateau and ate.

Eloim was giving me a hug maybe every ten to twenty minutes, which seemed to put Xander in a pretty good mood.

It had been a while for me to have a few days off of work, and the sheer reality of not having to work for a while there, was some of the most freeing experience, but it also made me feel so guilty to enjoy it. As if it was not supposed to be. I know I would not be doing nothing with my time. I didn't need to have been a parent to know that taking care of a child was very time consuming, and if I wanted to paint, I would spend a lot of my free time doing exactly that. Regardless, I still felt guilty.

Xander notice my mood swings.

"Are you okay?" he asked a few hours later.

I nodded. "It's just a pretty big jump I'm taking and I need to get use to this."

"You know that you can tell me if anything is too much or too hard."

I nodded. "Thanks," I said. "I'll just need a bit of time to grow more comfortable, and stop feeling guilty for being off work and enjoying it."

He took me in his arms. "See it as a bit of a holiday. Besides, it's not like you won't be busy."

"I know, it's just—."

"I know."

He was really growing on me. We got along well. We had fun together, I liked Eloim. I think I might be able to do this.

— Chapter Twelve —

Time. So much time.

I still get busy, but there is a freedom here that is absolutely foreign to me.

I'm glad I brought one of my drawing pad with me along with pencils, as I sent everything else to Europe already.

I've spent a few days drawing with Eloim on the coffee table, sitting on the floor. It turned out that drawing is another way to get him out from his shell. So I was a little proud of myself and my achievement in doing so. When he was concentrating on drawing the cat that was lounging on the sofa and grooming the kitten, I would draw him. He curly hair that reminded me of his fathers, only a paler shade of brown. The same brown eyes. He was tall for his age and will probably make a very tall man. He would bite his tongue and have the tip exposed between his lips when he was concentrating on something. It was the cutest.

Eloim had declared himself caretakers of our small menagerie, even better than I had anticipated. He would brush the fur of all three daily, calmly in a corner. He had a concentration and discipline that surprised me for a child this young. He also seemed pretty smart despite his hang ups. We even worked on his letters and numbers, most of which he already knew.

I moved straight into Xander room. It became natural pretty quickly and we tried to spend time talking every day and getting to know one another. This relationship had grown intimate rather quickly, but it's no worse than the few times I tried one night stands. It's just everything in between that changed more radically.

Xander allowed himself to be gone a lot more since I've been here to look after Eloim, but he said this contract was more complicated than what had been expected, and I guess for me being present did help him a lot. Plus, Eloim was a pretty quiet kid and could amuse himself for hours at a time, which did give me more time. With a child, and meals and everything else, I didn't have that much time left, but it was more than I used to have. But the thought of that big house, and all the vacuuming and window cleaning started to creep up on me, and I realised, that could be a full-time job in and of itself.

"There is this thing call a maid. It's easy, you give her some money and she cleans everything," had said Xander after I'd voiced my concerns.

I bit my lips, worried. Wouldn't that be my job now?

"I didn't have the time to clean myself, I can just give the maid the new address," he told me.

I nodded.

"Actually, I wanted to get an idea by you," he told me.

"Sure," I said.

"If you're interested, I'd like to move to the country house."

"Sure."

"So to make it possible to do that faster, getting more funding would help."

"You need money? I don't have much."

"No, no, I was thinking of selling the town house."

"Oh, I don't mind that. It's your house."

"Technically, it's sort of about to be ours. If you prefer London to the country, I'm okay."

"I was raised in a rural village in Canada. I'm completely fine with the country."

He smiled. "It has land."

"It does," I agreed.

"Not everything would be ready to move in right away, but we could probably move in part of the house in a month or two."

I nodded. "But you need the funds to get there," I mused. "It means selling now, but not moving in right away."

"Yeah. I could have a buyer right now actually, which would work great, but we'd be homeless for a little while there."

"Which means?" I asked.

"My parents bought a historical house when I was young and restored it. Like we're doing. It's big and has plenty of extra room."

"Would they be okay with that?"

"I'm sure, but I'll talk to them today."

I nodded.

"You're what?" asked a woman from Xander's computer in the kitchen.

"Getting married," said Xander.

"How long have you known her?"

"A little over a month."

I tried not to listen in, but it was hard as the place was not gigantic, and it was hard to escape noises, as we'd found out a few nights back, despite our efforts.

“Isn’t that a little quick Xan.”

“Sure, but it’s working out and Eloim likes her.”

“Mammy is upset?” Eloim asked me.

“I don’t know, maybe. She’s worried about your Daddy,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Because it’s a big change to have me move in with the two of you and she wants to make sure you will be both happy.”

“We are,” he told me.

“But she doesn’t know that, which is why your father is trying to explain it to her.”

He looked at his father’s computer and the drawing on the coffee table and back. He seemed to make up his mind and ran to his father, spreading his hands clearly wanting to be picked up, which surprised Xander, but he complied happily, sitting the boy on his lap.

“We’re happy, mammy. He told her. So stop worrying.”

There was a short silence and I saw him extend his marker still in his hands to the screen.

“Oi,” said Xander.

I came and swooped the boy in my arms.

“Okay, this is enough Picasso.”

“My name is not Picasso, it’s Eloim,” he told me, laughing at my mistake.

“What has happened to Eloim? What did you do?” I heard Xander’s mother ask him in the background, but Eloim had decided to draw a mustache on me and I decided not, and he was not agreeing with my decission, so I tickled him—which worked, as he laughed loudly—until I could snatch the marker away, cap it and put it back in its case.

“Mila happened,” Xander said.

“I’d like to talk to her,” she asked.

Xander turned to me.

“Give me a sec,” I said, holding the marker’s case up and shutting everything away, and keeping it out of reach of Eloim who was now trying to climb my leg, giggling.

“Okay, this is enough, let he breathe,” Xander said as he came to pick the boy up.

I put the art supply somewhere high, and went nervously to the computer.

It turned out that his mother was really kind, and after hearing me play with Eloim, it was all the confirmation she needed. I got a little nervous, but she agreed to shelter us while the work continued on the house and then talked decor, and we sort of rambled for a while together after that about interior design and colour palettes.

I notice as I shut closed the laptop, once the conversation was done, that I will have to do something similar eventually with my parents, but I was under not urgency yet.

— Chapter Thirteen —

"Is everything packed," I asked Eloim.

"No," he said, running back to his room.

We were leaving in two days, and I wanted everything to be ready. I had my piles of to-do lists and everything working like clockwork. I even calculated everything regarding our food supply, so there would be no waste left when we would leave. And I had already prepared the lunches for our travel. Nearly everything was packed except for the everyday stuff, and it was ready to be packed quickly.

I had cleaned the apartment up. There was a maid service, but regardless, with a kid, messes happens all the time and can pile up quickly, and they're not always what your average room service will deal with, and I didn't want to leave things like a bomb had exploded in here. I've done this job while I was in college, and what you find in rooms once the tenants left can easily become some of the most disgusting things you've ever seen. The moment people have no accountability, it's like they purposefully make it worst that they even could in their everyday life. I have a few bad memories from nasty rooms I've cleaned, still. The things people do in hotel rooms could make your skin crawl.

Xander had been trying to drag me to one of the restaurant downstairs, on a date—it looked like a really nice place—but he kept being interrupted with work, and he was afraid this contract could be lengthened, and he didn't want to keep Eloim away from home for much longer. I did try to make it work here though, as much as possible. I didn't want him to stress himself out too much. It's not good for his health.

I had talked to his mother, Miranda, a few more times. As she and his father had restored an old building before, she had tons of knowledge to bestow upon me, and I kind of took it under myself to help with the plans. We really needed to get the kitchen going as quickly as possible, and now that the town house was sold, the contractor had been set loose on the house.

So I planned in between caring for Eloim, and had everything run by Xander in the evening. I didn't want to push this in a direction that he didn't like, but it turned out, our tastes in houses were very similar. He had tons of great ideas, and I implemented everything I could. Then I downloaded SketchUp and thought myself how to use the software, and began making actual blueprints for the contractor. I did a few sketches by hand and had them run by Xander or Miranda, and everyone was super existed. I think I could really get along with that woman.

Regis, Xander's father, was a quiet man. He was often there when the calls with Miranda were happening, there in the background, listening in, but not saying anything.

I called my parents too. I had told them I was dating someone before I moved out and told them I was going to join him in San Francisco, but then moving to London a few weeks after. I did present them Xander this time though. My parents don't speak much English, so the conversation was very short, but I did have to translate between them and Xander.

Eloim though, got really interested in hearing me speak French and decided he wanted to learn a few words.

I wasn't sure I would one day speak my native tongue at home, but it was nice to transmit that knowledge. I always thought that no matter where I'd be in the world, that if I had children, they would learn English from me—for its versatility and international use—but also French because it was part of my roots, and I see this as important. But Eloim is not my biological son, and it could be a little weird for me to try and impose my language and culture on him, so suddenly.

But I talked to Xander about this and he was okay with this, as long as I didn't cut on his own language and culture. Which somewhat made me really happy. In a way, he was telling me to treat Eloim like your own biological son. And I know we had this talk at first, and that was how it was supposed to be, that he wanted me to be a mother and not just the girlfriend, but it's easy to say those things and another to actually implement it.

And it was getting harder and harder to keep a distance between Eloim and me. Kids, they have a gift at worming their way inside your heart, and the fact that we had started this relationship, all-in, from the get go, probably affected how we perceived everything and how we managed our own emotions.

We had jumped feet first.

"Oh, for crying out loud," said Xander as his phone resounded as we were preparing for the restaurant.

"Relax," I told him. "It's not the end of the world."

He looked at me sideways, unconvinced.

He spent the next hour on the phone, and I called the restaurant to cancel our reservation.

"I'm trying to wrap this up quickly," he told me, as he hung up and typed furiously on his laptop.

"How about we ask if they can do delivery instead?"

"It shouldn't be too long," he told me.

"Xander, it's late, it will be time for Eloim to go to bed, we can't send him to daycare now." The building had a twenty-four hour daycare downstairs for tenants, but it wasn't the right time just before bedtime.

He looked up sharply, then looked at his watch and cursed.

“I can set things up here, I can ask them if they deliver or at least offer take out, and go and pick it myself, it’s not like it’s far. And we’ll be alone regardless, as Eloim will be in bed.”

He pursed his lips.

I kissed his forehead.

“Stop stressing up, this contract is nearly done anyways,” I said.

“It’s not what I had in mind.”

“Not everything as to be according to plan, you have to learn to be flexible.”

He pursed his lips again.

“This is how I ended up here to begin with,” I said. “Readjusting is not always a bad thing.”

His frown vanished. “Sorry, I’m just a little stressed out.”

“I noticed.”

He sighed. “Maybe you can check for deliveries or take out. It’s not a bad idea. I’m starving anyways.”

“I’m too,” I admitted.

“Sorry for the delay.”

“It’s okay, I’m not angry.”

“Thanks.”

I kissed his forehead again, and called the restaurant.

I got through their menu and ordered—consulting Xander about what he wanted—then I went to put Eloim to bed. It took a little longer than expected and I was afraid the food would be cold by the time I’d go and pick it up, but I suppose this is why microwaves were invented.

I went downstairs to pick it up and carried everything back to our apartment.

When I got in, everything was dark, except for a faint glow.

I walked in further, and I spotted candles on the table, everything was setup perfectly, and Xander’s computer was nowhere to be seen.

I couldn’t help it, I beamed at him.

“This is a nice surprise,” I noticed.

“We haven’t had many dates so far. I thought this was not a good way to start things up. Doesn’t mean because we jumped to marriage and kid from day one, that we have to skip everything in between, right.”

I smiled. “I guess you’re right.”

We put everything on the table. We did have to warm a few things up, but the food was great and he sat in our own little romantic bubble and talked softly through the evening, trying not to wake Eloim.

“I wanted to bring you somewhere nice after dinner, but I guess that has plan has fallen apart as we have no babysitter, it’s going to have to be here,” he told me.

I looked at him curiously, but my eyes widened as he pulled a little jewelry box.

“You can’t really say you’re surprised,” he noted at my expression.

“Well, I kinda forgot about this part,” I admitted.

“Do I need to go on my knees?”

“No, no, it’s not necessary,” I said. I picked the box up and looked inside, curious.

“I don’t know about England, but not everyone gets engagement rings in Québec. So it was no obligation from my part.” It was a beautiful piece, what I assumed white gold, with a stone in the middle. Simple, classic, and versatile, but pretty.

He shrugged. “I wasn’t sure about that, but I guessed it would be better to do it right.”

I smiled. “Thank you.” I hoped he didn’t ruin himself on a ring. I mean, jewelry is nice and everything, but there are a lot more important things out there. Plus, we were in the middle of expensive renovations. I didn’t want this to be a waste, but I didn’t find it in me to tell him that. It would pretty much damage this moment, so I put it on, smiling like a child, looking at it like a besotted idiot.

I always thought I wasn’t that type of girl, but I guess, there are little cheesy things that can get to you in the end. No matter how you think you’ll react.

— Chapter Fourteen —

“Hello there, lovelies,” said Miranda, greeting us as we came in.

“Hello there, Mama,” said Xander, giving her a kiss.

Eloim was on his hip and Miranda gave him a quick kiss that he mostly ignored, concentrating on the plushy he had in his hands.

“How are you?” he asked me, coming in for a kiss.

I gave her one, smiling. “Very, well, how about you?”

“Wonderful,” she said. “Glad to finally meet you in the flesh.”

“Ditto,” I agreed.

I shook hands with Regis and Xander gave me Eloim, so that he could help his father unload our luggage and take everything inside.

Miranda looked from Eloim to me, nodded then turned around and led us inside.

We all had dinner together. They were really nice people.

“You’ll have to get used to the rain, sweetie,” Miranda told me.

“Can’t be worse than the snow,” I told her, which made her smile.

“I guess you’ll handle things just fine.”

I laughed at that.

The next day, we all went to have a look at the house.

“I know it doesn’t look like much now,” said Regis. “It can always be a little scary at first, but when things start to fall into place, you’ll see it’s not so bad, not bad at all.”

I nodded and we drove up the bumpy, disused entryway, until the car peeked from the trees and we saw the house erected in front of us.

The exterior was mostly wood in a Queen Anne style. The foundation was exposed stones. The paint was peeled and there was ornamentation hanging in all the wrong directions, but I was able to visualise everything in place, with a proper coat of pain. The details were intricate and the Mansard roof had already been updated and modernised.

“It’s amazing,” I said.

That made Xander’s parents smile.

“A lot of people get scared by big projects like these, especially in this state,” said Regis.

“Oh, it was a lot worse than this when I bought it,” said Xander.

“Yeah,” I said. “But with plenty of elbow grease, this is going to be one hell of a castle.”

Regis burst out laughing.

“I see you got yourself one though little lady,” he said to his son.

Xander smiled at me.

“I’m not afraid of work,” I told them.

“Good, because this is going to be a lot of it,” Regis told me.

“We’re still using contractors,” said Xander. “It’s not like we’re doing everything ourselves.”

The inside was great. There was peeling paint everywhere, and there was dead leaves that had found their ways in somehow. Some rooms were full of cobwebs—especially those that had no work done in yet—but the dark wood flooring was in pretty good condition regardless. It needed some massive buffing job and varnishing, but I saw no rot. The paint was bad, but most of the walls looked relatively healthy too, so it was mostly aesthetic damages and nothing impossible to repair. Scrapping the old paint and redoing it would do the trick in most cases. Taking off some of the damaged wallpaper too. I’ve found rot on some of it, but it didn’t seem to extend to the wall underneath.

We found some water damage in the attic, as the roof had been leaking, but the contractors had stripped everything off and the wood below was still in relatively good condition. They had changed a few beams, and did similarly in the basement, but no part of the house was about to crumble down, and anything that could have posed a risk, had already been taking care of.

There were a few rooms with massive built-in, which was absolutely marvelous. I loved those.

The kitchen, on the other hand, was horrid, and in the basement, as staff used to cook hidden below. We knew we were stripping everything away anyways and were converting one of the rooms on the first floor as a kitchen instead. The electricity, and wiring was mostly done too, and all according to my plans. It was great, we would get a stylish, modern kitchen, but that would still fit with the style and aesthetic of the rest of the house.

I loved it.

I loved all of it.the haunted house look didn’t deter me one bit.

I felt like everyone but Eloim had been sort of holding their breath to see what my reaction would be. I mean, I had seen the house in pictures, but when you actually walk inside it, when you smell the mix of stale air and new materials, and tool usage, it can get pretty intimidating, but I’m able to see the potential below it all.

Every house can be staged bad or well, and decor can change the vibe of any place. But what is below, the foundation, the structure, this is the most important. Plus, I love old houses.

And my artistic mind loved looking at the derelict look of it, and I took actually plenty of pictures. When I was a teenager, I went in abandoned buildings and places with my friends to walk around and take pictures. I mean, I would not live in a place rotten to the core, but there is a sort of beauty in the left-overs of life and how nature slowly retake land and devours old building where we are not there anymore to care for them.

I guess it's the cycle of all living things.

We explored further for a while and talked to the contractor, but so far, I wasn't scared at all by the work.

The one thing that can be scary in renovating old houses is the budget. I've never heard of a project costing less than expected. It's usually the other way around, and as I had no idea of our financial situation, I didn't know what to expect.

When we got back at his parents house, in the evening, we sat in one of the drawing rooms—because yes, they have those, and more than one too—and I voice my concerns, so Xander who took his computer out and we spent a few hours going through everything.

I thought I was an organised person, until I saw his spreadsheets.

He is a spreadsheet king.

Everything was sorted out with precise numbers, plus percentages of possible inflation relative to the kinds of surprises that could occur on various sections of the project, but even after all that, I he added an additional percentage of the budget to any possible surprises or delays. Now, I'm not so sure we'll bust our finances.

He also gave me the run down on what we could play with for the design, and then we segwayed into design ideas. I took my laptop and opened the plans I had made as of yet, and we made a few modifications to better fit the additional data we had gotten from the visit.

I heard of a lot of couples being tested by going through a construction or renovation project, but I hadn't heard of many couples getting together through those types of projects.

So I thought, if we can get through this and make it, then, we'll be able to get through anything together.

— Chapter Fifteen —

"You, what?" Annie nearly screamed in my ear.

I just said nothing, what do you want to say to that.

"Why the hell did you make such a decision on your own, like that without talking to me first?"

"Because you went backpacking in India for three months," I told her.

"I could be reached."

"Barely, when was the last time you checked in with your mom?"

She was pretty infamous for disappearing once in a while. She'd improvise going to some sort of new age secluded retreat or something, and give no news for weeks. I sent her a message weeks ago actually, and she only replied now.

"That is beside the point."

"Don't go around judging me, Amyrilis." She had gotten herself involved in some sort of weird Tantra sex cult where she changed her name to Amyrilis and was having spiritual orgies, whatever that is.

"That's not the same, I could always get out, what you're doing—."

I cut her off. "First off, Missy, this is not the 1600s, divorce is a thing. If it was really to go to shit, it's always an option."

"But you said this wasn't what you were going for."

"It isn't. I agreed that this was long-term. If it doesn't work, we'll look at alternatives first like having each relationship on the side or whatever. That, as the kid is concerned, this is until he comes of age, at least. But it doesn't mean that I'll never leave no matter what. You're acting like I'd stay even if he beat me up or turned into a serial killer. This is not a prison, this is a marriage."

"Wouldn't you prefer to be with someone you love?"

"You dated Richard for his money, you've been with Trent because you didn't want to be alone, and how many one-night stands have you had exactly? I'm not saying that to judge you, but you've been with men without having any love involved and you were okay with it. So what's different with me, that I'll be married? Besides, it doesn't mean love can't be part of the equation, just that it was not part of the initial decision. We actually get along very well."

I was in Xander's parents' backyard. Miki was running around happily, and I was walking slowly with my phone on my ear. It was a pretty nice backyard. Miranda has definitively the

green thumb. There were massive flower beds everywhere with bushes and trees. Everything in full bloom. The breeze carried the smell of lilacs to me. It was a good home. I understand why Xander love it here, or why it gave him the desire to find himself a place similar.

It was an old stone house that had probably been built in the late Tudor era, with a few extensions that had been added along the years. Stones and timber predominated the decor. Massive wood paneling was inside some of the rooms. It was beautiful. Nothing I could find where I'm from. The sheer amount of history alone is incredible.

I could imagine myself working on similar landscaping designs around our home.

Our home. It felt a bit odd to say it, but I caught myself thinking this more and more. The idea was sinking in slowly and taking root.

Miranda had been helping me with planning the wedding. We hadn't picked a date yet. I should tell my parents I was engaged before someone posts something on social media or something, and they learn it this way. They'd be pissed.

"I just want you to be safe," said Annie. "You're really far now."

"I'm safe, I'm okay, and planes exist, far is very relative. I mean, you're far more isolated than me right now." She had just crossed into Sri Lanka and was in a small hostel, finally checking her messages and using an internet connection stable enough to make a phone call.

"Is he cute?"

"He is," I admitted.

"How cute are we talking about?"

I looked around, making sure I was still alone.

"Black curly hair, a little over six feet would be my guess. In good physical shape, with a sexy English accent."

"Rich?"

I scoffed, this was such an expected question from her.

"He's not a millionaire, he won't whisk me away on a private jet or yacht or anything crazy, but he got a good job, and unless he loses it, I won't be hungry and I won't get my phone line cut any time soon."

"There is a very wide margin before starvation and private jets. Mind specifying things a little."

"I don't know his exact salary."

"You're marrying a guy without knowing is annual income?"

"Yep," I said. "Oh, and I let him sell his nice London townhouse so that we can move into this decrepit old house in the middle of nowhere. It's wonderful, you'd hate it."

"Man, you are such a weird woman."

"I know."

"Do you have a picture at least?"

"Sure," I dug in my phone a bit and sent her one.

"Not of the horrifying haunted house, dummy."

I laughed.

"The man, gimme, gimme."

I complied.

"Well, hello, there. Not too bad. You could definitely do worse."

"I don't know if I should say thank you, of fuck you."

"I don't think it's me you're gonna fuck."

"You have no common sense," I noted in a sigh.

"Tell me you tried the merchandise before buying."

"Okay, I think this has gone far enough."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, you're not a prude."

"No, but you're rude," I said. "You'd be the first to raise the feminist flag if a man talked like that about me or you, but you act like he's nothing but a sex toy, that is a little offensive. You want to know if we slept together, yes, we did. We also talked, like adults do."

"Get down your high horse, Missy."

I sighed, this is taking a pointless tangent.

"I'm not on my high horse, it's just that sometimes I'd like our conversations to have meaning."

"What are you accusing me of exactly?"

I sighed again. "Nothing, I'm just tired, I'm rambling, I should get going."

I made short order of ending that conversation.

Annie and I had never been the closest. One day, in elementary school, she had decided that we were suddenly the bestest of friends. She also acted a little disproportionately. We never really had anything in common. I had moved recently to a new town, there was this girl who wanted

to be my friend and I was desperate not to be alone, and that was it. But there as been times when I've felt more alone with her around than without.

I'm not sure why I kept that odd friendship going. After a while, it became a sort of habit. Plus, after a while of me distancing myself, she'd pop out of I don't know where and reenacted her initial friendship declaration all over again.

I've had other friends, friends with whom I'd connected better with than Annie. But life happens, someone changes city, some got married, or changed job, things happen and suddenly distance creeps in. After a while the hobbies don't align anymore, or the lifestyle. We say, 'let's keep contact' but in the end we don't and drift apart.

Only Annie has always fought against this, tooth and nail.

This time though, it's me who leaves, moves away, get married, and a kid. I don't know if it'll last after that. I'd like to be sad of the prospect of losing a possible friendship, but the truth is, I don't mind that much. I don't know what it says about us, or me in particular.

Maybe it's why I had so little qualms in moving abroad in the first place. When I have this limited connection with many of the people around me.

It's not that I don't have friends, it's just… I don't know, I don't know what it is.

Miki ran back to me with a wide doggy grin. He was having a great day.

I had been having a good day too before that call. Calls with Annie tend to put me in a weird mood. I decided not to let this ruin my day and went back inside. The sky was getting cloudy and there was probably rain coming ahead.

— Chapter Sixteen —

"Wait, stop," I told Xander.

"Why?" he looked up at me confused.

"I think I heard something."

"I think you're getting paranoid."

"I'm not paranoid."

"This is a big house. You were not this on edge in the apartment. Not everyone is going to hear."

"I swear I heard something."

"Is it about my parents?"

"What?" I looked at him distractedly. "No, no, it's not that."

He looked at me like he didn't believe a single word I said.

I heard a creek from where the door was and I moved off of Xander and landed sitting next to him, pulling the cover over my breast.

"Daddy," a sleepy little voice came from the dark crack in the door.

I gave Xander a knowing look.

He ignored it, grabbed some pants and went to see what was going on.

I did say that it didn't bother me that his parents were in the house, but since his father caught us mid-coitus, I can't say that I haven't been on edge. I think it's going to be a good thing when we have our own place.

I decided to put on some PJs just to be safe, and then I lied down on the mattress. I was trying to wait for Xander, but my eyes were tired and I elected to rest them for a bit.

The mattress dipped and I woke up confused.

"What?" I mumbled.

"Were you sleeping already?"

"Mmh, no, no."

"I've been away no more than fifteen minutes," Xander noticed a little annoyed.

"I wasn't sleeping," I said in a voice that was clearly betraying the fact that I had been.

“Are you too sleepy?” he asked wrapping his arm around my waist.

“For what?” I asked confused.

“I guess you are then,” he said dejected and rolled on his back.

Things clicked in my head, and I suddenly felt stupid.

“Sorry ‘bé, I’m awake now, we can return to our night-time activities.”

He turned his head my way, trying to gage if I would fall asleep on him mid-action, or something like that. So I circled my arms around his neck and started kissing him.

His mood brightened rapidly and he rolled me on my back. He noticed my clothing and frustratingly took it out of the way. I noticed he had taken care of his pants before returning to bed, so I used the access and slipped a hand lower. That really cheered his mood.

I guess I had kind of killed the mood—though, arguably, having a kid walking in on us was far more an effective mood killer than me, but I guess falling asleep before things had time to get really freaky, wasn’t that much better—so to make him forgive me, I rolled him on his back, and kissed his mouth, then his jaw, and his collarbone, and chest, and belly, and I kept going down.

His eyes were burning into me and I enjoyed seeing him lose control for a bit there.

I kept going for a while, taking my time, enjoying every moan he couldn’t contain, and then I went to resume my original position, only he had other ideas. Before I was properly seated, he flipped us around and took control of the situation back into his own hands. Quite literally. Which I enjoyed, a lot.

We kissed, our tongues dancing. He placed himself in between my thighs and I heard the creek again.

We both froze.

“Daddy,” said the same little voice.

Xander got up and grabbed his pants, putting them on quickly. I rolled under the covers.

“What is it, Pumkin?” asked Xander as he got to the door.

He stayed there for a while, then came to the side table, picked up his phone, turned the flashlight on to look around.

“Is everything okay?” I asked him.

He looked around in the room, and the corridor, then he left.

I waited.

This time, I had been a lot more keyed up and I didn't fall asleep. I guess it would have been a little insulting for him if I did. I prompt my head up just to be sure I wouldn't.

Xander came back a minute later and put his phone on the desk, then sat on the side of the bed. I thought he was about to take his pants off again, but he didn't move for a few seconds.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"You heard Eloim, right?"

"Yes, twice. What was wrong."

"He wasn't there. He was in his bed, asleep."

"Just now?"

"Yeah. That's weird."

I looked at the now closed door.

It creaked open.

Xander took his phone out and lit the door.

There was nothing. No one either.

"I'll have to check this doorhandle tomorrow, and maybe oil the hinges."

I nodded.

He put his phone back on the side table, took his pants off in one smooth motion and flipped me back down beneath him. It took us little time to get back where we left off and he slowly slipped inside me. I could feel the pressure all the way to my spine, I wrapped my arms around his neck and we kissed as we began to move slowly. Our breaths were growing heavy, and our movements slowly accelerated.

I was getting really close, so close. He was too, I could feel it.

"Daddy."

This time the voice game right next to our head.

We both jumped out of our skin and looked up.

There was a small dark silhouette next to the bed.

We scrambled to cover ourselves, and Xander turned a lamp on.

Eloim was standing there with his eyes closed. Is he sleepwalking?

The door, I noticed hadn't been closed again after it last opened on its own.

Was that what had been going on the previous time? Eloim sleepwalked in and out? It could explain how Xander found him asleep in his bed.

Now that he had pants on, again, he walked around the bed to his son who was standing on my side. We had been so busy that we never realised he was in the room to begin with.

I felt really uncomfortable about this.

I'm pretty sure that he's too young for sex education at the moment.

Xander examined him, and Eloim didn't stir. He eventually took him in his arms, clearly worried, and went to put him to bed.

— Chapter Seventeen —

“Do you have everything?” asked Xander.

“I think so,” I replied.

The kitchen was mostly done and mostly clean. We had two bedrooms painted and ready, the house was starting to take shape. We had decided that there was enough done for us to move into parts of the house. The main corridors were done, not all painted but at least primed.

We had one room that we could install the TV in. It would not be our long-term living-room, but it was feasible.

Xander’s cousin came to help us move furniture inside the house, and all the boxes.

I was by far the one with the less stuff as I had sold or given away most of it, but my crate had come in with whatever I had shipped from Canada.

“You people are crazy,” said Anton, Xander’s cousin. “There is way too much work to do in this house. You wouldn’t catch me taking on something like that. Give me a nice brand new prefab and I’ll be fine.”

Xander grimaced.

Neither of us found this idea particularly enchanting.

“Let us agree to disagree,” I told him.

“Good thing you found yourself an odd bird to fit with you,” he said to Xander pointing his thumb sideways at me

“Stop whining about what doesn’t concern you and help with the boxes if you want your beer,” Xander told him.

“That’s blackmail, mate.”

I left them at it and went to check on Eloim. He had been awfully silent for a while.

I found him in one of the unfinished rooms, there were three plushies in front of him. All of them had lost their heads which were a little further around and turned down, facing the floor.

“What happened here?” I asked.

Eloim turned away from me. I had a flashback of that first time when I had met him and he had kept his back to me, not looking at my face. I looked at the plushies.

“What happened, sweetie?” I asked lowering on my shin next to him.

He turned his body away from me.

“You have to talk to me for me to understand.”

“I don’t like the weird faces,” he finally replied.

“Did they have weird faces?” I asked.

He didn’t reply.

“What do the weird faces look like?”

“No,” he said putting his hands on his ears and crouching down.

I put my hand on his back but he flinched away. Something was wrong.

I went to fetch Xander worried.

He rushed to where Eloim was. Anton’s face was a lot more serious now. I guessed that a lot of things have happened with Eloim, and the family was aware of a lot of it.

I checked by the door on the two guys. Eloim was now in Xander’s arms who was rocking him softly. Eloim’s face was buried in his father’s chest, and he was gripping his shirt tightly.

I had the feeling I was not going to help them, so I went to help Anton instead.

“How things are going down there?” Anton asked me as we moved things to the upper bedrooms.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “Are you aware of how things have been going with Eloim?”

“Some.”

“Has he been known to have issues with faces?”

“I thought that phase was over?”

“He had a phase?”

“Yeah, it lasted months.”

“What do you know about it?”

He looked at me sideways unsure. “I don’t know if it’s for me to tell you.”

“Xander hasn’t hidden things from me.”

He thought about it a little. “Do you know about Enola?”

“Xander’s wife? Yes. I also know of the accident.”

He nodded. “No one is sure because, as far as I know, Eloim as never talked about it, but there have been speculations. I know Xander went to see a bunch of specialist about this.”

“About what?”

“Do you know how long it took to find them after the accident?”

“Two days,” I said.

“Yeah well, Enola was not in a good condition when they found her, both from injuries from the accident and decomp. They needed dental records to identify her.”

“And Eloim was in the car with her. He could see her,” I guessed.

“No one is sure, but it’s our best guess.”

I nodded. I couldn’t imagine how horrible that sight has been for a toddler. To see the face of someone he loved turn like this. It could be flashbacks, PTSD, I don’t know, I’m not a child psychology expert, but knowing this, I felt similar to Anton. It was probably the most logical explanation, which was why he acted like an autistic child, shying away from faces and physical contact, only it was not triggered by mental illness, but trauma.

What can you do when this happens? I’m sure Xander has asked one of the many specialists he’s seen with Eloim, and I will have to ask him about it later. If this happens when he’s not around, I’ll have to know what to do, how to deal with it. What I can and most of all can’t do. But there’s probably more there too, even if I did all the right things, it might not be enough. Maybe he was not used to having me around, or maybe the fact that I was a woman could put be at a higher risk of triggering him than his father.

That would put me in a very limited position in what I could do to help him.

Most new parents don’t deal with things like these from the get go, or at least, walk into it not expecting it, but I had known there would be challenges with Eloim. I knew and I chose to do it regardless. I was fine with this, but so far, everything had gone relatively well. Not only that, but the fact that it had gone so well had been the main reason why Xander asked me to marry him and come to live here with them to begin with.

What if Eloim didn’t get better? What if my good streak had run out? What then?

I had planned my life now around both of them. I was invested and excited about this house. I had quit my jobs, my country, everything, to come here. But my main purpose had been to become a mother, first and foremost. What happened if I couldn’t perform this task?

I liked Xander, we got along well, we laughed together, we had similar tastes on many things. I had grown to feel that we were a good match, I had not put any damper on my emotions towards either of them.

I moved out of the room and left Anton on his own to go to the bathroom.

By the time I was inside, I was already crying. Why was I so emotional now?

Was it the fear of losing them? Or the fear of not being good enough to help Eloim?

I had no idea what was going on with me, but I didn't like it.

I thought of all the crap that Xander had to deal with, and I decided that he didn't have to deal with this either. I would come out of this bathroom and be cheerful and helpful. I will finish the work while Xander is busy, and then I'll make lunch, and then I'll be my normal self with Eloim, and if it doesn't work, then I'll use the same trick I used the first time we've met, Eloim had a strong affection towards pets, if it worked once, it might as well work again.

Maybe it's not me that Xander needed, maybe he just needed pets.

— Chapter Eighteen —

Things had gone relatively well for us since we'd moved in. I was spending a lot of my free time painting walls and ceilings.

Xander had given me carte blanche when it came to decorating, which was nice, and not once did he say, or even appeared not to like my choices colours, so I went a little wild. I'm not really used to be given so much freedom, beyond that, he's turning into a great enabler.

Xander made himself a small temporary office to work from home, which was not ideal and a bit messy actually, so I decided to concentrate efforts on his future long-term office.

All the walls were patched up, modernised electricity done, primer on the ceiling done. Wood paneling restored. All that was left was to paint the ceiling and varnish the wood.

It was a nice room with lots of natural light and absolutely stunning built-ins.

Once the ceiling and walls would be finished, we could buff the floor and varnish it, then move in the furniture and he could finally have a good place to work in, somewhere where all his things would be reassembled so that he wouldn't have to go from one room to the other and he wouldn't have to dig into boxes all the time to access archives and such.

Once it would be done, the twelve-foot ceiling would be a nice midnight blue, all the moldings everywhere pearly white, the built-ins and wood panelling a deep dark colour. I had also started the selection of furniture to put there. Some of the pieces he had were perfect, others didn't work so we had sold some and I scoured the internet for replacement. I found a few good secondhand pieces that were perfect, and one was the main desk. I found an antique massive desk that had been very damaged, and so we could easily do a few modifications without feeling like we were damaging a valuable piece. It had been stripped of layers and layers of paint, and returned to its original wood finishing. We will varnish it the same tint as the wood panneling and built-ins. It had indicated sculpted designs on the sides, it would fit in perfectly.

Xander helped me with all this when he had a bit of time, the contractor and his team now concentrating on finishing the plumbing in the basement and also the new radiant eating system.

Eloim would spend a lot of his time with me. Sometimes he would help me scrape of paint, I tried to give him projects that if he messed up, it wouldn't be too bad, while at the same time involving him in everything. Other times, he'd play in the room not far from me, with his toys, something he occasionally did next to his working father too, but he spent more time with me.

I was afraid he'd bother Xander during his important business calls.

Eloim, seemed a little better, but I noticed a few times when he would look strangely at random things, then go and hide somewhere. Sometimes covering his eyes and ears and staying this way, abnormally long.

I tried to ask him what was going on, but I never managed to help in anyways. Though, I could take his kitten named Billy, put him on his lap, and he would return to his normal self within a few minutes.

He would carry that kitten everywhere. We had to make sure he wouldn't drag him around by the neck, but the kitten has grown pretty docile to Eloim's treatment, and the boy has learned to be gentle.

Lily would look at them from one of her perches around the house, once in a while coming for a rub, then running back to her perch when she thought it was enough and overlooking the scene with detachment, like all cats do.

Miki stayed mostly where I was, which was possibly one of the reasons why Eloim spend so much more time with me than his father.

We had accumulated quite the menagerie, but the house was large and it really affected Eloim positively.

At night, interruptions were becoming more and more part of the routine. Sometimes Eloim would sneak into our bedroom, at time refusing to sleep in his own bedroom, and others he would wake screaming about nightmares.

We were growing worried.

"I don't know what is going on," said Xander one evening after he went to check on Eloim for the second time. "He's doing increasingly better, but at the same time it's worsening."

"What do you mean," I asked as he slipped back under the covers.

"He's more open, he talks more than ever, he's comfortable with you, he clearly likes you, he called you Mommy today."

"Did he?" I asked surprised.

"When I put him to bed. He asked why it was me and not Mommy tucking him in tonight."

I had been in the shower, washing off all the paint and whatnot all over me around Eloim's bed time.

I smiled unable to contain the glee of such news.

"But he's having more episodes. The nightmares are getting worse. He hasn't had so much difficulty sleeping for at least a year."

"Do you know why?"

“No, I thought he was progressing so much in the last few months that I didn’t push for his psychiatrist’s appointments. He really dislike it, I don’t know why. But maybe we’ll have to resume that. Maybe I was too quick into dismissing it.”

“Nothing can happen overnight,” I said circling my arms around his neck.

“I know, I just hoped he would get better faster. You don’t know how he was before all this. He was a little ball of energy, he loved being the center of attention and always clowning around, now he’s just … in his head. Lost. The old him seems to want to peek out from time to time, but something happens and he reverts to his shell.”

“Maybe he just needs time. He is progressing after all. Maybe that progress is part of his new-found struggles?”

Xander’s head popped up. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Change is never easy. Maybe he struggles with it. Or maybe not. We just have to be on the lookout, and maybe make a new appointment too.”

He nodded, and turned us on our side.

“You know, a lot of women would have run off by then.”

“Not all. There are parents who adopt children with handicaps or trauma.”

“But most don’t.”

I shrugged. “I knew there would be challenges. But so far, nothing is impossible to face, and I’m not doing it alone, it would be a lot harder without you.”

He kissed me.

“We can do this, right?”

I smiled at him. “If we can go through this together, then the rest will be a piece of cake.”

— Chapter Nineteen —

I heard the small wail of the kitten coming from Eloim's room. I moved up the creaking stairs.

"What happened?" I asked. "You have to be careful with pets, they don't like it when you play rough," I told Eloim as I walked in.

He had a couple of small scratches on his hands, so I took him downstairs and cleaned them properly. I found it odd that he didn't cry, at least, until I disinfected them. But he felt better after I put on a few Peppa Pig Band-Aids on.

It was happening more and more frequently. I never saw what happened, but I'd seen the cats run off from whatever room Eloim was in at that moment, screeching and wailing.

Every time, Miki would start barking and would lead me to wherever it had been happening, and every time Eloim would be silent and stoic.

Was he purposefully hurting them when I was not around? He was so caring about them that I had difficulty believing that. Plus, as a rule of thumb, animals tend to be afraid of violence and either recoil, hide, or attack from those that do it, and all three acted normally with Eloim whenever I was around. But again, I couldn't truly rely solely on this as proof.

I wanted to talk to Xander about this, but he was on a new contract and doing crazy hours, so I decided to investigate first and only involve him when necessary, or wait for things to quiet down.

His job had a lot of ups and downs. Some weeks, he barely had to read his emails a couple of times a day and would be free the rest of the time, working with me on the house, playing with Eloim, or taking us out. We went to the zoo, something that apparently Eloim had refused to do in the past because of how many people were there, but accepted now and cooed over the animal. We did go on a week day so that there would be fewer people around, and it went pretty well.

But other weeks, Xander would pull seventy or eighty hours, sometimes getting urgent calls in the middle of the night, and he wouldn't return to bed until the sun was way up. It's not an easy schedule to deal with, but he really likes his job, and he's confessed that he has taken more jobs since I've been around as Eloim had not responded very well to nannies in the past, which had stopped Xander for being able to do this.

I didn't mind this too much. At least he worked mostly from home, so whenever he had a bit of time off, he could spend it with us.

Other than buying paint, or furniture, or groceries, I didn't go out of the house much these days, and I knew that eventually I'd have to get acquainted with the neighborhood, but seeing how busy we both were, especially with the renovations, I didn't mind so much either.

I video called my parents every week and they have begun asking me for pictures of Eloim, and even chatted with him a few times. The idea of being grandparents was growing on them.

Miranda decided to help out with the wedding as much as possible seeing how busy we were. I suspect she was afraid we would just go to court and sign a bunch of papers and be done with.

It will be nothing big, and we decided to do it at their home. They had a beautiful lawn and enough place for a small marquee so it could be outside. I told my parents I was getting married in a few months, they were not exactly surprised. They thought I was going a little fast, but they did see how I was interacting with Eloim and how I was adjusting to life here and had accepted that this was probably coming sooner or later, regardless.

It would be a small reception, and Xander and I were still looking into where we'd spend how honeymoon, but Eloim's situation made us worry to leave for long, or far, or even at all. We both wanted to take a break from everything for a little while, but we didn't want to do it at the detriment of Eloim's well-being. His parent's had offered to take him while we'd be away, but regardless, we made no decisions. Even with the wedding, we had sent no official invites and had not officialized any dates, in case things went sideways and we had to move it up.

Eloim had no problem with the wedding, or so he said. I mean, he was the one who had originally requested it. Maybe not in those words, but still.

Xander left for a job for a week, and I was left alone with Eloim for the first time for this long. Things went relatively well for a few days until I heard sobbing in his room and I heard the cat screech again and run off.

I went upstairs to check on the situation, but stopped right above the stairs, transfixed at the scene before me.

Eloim was sitting on the floor in a fetal position, his face in between his knees, his arms wrapped around himslf. Toys were littered everywhere. A couple of feet behind him, sitting on the bed, was a woman. She had shoulder length brown hair, a cardigan and denim on, and she was caressing Eloim's back slowly. He shuddered at every touch. Her skin was odd looking, bluish on the extremities, and her face was lacerated, bloody and rotten, and she was translucid.

Miki which had been following me upstairs started barking like a madman in the bedroom's direction, his four legs jumping off the ground with every bark and moving slowly towards the room.

My instincts kicked in. Eloim was suffering and I had to get to him and that's all that trully registered in my mind.

The second my foot moved forwards the figure turned her head to me and the door slammed shot with a bang.

"MILA!" screamed Eloim and my insides ran cold.

I slammed into the door, but the handles didn't work. It wasn't ever twisting.

"MILA!" Eloim screamed again, only it was breaking into tears and something in me clicked.

I put myself on my side against the door and swung my weight as hard as I could against the door, relying mostly on my hips.

This door was solid wood and would obviously not budge, but the doorframe was something else. A lot of work had been put into restoring those antique moldings, but I didn't even process in my brain the damage I was about to do, and all that matter was to hold him safe in my arms.

I banged as hard as I could. This was a solid wood door. I could feel my skin bruise, the burning sensation building with every impact, but I also heard wood creak and buck.

It finally gave in and the door swung open.

Miki was in a frenzy and had been barking and growling defiantly at the door while I was fighting my way through.

Miki ran to the underside of the bed right away.

I couldn't see the woman anywhere. I threw myself on the floor and grabbed at the crying Eloim hidden below the bed.

He trashed instinctively against me in pure terror, unsure of what was going on, and I didn't let him push me away this time. I dragged him out in one swift motion, pulled him to myself and ran down the stair and to our temporary living room.

Miki barked at the room at large a few times in warning, but followed suit behind us.

I stopped only when I was sitting safely, on the couch with the little boy that was now clinging to me as if his life depended on it.

— Chapter Twenty —

After the incident in Eloim's bedroom, he refused to sleep there alone. Actually, he would barely ever be away from me.

I was keyed up.

It was hard to believe what had happened in that room, what I had seen. I was questioning everything, from my perception of death, religion, all the way to my sanity.

Every night, Eloim would refuse to go to bed without clinging to my chest, so I let him and lied beside him. I would close the lights and read a book on my phone for a few hours. It did eat away at my schedule a lot, but there was not way now I would leave Eloim behind terrified.

I didn't know what I really saw, or what I could do.

I didn't even tell Xander when we talked on the phone.

I asked the contractor if they could help me repair some of the damage on the doorframe, telling them that there had been a problem with the doorhandle and I had to go through to Eloim to get him out, not mentioning any weird disfigured woman.

They glued all the pieces back, and we managed to save the moldings. In the end, I had to put a new coat of paint, but it worked and looked mostly fine once done.

There would be days, when Eloim would cling to my leg, or but his back against it to play on the floor while I worked. If I moved, it would take a few seconds and he's scooted around until he was back into position. He needed physical contact.

My senses were on full alert all the time, especially at night.

More than once I heard creaking from the bedroom floor when we were in bed, as if weight was moving around, but this was an old house. It could be a million things, normal things, rational things, but because of what I'd seen, I questioned everything that I wouldn't have otherwise.

The contractors were mostly working on the exterior of the house now, and it was extremely satisfying to see its metamorphosis from creepy old ruins to a stunning piece of architecture. Everything that had been hanging the wrong way were now back into place. Every scrape of paint had been stripped off, and in a week, I could have the pros repaint it all, and I was now choosing the colour palette with Eloim, making it an activity. I even printed a few pictures of the house for him to draw on and see which colour was the coolest.

He was very tempted into going for a rainbow pattern, I was sadly a little more conservative than him, and went for something a little less extravagant.

Eloim had enough fun with this project, than he was starting to return to him normal self.

We even managed to start early on the east side as there was not much left to do on the wood cladding.

“Purple?” said Xander as he came off his car the moment he returned.

Eloim had rushed to him like a small rhinoceros stampede to give him a hug, smiling.

Xander raised him in his arms laughing.

“That’s interesting,” he said looking at the painters working on the first few feet of the first coat. “Not subtle though.”

“Is it too much?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m sure it’ll be great.” He kissed me.

“You should have seen your son’s ideal colour pallet. It would have been a unicorn house.”

That made Eloim giggle.

“I prefer purple,” said Xander.

The day went well, but at night, when Xander tried to but Eloim to bed, things went sideways.

“NO! NO! NO!” screamed Eloim. “MILA!”

It sounded like he was being tortured and the fact that Xander was with him didn’t register as I careened through the house and rushed inside his room in a panic.

Xander looked at the scene with wide eyes.

Eloim jumped out of his bed and into my arms crying.

“What happened,” mouthed Xander silently.

“Later,” I replied in the same way.

I took Eloim in my arms and brought him to bed, and I resumed what was slowly turning into our new routine.

Xander looked at the scene worried. Eloim didn’t sleep until he was properly clinging to me, and I stayed this way until he fell asleep.

Xander sat on the bed on the other side and looked at his little boy with concern painted on his face.

“What happened?”

How do you answer this?

“He got locked into his bedroom and now he’s afraid of it.”

"How?"

I looked at the little boy, unsure of what to say next.

"I'm not sure what I saw," I admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"Just … don't judge me please."

He looked at me strangely and I told him all that happened.

He stared at me with skepticism, I raised my shirt and showed the side of my body where the massive blue bruises were slowly turning to purple and yellow.

He eyes bulged out.

I lowered the side of my pants, showing him the extend of it.

He looked horrified.

"I'm not saying that I believe into anything weird." I sighed. "I had the housed checked for carbon monoxide poisoning, I heard it can cause hallucinations and the feeling of being touched and everything. A child would be even more affected than an adult," I said.

"And?"

"Nothing. The air quality is pretty good around the house other than maybe where there is too much dust because of the renovations, but we always kept those sections isolated from the rest of the house and it should not cause trouble. I also asked someone to check the electricity, I heard that it can have built up sometimes that can affect people. It's called electromagnetic fields. I wanted to know if we had that."

"And?"

"Nothing significant to warrant intervention. I called a specialist to check for ultrasound frequencies?"

"Why?"

"Apparently it can make you eyeballs vibrate and make you see hallucinations."

"And?"

"I have an appointment for two days from now. I asked the contractors to check for possible toxic mold that could be here, but they said no, all the mold had been taken away and none had been found to be very harmful."

I saw his jaw pop in the corner.

"Do you think I should ask for a medical and mental check up? Just to be safe?"

"What? No, no." He shook his head.

"I know what I saw. I was not sleeping either. The pets saw it, Eloim saw, or at least felt it. What if it's part of why he's struggling so much? What if it's where the scary faces come from."

Xander turned around to look at the wall. He was unmoving on the side of the bad for a little while. I looked at his back and waited.

"When is his meeting with the psychiatrist?"

"In a month. There were no available spots before then," he said, his back still to mine.

"Do you think I'm mad?"

"No."

"Lying?"

A couple of seconds went by.

"No."

"I don't know what's going on, but I'll do everything I can for Eloim, but I'll respect your opinion in this."

He said nothing.

"I don't know what to do with something like this," I said.

"I don't either."

He stayed this way for a few more minutes. He needed to think, I knew I did.

I was slowly feeling tiredness take over.

"Do you think it's her?" asked Xander from the shadows.

I opened my eyes. He was still sitting on the side of the bed, probably looking at nothing in particular. I knew what he had meant, who he was referring to. I had thought about it too.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I never saw her before."

Xander took his phone out of his pocket and flipped through its content. He turned around a little later showing me the picture of a pretty woman with brown hair and eyes.

"I don't know," I confessed. "She had longer hair. Around her shoulders."

"She had that haircut when—," he let the words trail off.

"She didn't have a recognisable face," I said. "It was … damaged, injured, it was not pretty. I wouldn't be able to make out features much."

"If you saw that, could you recognize it?"

I felt myself heave. I knew exactly what he was asking me to do. I could just say no and be done with it, I could turn the page and move on, but I also knew there would be a million questions that would stay unanswered, and I doubt this is the best way to find a solution.

“I could try,” I told him.

He looked at me. He knew how bad what he asked could be, but we both knew what was at stake.

I could see he wanted to ask for confirmation, that he was doubting the wisdom of this, but I nodded. I will do it.

— Chapter Twenty-One —

“Hey,” said Xander to a police officer.

We had left Eloim at Xander’s parents for the day, which Eloim was not happy about, but he had gone with Miki, which made him feel a little better.

We came to the police station. This was the county he had grown up in, and also where Enola was heading that fateful day. People here had been the one to respond to the call.

“Hey, Xan,” said the officer, he gave Xander a hearty handshake. “How have you been doing? It’s been awhile.”

“It has,” Xander admitted. “This is Mila, my fiancé.”

The officer’s eyes turned to me a little wide. “Nice to meet you,” he told me.

“Ditto,” I replied shaking his hand.

“Mila, this is Marcus. We went to school together.”

I beamed at him.

“Fiancé?” he asked. “I didn’t know about this. Are you back in town?”

“Yeah, we moved into the house,” said Xander.

“Really? Enough with the big city?”

“Yeah, it was about time.”

“Is that old thing livable now?”

“Mostly,” Xander admitted. “Getting there.”

“Good.”

“Actually, I’d like to ask a favor of you.”

“Sure, mate, anything.”

* * * * *

“Mate, are you sure about this?” asked Marcus as he brought a file to a table in a small conference room.

Xander nodded, looking apprehensively at the file.

“You don’t have to look,” I told him. “It’s not necessary.”

He looked at it still unsure.

“What type of weird ass torture is this? Man, why would you want to look at that.”

“Not him, me,” I corrected Marcus.

“But why?”

“Just humour us,” said Xander.

Marcus looked like he really wanted to argue. I pointed at the table in front of me so that he would comply. I acted with far more bravado than I felt. He looked back and forth between us, still unsure.

“I’m not even allowed to do this shit,” he mumbled as he put the file before me.

I opened it carefully. I was dreading what I was about to see, but it had to be done and the longer I took, the longer it would last.

I flipped through pages of accident reports until I landed on the autopsy report and just behind were the pictures.

I was glad I hadn’t eaten yet, I don’t know if I’d be able to for a while after this. I was also glad Xander was on the other side of the room. I kept the side of the file up so that he wouldn’t see inside.

I flipped through a few pictures. I tried to look long enough to be sure, but the moment my eyes landed on her, I knew it was her.

I closed the file and nodded gravely at Xander.

“Shit,” he muttered and ran his hands over his face.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, officer,” I told Marcus.

Xander had been pretty impassive until now, but the expression on his face right now was that of a tormented man. I wanted to take him out of here, and fast.

“It’s my business, little lady. I just crossed a few lines to show you this, I have the right to know.”

Xander just kept his eyes on the closed file on the table.

“Could we do this out of here?” I asked Marcus, nearly pleading. I shot a quick glance at Xander who was still looking at the file.

Marcus followed my gaze. “There’s a nice café on the other side of the road. Go there, I’ll put this back where it belongs and I’ll join you, so we can talk. If you’re not there, I’m making an arrest.”

I nodded, took Xander’s hand and guided him out.

“Are you okay?” he asked me, his eyes filled with worries.

There was a cup of coffee before me, but I hadn’t touched it. Xander nearly downed his.

I didn’t feel okay.

I nodded. “Don’t worry, I’m one tough woman.”

He gave me a faint smile.

I took his hand in mine and smiled at him. “We’ll figure it out.”

“What do people do with this?”

“I don’t know?” I admitted.

“In movies they call priests, but I’ve never been into religion, does this even works if you don’t believe.”

“I’m not even sure basing our assumptions on unreliable movie logic is such a great idea.”

He scoffed. “Probably not. What then?”

I shrugged. “I’ll try anything. Even movie tricks, I just want this to be over.”

He nodded.

“I’ll do stupid Ouija boards if it works.”

“I’m definitely not an expert, but from what I’ve read online so far, this is generally a way to make it worst.”

He rubbed at his neck.

“What if it’s not a ghost?” I said.

“Then what?” he asked. “You never saw Enola before, and your mind would have just conjured her out of nowhere.”

I closed my eyes, tired, but I only saw the pictures reflected in the inside of my eyelids, and the image of the woman behind the tiny form of Eloim on the floor.

I opened my eyes, they were much better opened.

“I think she follows Eloim,” I said.

“I think so too,” said Xander. “It would explain a lot.”

“Do you think my presence triggers her, made it worse?”

He looked sharply at me. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Would it be better without me around?”

He shook his head. “It could have been going on for a while. I might not even have figured it out without you. Eloim is doing better with you, kicking you out is not a solution.”

“So you’ll kick her out?” I asked. “She’s his mother.”

I regretted saying this right away as I saw his face pale.

“She’s hurting him.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

Marcus joined us after a while. We were out of options, so in the end, I told him everything.

He looked from me to Xander, sipping on his coffee in disbelief.

It took me a little while to spot what was going on in his head.

“I’m not trying to do anything to Xander. I’m not bullshitting,” I said defensively.

“Eloim wouldn’t act the way he did if this was all bullshit,” said Xander.

“That’s some fucked up shit,” said Marcus.

Xander ran his hands over his face and through his hair, at a loss for words.

“What are you going to do now?” Marcus asked.

“I don’t know,” admitted Xander.

— Chapter Twenty-Two —

"Do you think it's linked to the house?" asked me Xander one evening at dinner.

I shrugged. "I think the target is someone not something," I said vaguely so that Eloim wouldn't figure out what we were talking about.

"Stop giving this to the dog," said Xander grabbing the food from Eloim's finger and putting it back on his plate. "He has all the food he needs in his bowl."

Miki stood there between Eloim and Xander, sitting straight up and looking at the boy expectantly.

I knew he shouldn't do this, but it was hard not to find it cute.

"How about we go to spend the weekend at your parents, maybe to see if things are different there?" I suggested.

"Sounds brilliant."

Since the first night back from his last trip, and especially since our little visit at the police station, Xander had become as keyed up as I, particularly at night.

There had been night when the door would open on its own, when there would be strange creaking around. It meant nothing, but we'd began documenting it every time something suspicious would occur. We had set up a notepad into which we wrote everything.

We both knew that it was easy to get your facts skewed if you let your emotions get involved in the mix, and Xander, even more than I was all about facts. So we had begun our own little investigation, gathering facts and compilling everything.

One thing that seems to correlate was that things happened more around Eloim. Wherever he was.

Of course, Xander made sure to lecture me about how correlation doesn't mean causation, which I already knew, but I think he was holding on the hope that it was not centered around Eloim so much.

What that meant, deep inside, terrified him.

For one thing, it meant that for years, his son had been haunted and terrified, and he didn't even know, let alone tried to protect him from it.

Secondly, it's the fact that he's just a child. The idea of a ghost can be horrid to an adult, but the sheer helplessness level of a child versus an adult is staggering.

We were both convinced that there was probably no malice coming from Enola. If the stories were to be believed, she had saved Eloim, making sure he would be found, but it didn't change the fact that her mere presence could be problematic to anyone's sanity.

Deep down, we weren't even sure if pushing her away was the right thing to do, but for Eloim to see her this way was triggering so much trauma, that I couldn't continue this way.

But what do you do then?

I tried to imagine if it had been me in her position, and it only confused me further. Not to be able to touch my child again, hug him, spend time with him, go through life with him, protect him, care for him. It's a terrifying thought.

As I was thinking this, I thought of if someone would take Eloim away from me, and it hurt. I hadn't given birth to him, he hadn't spent months inside of me, I hadn't even known him for a full year, and yet, the thought of separation was as physically painful as it was psychologically so.

I didn't keep any shield up to protect myself when I entered this relationship, and now I was starting to see the consequences of it.

I considered that I was making things escalate, and if so, then being away could be maybe better, at least until we found a solution, but the idea ripped my heart apart, and when I mentioned it to Xander, Eloim overheard it and had a massive panic attack at the thought of me leaving. He cried calling me Mommy and hugging me, which ended in a paralysed terror when a painting fell off the wall.

So obviously, the conclusion was for me to stay, but a solution was needed.

As far as attempts to understand what was going on, spending the weekend at the in-laws was not such a bad thing. I really liked Xander's parents, and they seemed to genuinely care about me too.

Miranda was so good with children, I really hoped I could develop the same intuition she had.

All of Saturday, Eloim was particularly bubbly and both Xander and I were really happy, but we also knew what this could possibly mean. If it was linked to the house, then the house would have to go.

I had fallen head over heels over this house. It was also looking more and more like a home. We had finished Xander's office, and our living room, the kitchen was completely done and the formal dining room was nearly done. And we had begun work on my studio. My own art studio, just for me. I couldn't wait to start painting again. I loved painting the house and seeing my ideas come the fruition, but painting on canvas, was completely different.

I had conceptualised a few design ideas for paintings that I thought would look great in certain rooms. The walls were high and stark, and it would be lovely with some art on them. We had a

few pieces, either bought or that Xander already had, but I wanted to do a few pieces myself at the very least.

I knew Xander was fond of his office, of everything really. He had had this house for years and couldn't part with it, even when Enola had begun doubting this project. Could he part with it now? Could we?

Sunday morning we prepared to go on a small hike on the property on one of the footpaths in the woods, and I went upstairs with Eloim to get him better clothes for the trekk.

"Are you ready now?" I asked standing in the corridor above the stairs.

"Yes," said Eloim walking toward me. He stopped as Miki start growling.

Instead of freezing like he usually did, Eloim rushed to me. "Mommy."

The moment I heard the words come out of his mouth I felt pressure on my chest pushing me backwards hard. My feet disconnected from the floor for maybe a second or two before I landed backwards, still in shock in the stairs, my head lower than my feet. All air was knocked out of my lungs as I tumbled heavily. I tried to grab at the railing to stop myself from going further down but I didn't get a good grip and continued tumbling down, every part of my body banging on every surface possible. The only thing I managed to do was tuck in my head to limit any damage there.

The moment I went backwards Eloim started screaming this awful high-pitched child scream that would be interrupted by few intakes of air to continue afterwards.

I could hear the pain in that voice and it was even worse than the pain in my body.

I landed heavily on the ground. I could only take small sharp breath, loud and painful. I didn't dare move.

I felt the ground shake from the thunder coming my way. I wanted to plead for whoever it was to stop as it made my head pound painfully, but I couldn't breathe in enough air to form words.

"Mila?" came Xander's voice. "Get Eloim," he ordered someone that rushed by me and up.

I was aware he called an ambulance.

He didn't dare move me anymore that I did, even if I had the strength.

In movies, people always faint after things like this. I would have preferred fainting, it's always less painful when you're unconscious, but I didn't faint. I was not given that mercy.

— Chapter Twenty-Three —

The ride to the hospital was painful. Every bump in the road was torture. Why the hell don't they repair their freaking roads?

The turns were barely better.

Xander was in the ambulance next to me, holding my hand all the while.

It took me a while to be able to breath enough to speak, but I squeezed his hand in what I hope was a reassuring way.

I was rolled around the building for a while. The vantage point disorienting. They had strapped my head and back, immobilizing it just it case.

When they started doing this, it freaked me out, but I then spent a little while focusing on my toes. They were moving, and judging by the amount of pain in my lower body, everything was working fine, or at least fine enough.

Everything was too long. It took them too long to give me painkillers, too long to see a doctor, too long for them to shot the damn light blaring in my eyes, and too long to get me off this freaking uncomfortable stretcher to an actual bed. But eventually, sleep won.

When I woke, my head was not strapped anymore. My body felt so heavy that thought for a second that it had sunk inside the bed. It took me some focus to open my eyes or even twitch a finger. Everything was stiff.

Beside me, Xander was doing stuff on his phone. He didn't notice I was awake until a nurse walked in.

"Hey," he said, putting his phone away in his pocket. "You fell down the stairs, how are you?" he asked me.

The nurse looked at him suspiciously. I guess there have been a lot of beaten-up women out there with a falling-down-the-stairs excuse for the injuries. The nurses were probably triggered by the mere mentioned of staircases.

So I said nothing for now and nodded. I barely moved my head, but the movement was not pleasant, at all.

My nose was itchy and I tried to scratch it but I realised my arm couldn't bend. I looked down. There was this big thing around my arm that inflated on its own every so often, checking for my blood pressure. There was this thing squeezing my finger lightly checker for my pulse, and there was the needle of a saline in the bend of the same arm which explained why it was so useless. The other arm was more painful, but it would have to do.

"What's the verdict?" I croaked.

Xander got me a glass of water and I received the run down.

No broken bones, no internal bleeding, not even a concussion. But bruises, bruises everywhere. They had done a few scans to make sure, but the conclusion was that I had been very lucky. Those had been long stairs and it could have been a lot worse.

The doctor visited. I had been in ICU for a few hours until they realised it wasn't as bad as it could have been. They did give me massive amount of painkillers which knocked me pretty hard, and the fact that I had not slept very well for a while probably made it worse, which explained how I slept through most tests.

In the following hours, they came and said I would be discharged in a few hours or whenever I felt ready for it as they had already unplugged me completely already. They offered to keep me over night if I wanted to, but I had the feeling Eloim wasn't doing well at home without Xander or I.

I saw in his eyes that he was thinking the same, but let me decide regardless. I chose to leave. They warned me than the next few days could be a lot worse and to go straight to get my prescription before leaving.

We did. Xander help me move as everything was stiff and painful, but there were a few bits who worked better than others. I focused on those, using whatever was less painful to move around.

Regis came to pick us up as Xander didn't have his car with him. He brought change of clothes for me and I was glad the clothes chosen were loose. I suspected Miranda's hand in this.

Xander help me to the bathroom and helped me dress.

"I didn't fall," I told him, now that we were finally alone.

He looked at me, his brown furrowed.

"I was pushed."

I watched realisation dawn on him, and the knowledge of all that this implied hit home.

"How is Eloim?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Mum said she took care of everything and refused for me to leave you."

I gave him a small smile.

He kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

“I got you into this.”

“No, all you did is offer, I’m the one who accepted.”

“Who didn’t know it would turn up this way.”

“Neither did you.”

He was silent after that and we finished up, then moved down. I was glad the hospital decided to dispense me a wheelchair for the trek. I could walk, but the thought of going down the maze of corridors all the way to the parking lot felt like a terrible way to go about it.

We went home.

Miranda greeted us and the men help me up the stairs to the entrance door. I decreed that I hate stairs now. They would hurt me even now, every time I had to heave myself up, my muscles screamed in protest.

“What about Eloim?” asked Xander the moment we got in.

“He’s—.” Miranda looked sad. “Unresponsive.”

They help me sit on the couch. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be able to stay sitting for long, but I wasn’t sure lying down would be that much better either. At least my core muscles wouldn’t be used as much.

Xander went to check on Eloim.

“How unresponsive?” I asked Regis.

“Nearly catatonic.”

I felt my insides twist.

Xander came down a little later with an unmoving child in his arms.

“Mila is here,” he said softly to him. “Do you want to see her?”

That got an instant response, only not the one any of us were expecting.

“NO! NO! NO! NO SCARY FACES. NO!”

We all froze.

Eloim buried his face in his father’s chest gripping his shirt tightly.

“Eloim,” I said softly.

He stopped moving.

“My face is not scary. My face is okay.”

I felt very glad right now that I’d managed to keep the damage away from my face.

I opened my arms. Xander came closer and lower Eloim on me.

My muscles screamed in protest, but I ignored that as best I could.

“Eloim,” I said. He was still gripping at his father, his eyes tight shut. “Look at me. I’m okay, look at me.”

He was not complying, so I turned his head forcefully to me. He instinctively opened his eyes at this, and realised I looked normal, he released his father, turned around and grabbed onto me like a baby koala, hard.

I winced, and Xander help move his little hands away from the worst of my injuries.

He didn’t say anything after that other than “no” whenever someone tried to take him away from me.

We managed to move this to the bedroom when I could lie down. Eloim didn’t step any further than the bed, but at least after a while he was able to release his grip on me which my body appreciated.

The doctors were right though, it’s worst the following days.

— Chapter Twenty-Four —

Things got quiet in the following days.

I stayed upstairs in our bedroom for over a week. The first times I went down the stairs, I was glad I was alone because I felt stupid and haunted by the sheer risk this posed to me. I couched down above the stairs and went down on my ass, one step at a time like a toddler. But I walked downstairs like nothing had happened.

I learned to build this mask over my face of a strong woman that wouldn't do this. I knew that if I crumbled I couldn't keep Eloim strong, and I don't know how well Xander would fare if he was the only one not falling apart.

He didn't talk about it, but I knew that the fact that his wife was here, haunting his son, was tormenting him. But like me, he had a mask of his own.

It's only when I had to go down the stairs with Eloim, that I went down like a grown-up, acting as if it was nothing to convince the boy there was nothing to fear.

I guess what they say is right, no matter how strong you are, it's nothing compared to the strength that comes from taking care of a child. My fears were sent to the back burner to elevate his, and I did something I, alone, wouldn't have thought myself capable of. I was starting to believe that for this kid, I might be able to walk through freaking fire.

It was hard to do things with Eloim always around. It's like he had the fear that the moment he would not see me for any significant amount of time, I would just disappear. So much so, that I wasn't able to take a bath on my own without having him playing on the floor next to the tub.

After a few weeks of this as my injuries completely healed, he learn to let us have some distance between us, but it was a hard process, and given the circumstance it was hard for me to gage where I had to limit him and where I had to be conciliatory and indulge him.

Trauma makes everything so complicated.

I wanted to do the right thing, to help him heal, but I also know that to learn to stand on your own is an important lesson to learn. So I was always walking that thin rope between the protection and lessons that he needed, never knowing if I was doing the right or wrong thing.

Xander contacted the priest of the local parish. The information we got was that he was busy and would give us a house call whenever he could. We were pretty sure that the main issue was that we were not part of his congregation, which was why he was not rushing this.

We even consider joining to make sure he would come, at least long enough to deal with our situation, but it felt hypocritical to both of us. We knew, though, that if this kept escalating,

hypocritical or not, we will do what we must, but at the same time, we had no idea if it would do anything to begin with.

When you fight an illness you can rely on medicine, when you build something, you can rely on engineers, when you face enemies, you can rely on the military, but whom can you rely on when you're facing something most of the world won't even acknowledge the existence of. How can You push away something that doesn't even have a physical body? You can't lock the doors one something that can walk through them. You can't call the cops on something they can't even see. And you can't run away from something that is hooked to a person without abandoning him, and both of us knew we would not, could not, abandon Eloim.

All we could do was try.

Anything.

Luckily, not every day was Amityville Horror. We could have long stretch of time without any incident, and most of them were minor things we couldn't even be absolutely sure were incidents to begin with.

We had managed to keep everything under wrap from the construction crew, so we had none of them running away. We even noticed that things were more quiet with them around, so we allowed them to work longer in alternating shifts, from six am to well pass nine pm. We only had to tell them we wanted everything done before the wedding, if possible, for them to see this as absolutely normal.

On the up side of things, it indeed accelerated everything. The exterior was mostly painted now and all that was left was the ridiculously massive amount of molding left to paint. On the inside, most of the first floor was done, my studio was well on its way, and as we hired painters for the inside too—mostly due to how little work I could do for a while there—it raised the cost, but accelerated things a lot, and I was mostly relegated to bossing everyone around.

Our budget was holding regardless, thanks to Xander's impeccable planning that had included provisions for such unexpected surprises.

This house was feeling more and more like a home, and it was showing us how much of a stunning butterfly was slowly emerging from its ugly cocoon.

Soon, it would not look like the local haunted house.

Now we just had to make sure it wasn't.

It was nice that we weren't too far from Xander's parents' house too. They came to see us often and to help around.

If everything went according to plan, our wedding would be around spring as it would be a bit complicated to have an outdoor ceremony in winter.

I was starting to get excited despite myself. Contrary to Xander, I never was married before and it was a bit new to me. Sure, I've been to weddings, but it's all different when you get this new vantage point.

Xander was pretty bummed by the fact that our intimacy had been pretty much cut short.

Having a kid in your bed tend to do this.

He did try a few things but nothing worked. Eloim could sleep like the dead, but the moment the bed was empty, it took a maximum of fifteen minutes for him to either look out for us, or start screaming.

We thought we could manage a few quickies, but everything we tried, failed, and had to stop halfway through, which can get even more frustrating than the lack thereof.

We were kissing in bed. Eloim was sleeping on the other side of the bed, snoring loudly. Xander sank his finger in between my thighs.

"You can't," I murmured.

"We can be quiet," he said equally quietly.

"It's wrong."

"We don't have to go all the way through."

"You call this not going all the way through?" I asked breathlessly as his fingers sank deeper in me.

There was a massive 'clanking' sound that snapped us out of it.

Eloim jerked awake in a gasp, and I turned around to grab him in my arms before he started panicking.

Xander opened the light and investigated.

Miki, at the foot of the bed was growling.

"It's just a box that felt from the commode," said Xander. "Could be the cat."

He came back to the bed and closed the light on the nightstand.

The moment the light went out, I saw it. A dark shape. I pressed Eloim's face against my chest so that he wouldn't see it, and shushed him quietly so that he wouldn't feel the fear and anxiety building inside of me.

Miki was barking and growling as ferociously as a tiny French bulldog can at the thing, and Xander turned into a pure statue.

There was little light coming in tonight. Since we were now rising at dawn with the construction workers, we didn't bother with the curtains as much, and the full moon was bright

tonight, bright enough to show us the silhouette of a woman, looking at us. It was hard to see her features and they were deformed, but there was enough light to see some of the gore on her face and splashed on her body.

I kept my eyes on her, not moving and sheltering Eloim.

“Xander,” I ordered him to snatch him out of it. “Light.”

It worked. It took maybe five seconds, but he stretched to the lamp and flicked it on.

There was nothing there anymore.

Miki kept growling at that same spot for a while until the bedroom door that had been left cracked open to let the pets move in and out at will, slammed hard.

Miki sat proudly at the bottom of the bed, giving occasional warning barks but generally satisfied with his own performance.

Xander just kept looking at the vacated space where she had been.

I spend an hour after that reassuring Eloim and getting him to fall asleep again. Xander stayed silent the whole time. He had never seen her before, and I knew that deep down, there had been a part of him that had hoped that this was all a terrible misunderstanding, but he couldn’t escape the truth now and it was crushing him.

When Eloim was finally asleep I took him in my arms, laid us down, and pressed his head on my chest, and something burst opened in him. Something that I suspected had been locked shut for a long time, something he hadn’t let many people even know was there. He wrapped his arms around my waist and started crying, while I glided my fingers slowly through his curls wondering if I had the strength to hold this household together.

— Chapter Twenty-Five —

Marcus came to visit us a few times, sometimes he would bring his wife Emily, but this time he was alone.

I was in the kitchen preparing lunch, Eloim was on the floor and we had put on his ears a pair of wireless headphones connected to my phone, where I'd but on some music.

It had been our best technique to allow us to have conversation with each other without him listening in, while still keeping an eye on him.

Xander and Marcus were at the table talking.

"You know, there is this guy at the station who swears by this medium. He helped find a lost kid three years back, and we found him miraculously alive, banged up, but alive. I've never given much credence to this, but now—," Marcus said. "I don't know. Maybe this dude can help."

Xander nodded.

"I'm gonna try anything that I can." He raked his finger through his hair. "The most frustrating thing is the lack of facts and standardised answers to any questions. There is no uni for ghosts."

"Actually," I said. "I think parapsychology is an actual study field available in some universities."

The man turned to me pensively.

"Is it even legit?" Marcus asked.

"I have no idea." My google fu was good, but the internet only took you so far. I had scoured forums, websites of every ghost hunters in the western hemisphere and the deepest darkest part of Reddit for answers, but again, just like Xander said, there was a limited amount of information that would be the same from one source to the other, and it was really hard to cipher through what was possible facts—or as close to facts as we could get—and what was superstitions, urban legends, and creepy pastas.

We wanted results, not entertainment.

We were not in the mood for scary stories right now.

We did note a few things that tended to trigger events. One was Xander and I getting a little too intimate near Eloim. Nothing overly sexual per se, but more than a peck in passing. Eloim calling me Mommy was another. We considered toning everything down, but we decided not to. We would not be told what to do with our lives by someone already dead—we wouldn't tolerate this from anyone alive, so the dead had no more say over this.

But we were also aware that if the dead are capable of emotions, then what we were doing was possibly hurting her, which was leading to those lashing outs. But it's not like we could exactly explain ourselves now could we? We didn't even know if she was aware of her situation.

Maybe this was something a medium could help us with.

Another trigger was anytime I came in between her and Eloim.

I was acutely aware of how terrified of her Eloim was and I tried to protect him from her as much as possible, but from her perspective, it could look a lot more different. This blondie younger slut coming in and stealing both her man and son, and pushing her away.

Which was possibly why she was lashing out at me so much.

Not once I've seen any injuries come to Eloim and Xander, but me, I was free meat.

I often found scratches on my body when I woke up. A lot on my arms and back, most were just red lines that faded within the day, but others took a day or two to resorb. Nothing drew blood, but it was annoying as heck. I wanted to be upset, but I decided to treat this as a mosquito invasion, biting me at night and annoying the Hell out of me, and nothing more. I wouldn't let these petty attacks get to me.

But the thought of this becoming something more always stayed in the back of my head as I'd experienced first hand in Xander's parental home's staircases. I would see Final Destination-like scenarios go through my mind, and I would always be extremely careful around everything, and never linger wherever something could fall on my head, or push me; anything pointy and sharp taken care of carefully.

"You know, Mila," Said Marcus. "Your spooky little house is turning into a thing of beauty."

I beamed at him. "It is, isn't it?"

"I'm surprised in how well you're dealing with everything."

My smiled faltered. "I'm not stronger than anyone else. I think I've entered the 'survive now, panic later' zone. We all do what we can, but that's keeping in mind that there will be an end to this. But what the internet has told me is that it's not always how it ends. And that terrifies me."

"We'll find a way," said Xander. "Enola's maternal grandparents were Jewish, do you think a rabbi would be more effective than a priest?" he asked Marcus.

"What do I know, mate? I'm not a ghost expert. Get a rabbi, and a priest, and a Buddhist monk, in here if you can. Cover all your options and if it leads to nothing, then at least it'll be a good start for a joke."

Xander gave him an indulgent smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He was calculating options, probably even turning it into a pie chart to evaluate what it meant and what were the

alternative, and how much everything would cost. At the end of this, he would probably be able to write the book on budgeting of ghost removal.

The thought made me smile.

I've always had a thing for intelligence, but I somehow managed to find it in a great packaging.

I looked at Xander talking options with Marcus about what would come next, and realised I had totally fallen for him.

I'm not sure when this happened exactly, but it was now a fact, as solid as the walls, and the ground beneath our feet. It wasn't just a crush, I really wanted to marry this man.

He saw me looking at him and gave me smile. It was a good one. I was began to think I was not the only one thinking this way.

— Chapter Twenty-Six —

Xander wrapped his arms around my waist, put his head on my shoulder and swayed us from side to side slowly as I was finishing the preparation for dinner.

“I love you,” I admitted.

He stopped for a few heartbeats.

“I love you too,” he confessed.

“We’ll do this, we’ll get married, we’ll have this beautiful house, and Eloim will get over all this ordeal, and grow into a strong and capable young man.”

He kissed me on the cheek. “What would I do without you.”

I shrugged.

He took the spoon out of my hand and put it on the counter so that he could spin me around in his arms.

“Eloim is going to be hungry,” I said.

“I’ll help you.”

I kissed him. He kissed me back and the heat built up very rapidly. I gave a quick side glance at Eloim who was at the table, with his headphones on, drawing in his book with all the concentration he could muster, his little tongue tight in between his lips.

Xander used this opportunity to give me a row of kisses from my jaw to my neck and going slowly down. I couldn’t withhold a giggle, which was followed by a sharp pain in the middle me back.

I squealed and pushed myself away from the counter and against Xander. Had I pressed myself against a flame, or a knife?

“What?” asked Xander confused.

I gave a quick look around but saw nothing that could give me an injury and Eloim had heard nothing and was still drawing.

“What happened?” Xander looked worried, probably questioning if he’d hurt me somehow, but the burning sensation was not receding.

I tried to contain a whine of pain. “My back,” was all I managed to say.

Xander turned me around and raised my shirt to take a look.

“Is there something there? Because it hurts like a bitch.”

Xander said nothing for a few seconds.

“Xan?”

“Claw marks,” he said.

“I want to see.”

He took his phone and took a picture of my back, then showed it to me. There were three long lines side-by-side in dark pink with little pearls of red welling up along them.

“I don’t want Eloim to see this. Get my shirt down,” I told him.

He did and I resumed my cooking. Xander put his phone back inside her pocket and looked at me strangely.

“You act like nothing happened,” he told me.

“What do you want me to do, it’s not like I can make it stop.”

He looked at me some more.

“This is not the first time isn’t it?” he asked.

“Never this deep,” I confessed.

“Dammit Mila, I need to know this stuff.”

“To do what, worry?”

“It’s not something for you to carry on your own, we’re doing this together. Hiding information doesn’t make it go away.”

“You can’t protect me from this, Xan.”

I could have stabbed him and I don’t think I would have hurt him as much as I just did and I instantly regretted this.

I put my utensils down and turn around, making sure that my voice was soft enough so that Eloim wouldn’t hear it.

“I’m not accusing you of anything.”

He didn’t look convinced.

“I just don’t want to add to what we have to deal with already.”

“And how exactly do you expect me to make good decisions regarding what is going on if I don’t have all the data?” he asked, equally softly, but it didn’t take the edge out of his voice. He was angry, and my emotions randomly decided that they had been quiet for too long and they needed some fresh air.

I felt water well up in the corner of my eyes and I tried to stop it pointlessly, and turned around as I failed.

“Mila,” said Xander, the edges in his voice smoother now. “Mila.” He turned me around to face him.

“I’m just trying to help,” I said my voice breaking.

“You are,” he said hugging me.

“I don’t want to make things worse. I don’t want Eloim to see this, he’s okay when he sees nothing upsetting if I’m upset all the time it’ll be worse.”

“I know,” he said, moving his hand soothingly over my back.

“I can’t fall apart.”

“I’m here.”

I snaked my arms around his waist and took long inspiration. I just loved his smell, and focused on this instead until I calmed down. It took longer than I wanted, but he stayed there patiently, smoothing my hair out of the way and holding me.

I really needed this.

The thing when you live alone for a while is that you forget what it is to rely on someone or how much strength you can find in a shared burden. I had forgotten.

“I really want to marry you,” I admitted.

It made him laugh. He had a good laugh, booming and jovial, I loved hearing it, there hadn’t been many occasions lately and I missed that.

“I want that too,” he finally admitted.

I looked up at him smiling too. The remnants of tears crusting on my cheeks, but his laugh had changed the mood and I felt a giggling fit about to emerge, and it was hard to suppress.

Stress tends to do that to me.

He kissed my forehead and I wanted to rip his clothes off, but there was a dinner that required my attention and a kid a little too close by.

“Well, handsome sir, you promised to help with the dinner, and you’re going to have to live up to the expectations now.”

He grinned broader. “Handsome, huh?”

“Very,” I said. “I really want to see under all those pesky clothes, but alas, we need to eat.”

He quirked his eyebrows and looked me up and down, very slowly. His eyes said he agreed about my statement about taking off pesky clothes.

It made me squirm a little. So I decided to turn around and focus on food before it became too hard to do.

He pressed himself against my back and there was at least a part of him that had different ideas about what came next.

Then he dropped on his knees and my eyes widened.

“Make sure Eloim doesn’t look our way,” he said.

I slapped his hand away, which made him laugh again.

“You help me now or there will be trouble,” I told him firmly.

“I’m all for trouble.”

“Eloim’s watching.”

He got up, looked at his son, clearly oblivious, and gave me a rebarbative look.

“Food now, sex later,” I said shaking a celery in his face.

He knew as well as me that later might be difficult, but again, we could try for creativity, who knows, maybe it’ll work this time.

He didn’t look happy, but he helped me regardless.

— Chapter Twenty-Seven —

Eloim had been sleeping next to me for a while now. I turned the TV off and took him in my arms carefully. He wasn't light, especially all limp this way and I moved gingerly.

I stopped as I heard creaking upstairs.

Xander?

"Enola," I heard him say.

I froze.

My arms were starting to burn and I sat at the bottom of the stairs, putting Eloim's weight on my lap carefully.

"I don't know if you can hear me, but we need to talk," said Xander's voice from above.

I didn't want to interrupt or bother him, so I waited.

"I know you looked after Eloim all this time, but you've done enough now. He's safe, loved, cared for. You can move on. You can let go. I know you mean well, but Eloim is scared of you."

At the end of the corridor, against the window, I could see the shape of a woman. I couldn't see anything but the silhouette, but I knew she was watching me, very, very intently.

"I've loved you, for a very long time," said Xander upstairs. "But I can't continue to live in the past."

I somehow knew that she was hearing him as clearly as I.

"I know it wasn't always perfect. I know I probably let you down plenty of times. I wish I could go back and be there more, when you really needed it, but I can't do this now. We can't keep doing this. Eloim needs to move on too. He's what's most important now. We need to protect him. I know that's what you want to do, but that's not the effect you have. You have to understand that."

She stood there unmoving, looking at me, and I couldn't rip my eyes away from her, in fear of what could happen next.

"We've both loved you, but the time has come for you to leave. Please, just move on. Mila doesn't deserve what you're doing to her. No one does."

She started to walk in our direction, slowly, a bit oddly and my heartbeat accelerated at a thunderous level.

"Xander?" I pleaded loudly.

Enola accelerated. I gripped Eloim harder, making sure his face would be hidden from seeing anything if he woke.

“Xander!” I said louder, now panic clear in my voice. I couldn’t run away with Eloim in my arms, not in stairs.

She had nearly reached us as Xander thundered down the stairs and Eloim stirred.

And it was over.

“Mommy?” asked Eloim, sleepily.

I felt scratching on my arms, one after the other, but as I searched the darkness, I could see nothing.

“Take him,” I told Xander as he landed next to me. I tried to reel my emotions in as Eloim was stirring now.

He didn’t ask any question and lifted his son effortlessly.

“Up,” I said.

My instinct told me to stay close to a fucking railing as I didn’t want a repeat of my free fall.

Xander rushed up and me behind him.

That’s when I felt something cold wrap around my left ankle. I unconsciously lowered my center of gravity and put both of my hands on the railing a second before it pulled. Hard.

I went down, my knees hitting the stairs, but I didn’t fall down.

“Mila?” Xander began turning back to look at me.

“Up,” I ordered again.

We needed to get Eloim away from this first.

And then it pulled down. I gripped my hands on the bars and held on for dear life as it pulled painfully on my leg.

I tried to suppress a grunt of effort, but Xander heard it and whirled around rushing down cursing.

“No, Eloim,” was all I could say.

He hesitated for a split second, but ran down, holding Eloim’s face against his chest.

Miki which hadn’t realised we had moved, woke and decided to join the fray, barking at the bottom of the stair incessantly.

I grunted again as the pressure didn’t subside.

Xander landed on his ass next to me, Eloim in one arm, and tried to grab at me. And that's when the pressure redoubled and I went flying down.

I managed to use my arms to prop my upper body up so that it wouldn't be smashing my head on every stair, but it didn't stop once I was down and continued on.

I heard Xander curse again and rush after me again, evidently slowed by the boy whom I'd no idea how he was doing in all this.

I twisted myself on my back to try to see something, grab something, anything, and I was swung sideways and inside a room, and knew what was happening a second before it did.

She would not hurt Xander, nor, especially Eloim, but now she got me alone.

The door slammed behind me, and a loud bang resounded nearly right after. Xander.

"Now I need to you be calm okay, so we can get Mila, can you do that for me," I heard him tell Eloim.

I managed to get back on my feet and to the door.

Obviously the doorknob didn't work.

"Xander?" I called out.

"I'm getting you out," he said.

Things started flying my way, so I lowered my head below my shoulders to limit the risks of head injuries and kept my back to it as I tried the doorhandle again.

Xander banged hard on the door again with his entire weight.

"STOP!" I said suddenly angry and the room.

Nothing more crashed into me.

I tried the handle again and it turned as Xander was about to crash into the door again, but he shifted his weight agilely, and grabbed me out of the room.

He kept his arm around my waist as he bent and took Eloim in his arms and walked us to the main entrance door.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we walked outside without shoes or anything else. He had managed to grab the car keys by the door, and nothing else.

We piled into the car.

Eloim was not happy to sit alone in the backseat and I sat next to him to calm him down, but he was not as panicked as I would have expected.

"I don't know, Mila," he admitted as he sat behind the wheel. "I just need a break."

Didn't we all?

— Chapter Twenty-Eight —

Eloim made his father go back for the pets, and no matter how freaked he was, he went back in, but before he left he gave me a knowing look. Stay with Eloim. It wasn't just for his safety and comfort, he had realised as I had that I was at a higher risk on my own.

I hated this. I hated the thought of using a child as a shield. What if she lost it and attacked regardless, and Eloim got affected in the crossfire. I would never forgive myself.

I wrapped my arm around Eloim shoulders. "You're doing so great, I'm so proud of you."

"Are you hurt?" he asked me, is voice small and fragile.

"No, sweetie, I was surprised but I'm not hurt."

In fact I was. Nothing as bad as when I careened down the stairs the first time, but still, I knew I'd have a few bad bruises in the morning.

The fact that she could do so much, terrified me. How come something insubstantial could have so much strength?

For a moment there, I thought that what Xander was doing would help, that he could get to her, maybe even convince her to move on and it would be over. I really did, and I also know he's going to blame himself hard for what happened.

It took him nearly fifteen minutes to return with the cats, Miki had followed us diligently when we had fist come out. He gave a few warning barks every other minutes, but there was nothing attracting his attention in particular.

Eloim would jump every time.

"Do you see how good Miki is? He's really trying to protect us."

I extended my hand to Miki and he climbed on my lap happily to show us how great he is. Eloim looked at him and pet him carefully, which prompted the little dog to climb on his lap in turn and try to give him and few doggy kisses.

By the time Xander returned, Eloim was laughing.

Xander gave me a relieved look, dumped the two cats on the passenger seat and started the car.

"I called my parents, we're going there for the night."

I nodded. "Look at that, a surprised sleepover," I told Eloim cheerfully, and it seemed to work a little. Then I went on about all the excited things we could do at a sleepover, and by the time we arrived, Eloim was pumped and ready.

I saw Xander's eyes dart my ways a few times relieved Eloim wasn't more traumatised than this.

I don't have much experience with trauma, but I have with mood swings. I have a little brother who would lose his shit on a regular basis. He would tell me later that sometimes we would completely black out in his rage fits. And I had become his de facto caretaker when we were kids, as I realised that the best way to make him snap out of it was distraction. Depressed, angry, or excessively and overbearingly happy, the best way to melo him out was distraction. Humour when he was depressed, focussing his attention on something when he was too much on a high, sometimes a surprise would work to get his attention when he was angry and then I would go from there. Sometimes it took hours out of my day, just to control his mood.

It was absolutely tiresome, and by the time I was ten, I would find ways to isolate myself, run off, just not to have to go through so much effort to care for him. That's when I started to really draw. I'd put my walkman on and just spend hours on the swings, or at the picnic table drawing—at least when the temperature allowed it.

There were times when it was mentally exhausting, and when something happened with me, upsetting me, everyone expected me to sort it out on my own.

That's probably when I developed my staunch independence. That was my comfort zone anyways.

Having three younger siblings, I had been the caretaker of a lot a kids. My parents worked two and three jobs and I babysat, entertained, cooked, and did everything that was expected of me.

I love my siblings, but there were days when it had been hard.

Only I would not see them as often, now that I lived so far away.

It's not that it bothered me much, and we've talked online at least every week, but it was a bit odd, this realisation that when things went sideways, everyone was so far.

I was used to having my family, always there, whatever happens, only they aren't now, or at least not the way that they used too. But at the same time, a part of me was glad they were far. I doubt they would understand any of it, either my desire to stay in this family despite what was now happening, or the happenings themselves. I'm not sure I would have believed myself if someone would've told me this.

I looked at Eloim rush out of the car in a cheerful mood and I was really proud of myself. I wanted to see this little boy happy. My little boy.

That's what he was supposed to be wasn't he? Mine.

That had been the deal. He already called me Mommy, but I never dared call him son.

I felt bad that this sort of competition for mother's right had sprouted between Enola and me. This is not what I wanted. I would have even been okay if Eloim would have preferred calling me by my name instead. It warmed my heart that he didn't, but I would have understood otherwise. I was not trying to erase his biological mother's memory from his life.

I wasn't even sure he realised the ghost was his mother. I think that deep down, a part of him did, but I didn't want to insist on it. I was afraid this would negatively taint the memory of his mother. I wanted him to be proud of where he came from. I wanted him to see his past, as his future, with positivity, despite all the challenges, despite the struggles and fears.

I slipped my finger through Xander's.

On the plus side, my little bout of introspection had managed to get myself out of my own misery to focus on someone else instead.

I looked at the boy, rushing happily to his grandparent who were in their pyjamas, and I marveled at the power he had over me.

"I really love him," I told Xander.

He moved his arm around my shoulders and squeezed hard.

"It's not your fault," I told him. I could see the torment in his eyes as we walked in.

He said nothing.

"I heard what you told Enola. It was the right thing to do. Don't blame yourself for what happened after."

"She could have seriously hurt you, killed you." He swallowed. "I can't let that happen. It was the last time."

"You know that there is nowhere we can escape where she won't be."

"I know," he said through his teeth, his jaw tight.

"So what's the next step in your plan?"

"How can you be so calm?"

"I'm not, I'm waiting for you to get better, then I'll fall apart. That's how it work isn't it?"

He looked like he'd just received a wrecking ball in the guts.

He left to talk to his parents for a few minutes and I let him.

When he returned he had a serious look on his face. I saw Miranda and Regis each hold one of Eloim's hand and talk about sleeping under a bedsheet tent that night. I would have smiled at this if it hadn't been for the intensity in Xander's eyes.

"Right now, there is no kid, no ghost, no early construction workers, no interruption, I'm getting you naked and you're not leaving that bed until noon."

I grinned excitedly.

"Sounds like a plan."

— Chapter Twenty-Nine —

We had needed this. It had been a long while since we'd had some quiet time together. I absolutely adored Eloim, but he was demanding a lot of time out of me, and he had been cheered enough to spend all night and morning with his grandparents.

My nerves had broken when we reached that room, alone, and Xander soothed me patiently, then we talked for a long time until he finally indulged in his initial plan. It's only in the morning that we really saw the bruises, on my legs, elbows and knees, which was where it was worst. It wasn't as bad as when I fell down the stairs, but it was tender.

Xander looked at them transfixed and angry.

"I'm about done with this shit," he said while running his hands on my skin, his voice harsh when his hands were soft and delicate. "I've been ready to be tolerant with her, understanding, but it can't go on any further. This is some psycho shit."

I ran my finger on the side of his face and through his stubble.

"It wasn't always rose-coloured with her, you know," he said.

"How so?"

I looked in his eyes. I wanted him to talk to me, but I also wanted him back to his sweet self, rather than this angry man, that gave me the impression he really wanted to punch stuff. I could get his feelings, I can't say I didn't feel this way at times either, especially lately, but I also know that the more you delve into anger, the more it takes all the mental space you have. And I much preferred his smart, kind, funny, loving side. I wanted him to give more space to that guy, but for now I just kept my hand on the side of his face, and listened.

"We had our ups and down, but since she's gotten pregnant there was a lot more downs than ups. She would lose her mind on the smallest of things. After Eloim was born, there was a few weeks when every time he would cry, she just couldn't stand it, she couldn't even look at him. She refused to nurse him. She had really wanted kids, but we had struggled, and then when he came, it was like everything was too much."

"You mentioned before that she had postpartum depression."

He nodded. "It took so fucking long for things to get better. There were times I thought of giving up, but then I felt like a massive asshole to leave her when she struggled so much, especially after giving birth. But I might have given all my time to either Eloim or work." He let his head fall back on the mattress and closed his eyes. I rolled on my side and put my head on his shoulder. He ran his fingers up and down on my arm, distractedly. I moved my hand on his chest trying to sooth him.

"What happened after that?"

"I think she resented me for a while. Things started to get better when Eloim was maybe eighteen months old. We hadn't had sex since the beginning of the pregnancy, she hadn't worked since then either—not that I wanted her to work, necessarily—but she had been keen on her career and had made me promise not to force her out of it after we'd have children, yet she never found the strength to return to work. She was locked in her own downward spiral and I really tried to help, but after a while, I started to focus more on Eloim than her, I don't know, maybe a part of me was starting to lose faith. But then she began improving and I thought that we could put all of this behind.

We had promised each other to have at least three kids, but after seeing how hard it had been with her, I was about ready to have a vasectomy.

We talked about leaving Eloim with my parents for a week and leaving for somewhere in the tropics just the two of us, to reconnect. And then she disappeared. I feel bad that the first thing that came to my mind was that either she had run off with him, or committed double suicide."

"But it was ruled an accident right?"

He nodded and turned to look at me.

"Yeah, it's not impossible that it wasn't, but it was a foggy evening, there had been rain not that long before, it was a dark road in the middle of nowhere slithering through the tree, and the car went down a dangerous bend. It's not the first car to have gone down there either. It took a bloody long time for the county to get some safety railing there. I think there have been at least five deaths in the last fifty years on that stretch of road, so it gives no indication of ever being anything else."

"You think she had been depressed enough for suicide?"

"I don't know," he said in a sigh. "For the first year, I would have said yes, but she had been improving. It took her a long time but she eventually accepted to see a therapist, and after a few months it was getting better."

"Was Eloim close to her?"

"Not that much. I took care of the diapers, and feeding, and bed time. She tried later, but he was so unused to it that it wouldn't work. My parents had more facility than her and it frustrated her even more. But I guess not spending much time with your child can do that."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe he just picked on her frustration. Children, like animals, they pick up on a lot more than we give them credits for. If we're all over the place, it affects them in the end."

He moved my curls away from him face slowly. "You're really good with kids."

“I’ve had practice with my siblings.”

“I’m a single child, so I’m pretty sure I have no idea what it’s like to care for siblings.”

“Is that why you wanted more kids?”

He thought about it. “In part. I loved it here and everything, but being raised in the country side, away from other houses without any siblings can become very lonely at times. My parents were very present, and I get that with the internet age, distance is not the same as it used to be, but I’ve always like the idea of a large household.”

I smiled. “I always liked that idea too.”

There was a small knock on the door.

We pulled the covers over us.

“Yes,” said Xander.

“Mammy says that if you want lunch you have to come down soon otherwise you won’t have any,” came Eloim’s voice through the door, but he didn’t open it. We heard him bounce back to where he came from.

“Regardless of everything that has happened, he’s changed so much in the last few months,” said Xander.

I gave him a peck.

He turned to me thinking this was clearly not enough.

“Lunch,” I reminded him.

He growled, but it was a happy growl, underneath it all.

— Chapter Thirty —

"What happened here?" asked Miranda, pointing at a series of four bruises on my arms that looked like marks from fingers holding me.

I looked at them curiously. "I have no idea," I admitted.

Xander came to check as Eloim ran into his grandmother. He furrowed his brows uncomfortably.

"Maybe we went at it a little too rough last night?" I suggested sotto voice.

It put a smile on Xander's face but it didn't last long and he returned to looking at the bruises, contemplating.

So I gave him a peck on the nose and moved along.

He caught up to me and grabbed me by the waist.

"I know what you're trying to do," he muttered in my ear.

"And what is that?"

He gave me a knowing stare.

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't think that is from me and you know it. You don't have to cheer everyone out. You can be worried too sometimes."

I felt my smile melt away.

"I talked to the priest again. He said he could come next week. Maybe it'll be all over after that."

I looked up at him wiggling around in his arms. "That would be nice."

I was surprised by how mild the temperature was at this time of the year. I was sure that by this time, there would be a good layer of snow already back home, but it wasn't too terrible here.

Not everyone seemed to think so, and I heard of few complaints about the weather, but quite frankly, other than the grey sky, it was pretty lovely. I thought it was a nice improvement.

"Aren't you cold dear?" Miranda asked me as I returned from a short walk with Miki, so that he would do his business.

"It's a little brisk, but quite comfortable actually," I admitted.

Everyone looked at me like I was partially insane. It was maybe ten degrees outside, so I didn't need to layer up so much, I didn't even get my scarfs out yet.

"Is it warm outside?" asked Eloim.

“No, it’s just Mommy who has super powers against the cold,” said Xander.

The words ‘super powers’ sank into Eloim psyche and I watch as his face melt to absolute wonder. I couldn’t help it and I burst out laughing.

“Could I have super powers too?” he asked me.

“That’s a very good question,” I mused. “It’s possible to acquire super powers, you know, but they require a lot of work. They make it look easy in comics and movies, but in reality you need to really put your mind to it, but if you’re ready to work really hard, I could maybe show you a trick or too.”

It had an instant effect, and he spent the day pestering me about it.

“I think you might have dug your own grave here,” Xander said a little later.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” I said clicking my tongue at him. “Ye of little faith, give me time and I do miracles.”

That got him smiling. “Oh, I believe you.”

I beamed.

I spend a few hours giving Eloim a few tasks and preparing for the days to come. I didn’t know how effective this would be, but if it had even half the effectiveness than pets have on him, then it will be great.

Xander had had the presence of mind to bring his laptop, despite everything that happened, so he spent a few hours catching up on work. He had been reluctant on taking up a big new contract, giving the situation, and I was frankly unsure too if it was a good idea.

I didn’t want this to cause a dent in his career, but realistically speaking, I wasn’t sure how well things would go if we didn’t deal with this together.

It couldn’t continue this way for too long without this becoming a serious issue in his career, and the fact that I was not getting any income, or even a working visa at the moment, meant that we were both, Eloim and I, dependent on his income.

If this went really bad, I could always get a job, but I was still on a visiting visa. It would get easier after the wedding to change that, but it didn’t change the fact that if I wanted to work legally, it might take me some time.

I knew he had set some money aside, but we were also renovating a massive house, and that expense had been undertaken while considering he would keep bringing in money regularly, but having his own business, meant that if he didn’t do the work, we weren’t getting the income that went with it.

“Is there some things that could be adjusted?” I asked. “Like, I don’t know, having some of your guys taking in more of the workload, and limiting your travelling some more?”

“I thought about it,” he admitted.

He had set up shop on the little desk in the bedroom. I sat on the bed, trying to find possible solutions.

“I don’t know how viable it can be, I’m the one with the most expertise in the company, the whole business model his based on me doing the work.”

“What if you do more training,” I suggested. “Use the off time to solidify the team. I mean even if it wasn’t a ghost causing havoc. What if you get sick five years from now and you can’t work? You have all your eggs in the same basket, what if that basket fall and all the eggs crack, there will be nothing left for omelettes.”

He smiled at my attempt at comedy, but I could see the wheels turning.

“That or you hire someone around your skill level. It might not bring in as much money as you doing the work, but at least the business continues to take in contracts. Maybe you could set up multiple teams, get multiple jobs, and manage them from afar in the future.”

“Are you suggesting I expend?”

I shrugged. “You don’t have to it if you don’t want to, but this is a niche area of expertise, you could probably exploit this more. You told me you had to refuse contracts sometimes. What if you didn’t have to?”

He smiled incredulously at me. “My last serious relationship had for conclusion that I was working too much and you suggest the opposite.” He shook his head.

“Not necessarily. I’m not saying work more, as much as work smarter. If you have just one pivotal piece, anything happens to it and it all crumbles. That is a little scary to me.”

“I’ve invested some money, I get dividends and interest, even if everything went to shit, we could survive.”

I nodded. “Would it be enough for Eloim’s schooling?”

“I’ve put some money aside when he was born, it’s not massive, but it’s pilling interests at the moment, so it’s not terrible. It’s enough to cover a little over inflation rates.”

I nodded.

“But I’ll consider your suggestion. It’s not a bad one, and you’re right, it’s a weakness in my business model.” He rubbed at his shin pensively. “If I set things correctly, I could even have things set up for the business to be able to function under different management even, so that it could continue working after my retirement, or if I die, you still get income from it without

having to manage it yourself. It would mean a dip in revenues for a while though, as I'd be reinvesting a lot of income."

I nodded. "We just have to make sure we won't run out of funds for the house and its maintenance, and make sure we have all the basics covered. For the rest I'm okay with being more frugal."

"Come here." He said, opening his arms.

I complied and went to sit on his lap, letting him give me one of his bear hug.

"We'll be okay in the meantime?" I asked. "I'm sure that would be hard to do now, even more so if you're already taking fewer contracts because of everything that is happening."

"I don't know," he admitted.

"We could apply for my working visa, or we could accelerate the wedding, it could help with the visa process, then I could get a job on the side. Maybe I could even find something that I could do from home."

"I thought you wanted to be a painter."

"I do, but I'm aware that we can't always get what we want, and maybe when things settle down, I could go back to painting, who knows, maybe I'll even be able to bring in money once in a while."

He gave me a smile that hid a bit of sadness in it.

"How about we try to keep the plan as is for now, we finish the house, I see what I can setup for my business from home, for now, and we deal with things one step at a time?" Xander said. "I have nothing against advancing the wedding date though, if we want to be able to use this as a backup plan, just in case."

I nodded and gave him a light slap on the chest.

"How about I stop distracting you from work and I go take a shower as Eloim is still busy with his grandparents."

"Sounds like a plan."

I spent a few minutes in the shower with my eyes closed just enjoying the hot water massaging my stiff muscles.

When I looked at myself, I found a few new bruises too, and scratches that I had no recollection of. I was starting to look pretty banged up again. I'd have to cover those properly when we go in public next, or people will start to think that Xander is beating the crap out of me. Nothing was really terrible, and it was mostly little aches here and there, but it piled up and I really wanted to give my body time to get back to its normal self.

I took my times with shampoo and conditioner, massaging my head. I really needed to relax, we all needed it. Maybe Xander and I could indulge in a little mutual massage session. It sounded like a great idea actually. We'd have to check if we could find some massaging oil, or maybe argan oil, or something.

The air around me hit me in a cold wave and before I even realised what was going on, the shower curtain stuck to me, wrapping me tight, particularly around the throat, and I started choking instantly. I trashed as hard as I could, ripping the curtain from its hook most of the way, trying to free my hands.

Footing inside a wet tub was precarious at the best of moments, so it was unsurprising that I went down the clawfoot tub in a heap, clawing at the curtain still wrapped around me, strangulation me. My neck was painful, and I decided to push on this instead of trying and failing with my wet feet to get my footing back under me. So after a few attempts, I managed to grab at the part that was tight around my neck, and pulled down instead of up. It would have choked me for good if I hadn't used my hands as leverage, but I gave a few sharp tugs and the curtains ripped all the way through, and I toppled out of the tub completely, tea over kettle.

I heard things slam around be and the mirror shattered somewhere above my head, but I just crawled to the closest corner in pure panic then I heard a word that chilled me to the bones and I clawed my way out of the curtains grip.

I was naked, half-covered in a sheer damaged curtain that had little bits of blood on it that came from I don't know where and there was mirror shard everywhere.

My mind entertained me to images of them flying in my direction, stabbing me from all angles, and I just bent over myself, shaking and wheezing as I could still hardly breath. The massive intakes of air, burning in my lungs after I had been deprived for so long. I had felt my vision darken, and the sheer realisation that I had nearly died hit me in the face harder than everything else so far.

The door burst open and I jumped in pure terror at what came next.

When Xander's face peeked around, I burst into uncontrollable waterworks.

A distant part of myself was aware of the child cries in the background, but there was no strength left in me and I crumble completely.

— Chapter Thirty-One —

Xander took me in his arms. Her tried to get me to stand up, but I was inconsolable and I wasn't able to get out of my fetal position on the wet ground.

"Can you take the dog out of here before he hurts himself on the glass?" said Xander to someone.

I was vaguely aware that I could hear Miki going insane at the mess, and I had a massive headache, most probably fueled by the choking that would not subside with the noise.

"Make it stop," I croaked at Xander."

His face paled and a small still sane piece of my mind managed to realise how bad this could sound to him.

"The noise," I promised.

"Dad?" said Xander way too loudly.

Regis had probably gone to fetch himself a pair of shoes or something—it was hard to tell with all the tears in my eyes—he walked gingerly in the bathroom and picked Miki in his arms and left us.

"You need to get up Mila, there's glass everywhere here."

"She wants to kill me," I said in between sobs. "She said the word 'kill' right in my ears after she choked me."

Xander looked horrified, but he focused on getting my naked ass off the floor.

I vaguely realised that he had no shoes on.

"You'll hurt your feet," I said still crying.

"It's already done," he replied. "Don't worry about me."

"Now you're hurt," I whined falling apart again. He had to hold my weight, or I would have fallen on the floor again.

I tried to get a grip on myself, I'm usually good with emergency type situations, good enough to have thought that I could be an EMT or something like that, but now that I had someone to rely on, I was falling to pieces.

The knowledge kicked my mind in the metaphorical butt, and I straightened up, and let Xander guide me to the bedroom.

I don't know when he grabbed towels, but he had one in his hand and he was trying to dry me up, making slow careful stoke on my skin.

"MOMMY!" screamed Eloim, from the other side of the door, coming in our direction.

"Not now," said Xander loudly.

"I'm taking him," said his mother. We heard Eloim whine and cry and it was heart braking, but Xander was right, neither of us could properly take care of him right now, and it was better for his parents to do it instead.

"I need a first aid kit," he said again loudly.

"On it," I heard his father say.

It took a few minutes during which Xander continued to dry me up, looking very disturbingly at my neck. He brought a few clothes too.

Regis brought in the kit, and Xander tended to a few wounds I hadn't seen. Nothing big, but he gave each his full attention.

My crying slowed down. Every sound that came from somewhere out of my immediate notice freaked the hell out of me, and I tried to calm my nerves as best I could.

Xander sat next to me when he was done, and I downed a couple of glasses of water while he took a few pieces of glass out of his soles.

"You need help with that?" I asked.

"I'm fine."

He clearly wasn't. It's pretty hard to see under your own feet.

I went to the side-table, and took the lamp closers, then I took his foot and the tiny pincers and went digging for glass shards in his skin.

It took me a while, and we stayed this way in silence.

After a while, I put his foot down, sure I had taken them all out of both feet, and looked up at him. We said nothing, what is there to say?

We hugged for a while, it was the only communication form that made sense, we spent a long moment just breathing in one another's sent, slowly, reassuringly, the rhythm of his heartbeat slowing mine, but eventually we had to get over ourselves and check on Eloim.

Regis was on a rocking chair moving back and forth with an uncontrollable Eloim in his arms, Miranda was walking back and forth until we went down the stairs.

And rushed to us about to ask about what had occurred and spotted the marks on my neck instantly in horror, but I put my finger against my lips and pointed at Eloim. She understood and withheld her questions for now, but I knew she would hound us later.

Xander's parent's had been informed of the situation, it had been hard to ignore this as the first major incident had been inside the walls of their homes to begin with, but neither of us had gone into details about everything.

When Eloim spotted us, he disentangled himself from his grandfather and rushed to us.

He was incoherent for a while.

Regis moved from his chair, Xander sat in it, and put me across his lap, with Eloim pressed against both of our chests, on top of my lap.

As his sobs slowly subsided, he managed to tell us that the scary-faced lady said I would die.

I don't think any of us had heard her talk before now, at least, Eloim had never talked about it. I felt a chilled ran between us that had nothing to do with thermodynamics and everything to do with fear.

Xander rocked us for a while, he hummed something that didn't sound like any song I knew, but it was soothing, he had a good voice, I could imagine him doing the same with baby Eloim every evening before putting him to bed, and after the massive dose of adrenaline that I had been given with that disaster of a shower, I felt myself crash slowly and a few minutes after Eloim's breathing slowed to a constant rhythm, I felt myself drift away slowly, my body heavy, with each sway of the chair and the warm heat of Xander's body until darkness took over.

— Chapter Thirty-Two —

I had slept surprisingly long, we all did. We woke a couple of hours before lunch, all three of us, bundled close together.

I have no recollection of even going to bed, so someone must have carried Eloim and I. I don't think anyone has done this since I was two, and it made me feel a little weird. Eloim was between Xander and I, and they were still sound asleep. They looked so similar right now, they had the exact same position and it was adorable.

I reached carefully for my phone and took furtively a few pictures. Both of their mouths were half open, and they were breathing loudly in alternation. It was hard to imagine how my life had changed so much in such a short amount of time. If it hadn't been for Enola, at this moment, my life would be the closest thing to perfection I could imagine.

I could picture a few more kids running around, me spending my day painting, or running after the little runts all over the place, and Xander whenever he was not deep in work, helping them build a cardboard forth or whatever crazy projects he would do from time to time with Eloim, always with mirth at the corner of his lips.

He was really made for the family thing.

I brushed my fingers the lightest I could on his cheek. I saw him twitch and lean into it. It made me smile. The sheer dichotomy of the insanity of yesterday and the sweetness of this morning could barely be processed by my brain. If only every day would be like right now, I could do this for the next fifty years without any problem. But that's not how life works isn't it? It's all ups and downs, and we just have to find someone that can give us a good average to share together.

I promised myself that we would go through this and I really wanted to believe this with every fiber of my body. How long would this take.

I could still run. I could run and everything would be over, but my heart would shatter. I couldn't I do this to myself, to them.

Xander opened his eyes slowly, blinking a few times.

"Hey there, handsome," I muttered quietly, Eloim was still sleeping.

"Hey there, beautiful."

I smiled.

He put his fingers over mines, took my hand to his lip and kissed the back of it.

There is something to be said about old-fashion British gentlemanliness. It made my legs all nooddly. Good thing I was already lying down.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice careful, soft.

“Better,” I admitted.

“You have nerves of steel,” he noted.

“Like yourself.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t face half of what you are.”

“But what you’ve faced, you’ve faced it for far longer than I.”

He tucked a curl behind my ear. “I’m calling the priest today, we need to accelerate this. It can’t wait any longer.”

I nodded. I took his hand in mine and drew it to my lips. I made him smile.

Eloim stirred and we slowly made our way down to lunch, our little perfect moment now over.

The day went relatively well, despite everything.

I know that Regis and Miranda cleaned the bathroom while we slept, but I wasn’t keen on seeing it right now, so I used another one. I supposed this is one of the advantages of a big house, you have alternatives.

After a few times of this, I decided it was silly and I’d better get over this now before it festered into anything bigger, so I went to the bathroom and opened the door to look in. I half expected to see a dark silhouette looking at me from a corner, but nothing was there.

The mirror was gone, all the shards gone, there was no shower curtain anymore, but other for that and a couple of decorations that weren’t where they had been before, everything looked normal.

I just stood there, taking everything in. I still wasn’t keen on getting in there but I wondered if it would be better for me so that I would not sink into some form of paranoia, or bathroom phobia. I got over stairs, I could get over this bathroom, right?

I heard a creak next to me, and my heart jump out of my chest and I whirled around ready to fight to the death.

“Easy, easy,” said Xander. “Did something happened?”

He checked nervously inside the bathroom then back at me.

I let my forehead fall on his chest and closed my eyes to let my breathing return to normal, but there was this massive empty space behind me that kept creeping me out.

“Hug me please,” I asked.

He did and we stayed this way for a while so that my heart would quieten, but the opened door next to me kept bugging me, so I turned and closed it.

“Are you okay?” he asked me, worried.

I was about to say that I was fine, but I changed my mind and went for the truth instead. “No,” I admitted.

We managed to put Eloim to bed early. We both tucked him in our bed, but when he slept we moved to the corridor to talk for a while. After maybe half an hour—for which we didn’t dare to go any further from Eloim—we heard a few choked scream, and rushed inside the room in a panic.

I heard Miki run up the stairs as if he had a sensor that had just gone up.

Inside, Eloim had wide terrified eyes fixated on something that we couldn’t see at the bottom of the bed. I heard a creak on the mattress and Eloim went scrambling up the bed trying to climb on the bedframe if he could.

As I had been the closest to the door and the first through, I rushed to Eloim to take him in my arms. Something solid went flying my direction, trying to stop me, but Xander found himself in between me and whatever that was. Miki was barking continuously, and I rushed out of the room with Eloim in my arms and Xander on my heels.

It would probably have been easier for Xander to take him, but we also knew that it was probably safer for me to do it. The fact that she had been stalking Eloim so hard freak me out though. We had assumed it was little things here and there, maybe occasional apparition, but either it had been worst that we had thought or things were escalating now.

“You get in the car, now,” told me Xander.

“Where could we go?” I asked him.

“Consecrated grown, we’re trying for a church.”

— Chapter Thirty-Three —

“The cats,” said Eloim as we got to the car.

“They’re with Mammy and Pappy, they’re fine,” Xander replied.

I didn’t bother with the back seat and sat in front with Eloim still clasped hard in my arms. I knew this was not legal, but the parish was really close by, and everything should be fine.

I had felt a number of scratches on my arms and back as I took Eloim away from Enola. I had ignored the burns completely, but now they were throbbing in sync with my heartbeat.

Obviously, Miki had refused to be left behind and had jumped in the car with us. Xander started the engine and we left. We had given only a few word of explanation to his parents, but they had nodded in understanding, and waved us goodbye on the porch as we made our way to the church.

The road was pretty quiet at this time, but we crossed one car, as it passed us by, police’s red and blues light up, the car turned around behind us and we came to a stop on the side of the road.

It took a little while to process why, until I felt Eloim move against me and I looked down. Xander came to the same conclusion as he opened his window, with a groan.

“Xan?” came Marcus’s voice from behind the flashlight.

Xander ran his hand over his face a couple of times in frustration.

“What is going on? This is not legal in the UK Mila, and I’m pretty sure it isn’t in Canada either.”

“Please Marc, it’s just for a couple more kilometers.”

Marcus bent to better look at us, his lamp landed on me. “What has happened to you?” he asked me.

“That’s the reason why we need to go now,” said Xander, which was more or less true.

“Go where?” asked Marcus.

“Church,” said Xander.

“The church is closed right now.”

“We can call the priest,” Xander suggested.

Marcus sighed. “Lead the way.”

“Thanks.”

We slowly made our why to the church with Marcus's cruiser in tow.

"What going on?" asked Marcus again as we piled out.

I manage to keep Miki inside the car, which he was not a fan of, but complied.

"Let me get them inside and I'll tell you," said Xander.

He marched us all the way to the front of the church and I sat on the stairs next to the Virgin Mary statue, Marcus looking at us curiously but waited patiently regardless. The man started to talk as they left, and we stayed here for a little while. I rocked Eloim gently, most lights were out and after half an hour, he fell asleep again, going limp.

I felt a strange sensation creep over me but I tried to associate this with all the weirdness that kept trashing us around.

I heard voices from afar. My butt hurt from sitting on something so hard for so long, and my arms had started to burn from the strain of holding Eloim for so long. I tried to find a better position that would require less from my muscles. The cuts continued to throb and were starting to really annoy the hell out of me.

I knew why Xander got us here, or why he left us here while he went to sort everything else. Both Eloim and I were Enola's only real targets, and so, if the theory held, then spirit couldn't hurt you in a church, right?

I do remember seeing a few pictures of apparitions in churches on the internet, and I wasn't sure if our logic was good or flawed, but it's not like there was an overwhelming amount of option out there for us either.

The creepy sensation wouldn't leave me, and I was really thinking I was becoming freaking paranoid. This is not mentally healthy, at all.

If things continue this way, I'm going to need some serious therapy after this.

Three men eventually walked our way talking. I recognised both Xander and Marcus's voices, the third was a new one, probably the priest.

I watched them, relieved as I could now ask Xander to take over with Eloim for a little while. My muscles were starting to cramp and I feared I might walk like an old lady for a few minutes at least once I'd been freed.

I saw the priest stop in his tracks first with his eyes wide, it took a little longer for the others to notice and turn their attention to where the priest was staring. And it wasn't at me, but above me.

I turned my head upward slowly, feeling dread build in morbid anticipation.

The Virgin Mary statue was bent above me, her closed eyes were now wide open and looking straight at me. She was curved in an unnatural way and my heartbeat peeked again in terror.

I wanted to move, I wanted to run, but a part of me felt that a movement for me would just trigger something. It was like finding yourself in the savanna face to face with a lion ready to pounce at you, and you indulge in this staring contest, the predator waiting for any sign from the prey that it was meal time.

I heard steps rush our way, but I didn't dare taking my eyes away from the statue orbs.

Xander took his arms around both Eloim and me, clearly not daring to take the child away from me and help me and get away from the thing, as quickly as we could.

Marcus and the priest were still staring in shock at it.

My level of weird had gone so high that no matter how disturbing this had been, it was not enough to shock me this much. I knew that this statue will haunt my nightmares for a while, but I would not stand there slacked-jawed either.

We had our back to it as we walked down the aisles.

Xander snapped his fingers a couple of times and the priest finally lead us to a side room, which is probably called something, but I had no idea what.

We all dared a last look before we moved in, and I regretted it instantly. The statue was back in its original position, but its eyes were still open and staring at us with its mouth opened wide and a horrifying silent scream.

— Chapter Thirty-Four —

“Look at this,” said Xander, showing my arms to the men. “And this,” he said, lifting the back of my shirt, showing the skin there. “And that.” He moved my head around showing the bruises on my neck. “You’ve seen the bloody fucking statue, you can’t say there is nothing happening, or that this is not an emergency. She’s trying to kill her. She’s terrifying my son. This has to stop.”

Eloim was sleeping on a sofa not too far from us, with a blanket covering is little frame. Xander had sat me on the priest’s desk and was giving them the rundown of what has been going on.

I didn’t mind, I just stood there, tire, exhausted, I didn’t feel like talking to be honest. I just wanted it all to end. I had fought my battles, so I let Xander fight his on. I knew how powerless all this made him feel, and that right now, it probably felt like he was finally doing something about it. I let him have it, he needed it.

I was eyeing Eloim, and it sounded like a really good idea to just lay down and sleep. I thought that statue would freak sleep out of me, but it turns out, that there is a limit to what the body can take, there is a maximum brain power stamina and mine had run out. The fatigue was not just physical, or even mental, it went beyond that, I was beginning to feel like even my capacity for emotions was running out of fuel.

The men talked. Marcus and the padre had eyes a little too wide. I guess mine would be too if I’d just seen what they did without any preamble.

“I need to sleep, Xan,” I said.

Xander stopped mid-conversation and they all turned to me.

“I’m done for the night.”

Xander looked torn, as I knew he was not fond of going back either home or to his parents’ for the night, as we had no idea what could happen next.

“I have a few cots for people in need,” said the priest as he saw the dilemma fought behind Xander’s eyes. “It’s not luxurious but you’d have that you need.”

I nodded. “Can you bring Eloim?” I asked Xander, unsure that I had the strength to do it myself.

“My not leaving the two of you alone,” he said.

“You can both sleep there,” said the priest, and we can convene in the morning.

Xander looked like he wanted to argue, but he hesitantly accepted, picked Eloim and carried him to the tiny room we would share. A second cot was put next to the first, the room was so small the we had to take out the side-table and the two little bed ended up pressed on either

wall, which was fine as otherwise I would have been worried of the bed separating during the night and having Eloim fall between them and to the ground.

I would have preferred to have a change of clothes, or at least a change of underwear, but I was too tired for arguing. Xander went to pick Miki in the car, and he slept on the foot of the bed. He had been a good warning sign so far, and I was kind of happy to have him there with us.

Xander was as exhausted as me. I know he tried to stay awake for a little while, but I know he fell asleep not long after me.

The priest brought us food in the morning and we made our way to Xander's parents first to give Eloim to his grandparents and we moved to our house.

The priest did a few prayers and went through various rooms drawing crosses on doorways and windowsills in holy water and holy oils. The whole thing was uneventful, and the house did feel a little brighter and lighter once it was done, but there we no special effects budget with our story, just a change in how the atmosphere felt—lighter—and that was it.

The priest finally bid us farewell once he was done, blessed us both, and wished us the best before he left.

Once that was done, we called Xander's parents and they brought Eloim and the pets back here.

For the next weeks, Xander slowly returned to his regular work schedule. He didn't want to travel just yet and did hire a few new employees and gave a few master classes online. He was actually excited in how things were going and it looked like, if things went according to plan, we might not be too tight with money for too long.

Eloim was doing better than ever and was slowly growing into a chatterbox which made Xander and I both proud parents.

My studio was done and I was spending plenty of time there. I had installed a section for Eloim with toys and his own art supplies, so that he could spend time with me here rather than to play alone. He was sleeping in his room again, on his own.

I had sold online five paintings already—mostly small one—but the prices and been good.

I ran to Xander's office, knocked and slipped in quietly—I never really knew when he was on a conference call and I didn't want to mess anything up.

He looked up at me, he wasn't on the phone.

I flipped my iPad towards him and showed him an email I had received, while smiling like a five-year-old at Disneyland.

He looked at me curiously and took the tablet to read.

It took him maybe twenty seconds until his expression morphed to a broad smile.

“This is happening?” he asked.

“This is happening,” I confirmed. “I just sent the reply.”

“That is great news. If things continue this way, you’ll become the breadwinner of this family.”

I beamed, but as a thought came, I turned more serious. “Will this be a problem with Eloim? You’re busy a lot lately and you did say that you might leave for part of February, I might not be able to spend much of my days with him if I do this.”

“I can check if my parents can take him, or get a nanny, or he’s doing so well lately, that maybe he could just go to daycare, make a few friends his age.”

“That could actually be good for him. Maybe we could try to integrate him slowly.”

He nodded. “But we’ll find a solution, a commission like that is not something you get every day, so I don’t want you to refuse it to stay at home.”

I nodded happily and went around to give him a kiss. “Thanks. I’ll let you work now.”

I got up to leave, but he wrapped his arms around me and dragged me down, half-sitting on his lap. I giggled, but we were interrupted by a massive ‘bang’ from upstairs.

You don’t lose months of built up instincts in a few weeks, we both bolted out of the office and ran upstairs.

Every single step we took was marked by Miki’s barks from above

As we approached, we heard the whines of the two cats, loud and menacing.

My stomach sank, knowing what it most probably meant.

Weeks. Weeks of tranquility. Weeks of quiet. Weeks of no apparitions, no banging, clawing, attacks, nothing.

Then, as we drew closer to Eloim’s room, we heard little terrified whimpers.

— Chapter Thirty-Five —

There was a strange clacking that came from the room, it sounded like a drum roll only on resounding wood instead of drum skins.

Xander opened the bedroom in one smooth motion and ran in without any hesitations.

There was a massive back mass in the corner of the room as I came in. Xander honed on Eloim who was cowering in a corner, sobbing. Miki was trying to chase the mass away, but it was not working. The cats bolted the second we opened the door, and the strange clacking sound came from the closet door and was opening a few inches and slamming shot repeatedly, so fast that it looked like a blur.

A desk slid on the floor and landed between me and the boys.

Xander's eyes widened in fear, at the realisation that the moment I'd be completely separated from them, I would become an excellent target.

He moved Eloim on his hip with one arm and in two steps grabbed me over the desk and hauled me over it with the force of the adrenaline and endorphins running through his veins. I was surprised by this, but I shifted mental gear rapidly, and I ran out with him, my hand in his, his grip painful, for I knew he was scared for having me ripped from him.

He went to the living room. It was day still. I didn't even know ghosts were not limited to nighttime activities. Maybe we notice them more because there is no other distractions at night, and it's so much more quiet.

Xander sat us on the coffee table, probably too primed to sit on the comfortable couch. I was next to him, and Eloim still in his arm.

"Take my phone and call Marcus. Put him on speaker."

He had his arm around me, he wasn't ready to let go of either of us.

He shifted his weight around a bit, to allow me to take his phone out of his pocket, and I did as I was told.

"Yes," said Marcus.

"It started all over again. That medium you talked about, call him, I want him here right now, I'll pay him, whatever is necessary," said Xander.

"Are you okay, mate?"

"No. Call him. Now."

After that he had me call the priest. During this time Eloim had grown quiet, he didn't seem to be having a panic attack. I stroke his back a few times, and he seemed relatively okay.

Miki was at my feet sitting up straight up looking at the living room door very intently.

Xander had a similar conversation where he asked the priest to come back.

"Why did it not stick?" asked Xander.

"I've done a bit of research since our last encounter. It could be because of the attachment. She is connected to someone and not a place, so there could be limited results with blessing the house."

"Could it be because of the religion? Enola's maternal grandparents were Jewish, I don't know about the rest of her family though."

"I'm not sure but it could be possible."

"Could the blessing be done by both."

"I think so."

"Do you have any contacts?"

"Maybe, give me an hour to make some calls and I'll call you back with an answer."

Xander wasn't happy with this response, but it was better than nothing at all.

It turned up that waiting on a coffee table while doing nothing is really boring, and I managed to convince him for us to eat something. The rest of the day could become a long one.

We moved all three of us to the kitchen. Xander always stayed within arm length of me, and sat Eloim on the counter next to him, as we prepared lunch.

We ate in relative silence, installed a tablet on the table a little later to put on some cartoons to distract Eloim and the calls started coming in.

This time there were a few people aware of the urgency of the situation which steamrolled the process.

The priest had contacted a rabbi who would drive a few hours and they would come here later today. When Xander talked to Marcus and gave him the run down on the situation, not only had Marcus managed to get the medium involved, but he said he would be present, and knew an EMT who was open-minded and could be present in case of emergency during this process. Because one thing terrified us more than anything, was knowing that Enola was connected to Eloim, meaning he would have to be present for it to possibly stick. He was so young, it felt like terrible child endangerment from our parts to agree to this, but we also knew that not doing anything could have far more dire consequences than this.

We tried to keep our faces calm and serene in front of Eloim, but inside, it felt like a funeral march.

As the day rolled forward people started coming in. First it was Marcus who had taken the rest of the day off. He was extremely on edge about this whole thing and wanted professional there in case anything bad happened. We were both secretly happy of his decision. Around four, I decided to keep myself occupied and made food for everyone.

I liked cooking, I've developed this from my mother who would cook everything, and from scratch when she could. I learned with her very young, and it had been a stress coping mechanism for me since. Plus, there will be a lot of people here, and possibly for a while. It felt like the least I could do was to at least give them a proper meal.

This was the most beautiful kitchen I'd ever had, and I was proud of it. And the accessibility to everything made cooking a smooth experience, I focused everything on these little facts. There are times where we forget about the good, to focus on the bad, but this will not dominate my life, not now, not ever, I told myself mentally, and decided to hum something as I tried to cheer myself up.

I believe that if you laugh long enough, even a fake smile can turn genuine.

— Chapter Thirty-Six —

After that, people arrived in rapid succession.

It was decided that the best thing would be to give a child dose of sleeling pills and have Eloim sleep through the whole process. The EMT, Johnny, could monitor him all the way through to make sure everything would be fine.

In our afternoon Xander and I had googled a few known cases of children behind exorcised and cases like Anneliese Michel had haunted us ever since. And yes, exorcism, as a human having a connection to a spirit or entity required such a practice to break the connection. Eloim wasn't possessed so it would not be as arduous, and the priest did mention that at the first sign of possession he was out as he needed approval from the Vatican for this, and had not the expertise required.

The rabbi seemed very understanding and the men went to prepare for what was to come.

The Medium, Hector, was a very normal dude, no plashes and glitter, or spooky voice. It did make me feel a little better about this. I was still worried that this was the right thing to do, but I reminded myself that if a simple blessing by a priest gave us nearly a month of peace, then this had a good chance of working, at the very least temporarily.

God, I hoped it would stick.

I held Xander's hand tightly into mine.

He squeezed in reply as we looked on, on what was about to happen.

In the end, the basement was chosen for the rite. Not because of a creepy factor, but because there was no furniture there. There was a section which was a large room where we had plenty of space to operate. The walls we solid stones, the floor concrete and the ceiling unfinished, so there was a limited amount of property damage that could be done, but the thought of property damage with a child in the middle didn't make us any less fearful.

The Medium walked the house to get a good feel on the situation, or so he said. He ended his walk in our final destination in the basement, while the other men we setting up shop.

There was a small bed being set up on the floor for Eloim, and Johnny was bringing in his medical equipment. Everyone had been instructed to have their cellphone at hand if anyone had to call an ambulance. Marcus was overlooking the whole thing with an eagle eye. Two small tables had been set up for the priest and rabbi to put their paraphernalia on.

We finally gave the pills to Eloim, and Xander and I stayed with him, rocking him until he fell asleep, then we moved him to the basement, and placed him in the middle of the mattress. At least, asleep, he would not know what was going on, or would see anything terrifying.

I sat on the floor next to his little body, holding his limp hand. On the other side, Johnny took his pulse every five minutes.

Xander sat behind me, with his legs on either side of me and his arm carefully surrounding my body.

When everyone was ready, we gave the okay to proceed.

It started simply. Hector asked for everyone to give him a few minutes to try and reach out to Enola. He had been given the run down on what the situation had been with Enola about when she was alive and what happened after her death.

Then, when Hector gave the nod to the others, both men began chanting their prayers.

They were a strange musicality to prayers. Maybe it's the word chosen, or the structure, but there is a rhythm to prayers, one that I've always found soothing. The drone of the priests prayers and the musicality of the rabbi's had a strange cacophony to them that didn't quite fit, but didn't quite clash either. They soon found their pace and continued for a lot longer. Clearly the priest thought this required far longer prayers that he had previously given us, and the rabbi seemed of a similar opinion.

I inserted my finger in between Xander's. "I love you."

He pressed his chin in the crook of my neck and muttered next to my ear, "I love you too."

We stayed this way for a long while in silence.

"Enola? Are you there?" asked Hector to the room at large. "Enola, it's time for you to move on."

"This is your fault," he all heard below the chanting of the men.

"Whose fault is it?" asked Hector.

I felt Xander tense behind me.

"Whose fault is it?" repeated Hector.

"Her," we heard.

No matter about all the Zen energies that I tried to pour into my vein, this iced my blood. Echoes of all the injuries I had suffered pulsed in my nerve endings. My bruises were all gone now, no scratches left, and I wasn't keen on getting new ones. Again.

I instinctively leaned into Xander's embrace, which he tightened in response.

The cloth on the priest tables, slid off on its own, dragging with it all of his things to the ground. Luckily, nothing had broken. Xander had insisted on nothing made of glass in the room, just in case. It had been a good call, that Marcus had approved.

The rabbi's table flipped on its side, leading to another series of crashes on the cement floor.

Johnny's eyes were round and looking around very intently. Marcus hadn't told us if he had experience with anything like that, but he never moved from his spot and continued to monitor Eloim.

"Enola, you can't continue this. You are hurting people, you are hurting Eloim," said Hector.

"No," we heard louder this time.

We could still not see her.

The prayers were still underway.

All the little objects that were strewn on the floor started flying my way. I pulled my legs bend up, sheltering half of my body, and Xander arms went over my upper body and head, protecting the rest.

Most of those things had little weight to them and were not particularly painful, other than maybe a bible hitting my shin. Few of them connected hard and a few hit Xander instead.

"Stop," we heard this time and suspected it was aimed at the prayers.

"Enola," began Hector.

"No," she replied, and I saw Hector twitch as a series of claw marks appeared on his arms, then I felt a few on mine.

"Die," I heard whispered in my ears.

— Chapter Thirty-Seven —

I instinctively backpedalled into Xander's warmth. There was a burning sensation on my wrist, and I dropped Eloim's hand to cradle my wrist closer to my chest.

At that moment, both my ankles were pulled on. Xander held on to me and got dragged a few feet forwards.

"Enola, enough," he boomed.

The pressure released and I fell limply, to scramble back inside Xander's embrace.

That's when the weight of everything that has happened and everything that could happen, really hit me the hardest, and I turned to hug Xander and fell apart.

The prayers continued, Hector pursued his conversation with an unresponsive Enola. Xander tried to sooth me, but I knew he was running out of steam too, and he just hugged me hard, his face buried in the crook of my shoulders. I heard him mutter a feeble, "I'm sorry," at one point.

I wanted to tell him it was not his fault, like I had told him before, that everything would be okay, that we were strong, but it was only gibberish coming out of my mouth, just fractured words escaping in the wrong order.

I just wanted this to be over.

I gave little attention to what was happening in the room, which seemed to be a whole lot of nothing.

Marcus came to us with water bottles, we straightened and took them.

The moment we were concentrated on drinking, I was dragged again, only this time, it happened faster, with Xander's hand only casually was laid on my hip, and nothing more. Both him and Marcus tried to grab at me, but none of them had the time to do so fast enough to stop me from being taken away.

I didn't even find the energy for a good scream, those are not as easy to do as the movies would like you to believe.

It took maybe two seconds for me to traverse the whole room and find myself in the next one, with the door slamming behind me.

I still couldn't see anything, there weren't that many lights installed on this side.

I had nothing, I was out of strength to fight, so I did the last things that I could, as I heard banging at regular intervals on the steel door behind me.

“Enola,” I said. “I’m not here to take your place, I could never. I know that Xander still loves you, despite all the adversities the two of you went through. I know he feels guilty for not having been there enough for you, when you needed it the most. I know that no child can’t hate his mother, not one that did so much to protect him.

I know it was you by the road that hailed the car that saved Eloim. When he will be old enough to understand this, he will hear the story and be so proud to have had such a wonderful mother. I know that you probably felt very guilty for not being able to care for Eloim as much as you would have wanted.”

A dark shadow in the shape of a woman appeared in front of me and she looked pissed.

“I know that it’s probably why you try so hard for Eloim now. You want to protect him, you want to be there for him. You love him with all the love only a mother knows.”

She started to walk my way slowly.

“I could never replace that. I would never want to even try. You will always be in their hearts, until their final days.”

Tears were coming out of my eyes, making my vision blurry as I tried to focus on the walking corpse coming my way.

“I will never be what you have been to them, but I could be something else. A different chapter in their lives. No one can spend their entire life living in the past and in grief, they have to move on to be able to to find some semblance of happiness.”

The banging continued behind me and I could hear the doorframe begin to crack.

She was standing between my feet now, looking down on me.

“Eloim is a wonderful little boy, but he’s suffering very deeply. What has happened is still haunting him.”

Oh, she didn’t like me talking about that.

She bent over me, with her hands on my arms, the touch so cold, that it burnt.

The frame broke and the men began piling out of the room.

Xander tried to free my arms, Marcus went on my other side, attempting the same thing. Johnny was apparently still with Eloim. The other three men took position in a half circle behind her and resumed their work.

“Christ, En, have you even looked at yourself,” said Xander. “You’re terrifying to look at. How can you imagine a little boy not to be scared to no end with you? No matter how good your intentions were, you’re hurting him.”

She turned her head to him.

“He needs to focus on the world of the living and not go through the flashback of watching his mother die and rot every time he looks at you. You’re traumatising him. Nothing here is Mila’s fault. Time continues to go on, even after you’re gone. Things can never go back to want they were. We all need to turn the page and be happy, and that is including you too.”

She stared very intently at him.

I hadn’t realised Eloim had awakened and walked behind us until we heard his blood-curdling scream.

Enola’s eyes snapped to him, and it’s like she realised for the first time how terrified he was.

Eloim when into a massive panic attack, and Enola’s expression, behind all the gore, turned to horror.

Xander nodded at Marcus, leaving me to him, and went to cradle his son.

She released my arms and retreated.

I couldn’t see her anymore but I knew she was still there. I leaned on Marcus as my body became rubbery.

Again, it would have been easier if I’d just lost consciousness, but I wasn’t so blessed, and I just looked at the scene with my eyes half-closed at the men helping her to, I hope, cross over.

It was like her touch had drained all life out of me and colours faded slowly into blurs.

— Chapter Thirty-Eight —

I didn't talk for three days after that and I didn't do much more than sleep. I would wake, drink some water, maybe pee, then sleep again. I didn't even have the energy to chew food for a whole day.

I knew Xander was worried, but I didn't even have the energy to worry about him. It was like everything had died inside and my body hadn't caught on yet.

It took me time, but I started to feel slowly more human.

I ate heartier meals and when Eloim came to my room and asked for a hug—which his father was reluctant to let him have—I spread my arms wide. Xander put him on the bed and we hugged.

Eventually, I spoke again, my voice was rough and weak, but it was there. There verdict had been mostly that of extreme exhaustion, and stress, which I couldn't deny. The burns and frostbite on my arms slowly healed. I don't know if those would lave scars though.

The priest, rabbi, and medium all said that she was gone now, that it was over. Eloim was doing surprisingly well, which cheered me up.

Doctors would still come and go, and ask me for a panoply of additional tests, for which I complied.

Miranda and Regis came to visit. Everyone seemed to feel really bad about this situation, about how I got caught in something that had nothing to do with me in the first place. I couldn't exactly say that I didn't feel similarly, but despite it all, I had gained something in return. I had a family now.

"We'd like to extend your stay for an additional day, just to be certain," told us the doctor a few hours later.

"Can we know why?" asked Xander.

Miranda, Regis, and Eloim had gone to pick up some food at a restaurant—take-out—so that I wouldn't have to eat more hospital food.

"Are you aware Miss, Lavigne, that you are pregnant?" he asked me.

Xander and I froze.

"I guess you didn't. Then, congratulations. And this is why we're keeping you under observation a little longer. I'd also like to have a first echography to make sure everything is as it should."

I nodded, numb.

Xander took my head in between his hand and kissed me, hard.

By the time everyone returned, we were so cheerful, it turned into a celebration.

It seemed to take Eloim a bit of time to realise what it all meant, but he enjoyed the festivities anyways.

"If we wait for spring for the wedding, fitting a dress could become a challenge," I told Xander a little later on. "Besides, getting paid for commissioned work and all that, maybe it would be simple to advance things."

He just smiled broadly.

"What are you thinking?"

"That my son is a genius at matchmaking."

That got me laughing.

We called my parents a little later that day. They weren't super happy to hear just now that I was in the hospital, but when they were told it was just exhaustion, and that I was pregnant, it changed the mood instantly. The following hour, I spent it translating between my parents and Xander's, which was all mostly wedding preparation, baby showers, and so on.

I moved back home the next day.

I wasn't sure when we drove back how I'd felt about this house and everything that has happened in it. But when we drove past the bend and I spotted it, in the afternoon sunshine amongst the trees, the exterior finished, it looked absolutely stunning.

But I noticed how terrible our land was looking at the moment. Winter was settling in, and there wouldn't be much that we could do about it, but I knew that come spring, this would be my next big project.

Marcus came to visit us with Emily that was slowly turning into a good friend. She was goofy and loved to spend afternoons baking, so I invited her in my glitzy new kitchen and we had a few baking parties. Her two daughters were around Eloim's age, and he was now opening up to other children, which had been something he hadn't done very often in the past.

I got slowly acquainted with other families in the neighbourhood. It was much easier now that our house was not terrifying most of them. Of course, none of us spoke of what actually happened here. It was useless and would bother them needlessly.

The work was finished in the following month, just in time for the wedding, but Xander seemed keen on renovated the big shed in the back and to turn it into a garage. I tried to convince him to wait a little more for the business side to grow more stable—given all the changes that were happening there, and also the fact that a baby was underway—but he assured me everything was fine, and I decided to stop nagging at him and let him have is pet projects.

We were not at a high risk of financial instabilities after all, it's just that I've always been naturally cautious.

The shed looked even worse than the house had when I came in. The roof was crooked, the windows broken, some of the wood rotten, but Xander was sure that some of it could be saved. So, I decided to trust him on it.

One of my pet projects became landscaping, I couldn't do any of it myself, but I could measure the land and start planning.

Miranda promised me, that has her flower beds were mature, she had to take away a lot of plants yearly to give them some place to breathe and so could give me tons of them to start up for free, and as I started to show my plans around, and the list of plants I had access to, we started our own little plants exchange circle in the neighbourhood, which was wonderful as I'd have suddenly access to at least a hundred different varieties, if not more.

I was really coming into my mistress of the house role and enjoying it.

I was painting more than ever, especially as Eloim began daycare.

He was so stressed at first that I spent that day there with him. With time he would focus more on the toys, or friends than me, he'd stop holding my hand all the time, and do his thing. After a few times, I began leaving him there a little at a time.

The woman there was really nice and understanding of the situation, and was very willing to work with us at our own pace.

Eloim return to having weekly therapy sessions and I asked Xander that we both did too. It took us a while to find therapists that had knowledge and some understanding of what happened to us without trying to lock us up in a mental institution for even mentioning it, but Hector got us in touch with the right ones. We had to travel all the way to London, but it was working well, and might be phasing out soon. We elected to keep Eloim going for a little while longer, but he was growing into a normal little boy.

We worked really hard toward socialising him, as he'd spent so long isolating himself from everyone and it was clearly a work in progress, that—we had been forewarned—could take years if not a big chunk of his life, and we'd only truly know the true impact when he'd age and mature, but everyone was hopeful.

Moving the date forward for the wedding had all sorts of consequences, but has it wouldn't be a grand affair, wasn't too hard to conciliate.

My parents came for a full month, a coupe of weeks before the wedding.

They fell in love with my house, obviously. It was hard for anyone not to. The moldings, the high ceilings, the fireplaces, it was perfect. It had an old-world charm that is so rare in America.

We had made sure that the insulation, the heating and A/C system, that everything was up to snuff, and Xander had made a few modifications to the plans to be able to upgrade to a full smart-house in the future. We decided not to indulge in this right now, as it could be so costly, but I knew he was dying to move forward with it. He already had his place in the basement that I nicknamed the geek room where the central server and everything would be. I caught him a few times shopping around various electronic gears, and comparing prices and specs. I was sure he had a pie chart or two dedicated to that hidden somewhere. Boys!

With my mother around, there was so much cooking going on that we had no space to store everything.

“You just have the one fridge and no spare freezer, how can you be storing everything,” she told me.

“Maybe we can check for an extra freezer later, but maybe we can move to canning some right now instead?” I suggested.

“Have you thought of a vegetable garden in your plans? You have the space. Plus, with this climate, you can produce much longer.”

“I thought about it, but I made no plan yet, I just don’t know where to put it.”

And the conversation morphed into what vegetables and fruits I should plant.

There will be enough food here by Christmas to feed a small cohort, at least.

— Chapter Thirty-Nine —

There was the beginning of a baby bump under my wedding dress. Given the circumstances, our outdoor plan for a wedding failed. We did manage to get a few good pictures in the snow though.

A few of my extended family came. Annie was back to a retreat in Mexico and I hadn't had much news from her for a while now, and had not been able to tell her of the change of date yet. I wasn't exactly sad about it. I didn't have many friends who took a plane for my wedding, which was understandable, but a few came, which was nice.

Obviously everyone gushed about my house, until they saw some of the before picture, and then they were not all convinced anymore they could have done this. But it did blow a few minds to realise the different and sheer work required for this, but like everything else in life, it all has a price, and if you want something that seems so priceless, then there would be some sacrifices to be made.

This was more of less my take on this whole wedding to begin with.

A few months later came a beautiful baby girl that we named Anika. Just like Eloim had grown into a caretaker for our small menagerie, he turned into an absolutely stunning big brother. To tell the truth, I don't think anything I did, or our pets did, was as effective with him as holding his little sister in his arms for the first time.

Actually, we had to reshuffle the rooms, because if he heard her crying at night, he would wake, and come and check on her.

We actually moved her from the nursery to our bedroom for the first few months to stop him from doing this constantly. It was cute, but not the best habit to develop, and we wanted to make sure this would not impede on his sleep time too much.

I got pregnant again the same year as Eloim started school for the first time. It had been a great idea to move him to a daycare first, or the transition would have been a lot rougher.

My work really took off that year, and my painting rose in value with it. I even managed to get a few of my paintings in a small gallery in London.

Xander's business took off as the expansion settled in, and he soon had to expend again to cater to the demand. He has managed to keep as much of his work from home, but he travelled a lot too, only he kept it to inspection visits rather than to do all the work himself. He was enjoying the change in responsibility, but he never managed to stay out of the field completely, he loved it too much. Whenever there was a particularly big contract or prestigious one, he'd take it on himself, and would bury himself into massive amount of work for a few weeks if not more. But we managed.

We didn't get a contractor and building team working double shifts on the future garage, actually, we kept it to a skeleton crew, so it went a little slower but it got done eventually, and he got me a gardening shed in the process.

I did my garden plans and even improved it. I thought our house and land might be one of the prettiest in the neighbourhood, but I might be biases. Before Anika turned two, Avalin was born. And though a big household with young children is a lot of work at times, I loved it.

Truth be told, they made me go crazy so often, but when I tucked them all in bed at night, I had no regrets, which is probably why Xander and I decided to do it again one last time.

Though he worked a lot, whenever he was not, he was giving one hundred percent of his time and attention to them, which would allow me some alone time with my paintings.

He built them a massive tree house with his father. It was so big it needed pillars to keep it up there. He was totally spoiling them rotten.

I had decided to rent occasionally some of our extra bedrooms to students, and travelers. It wasn't that we were strapped for cash, but it was a little bonus that we used to travel ourselves, and it got us to meet new and interesting people. It's actually a little how I met my own husband, so I decided that to keep doing it was not so bad, but we did not have them on all the time, and sometimes enjoyed the fact that we were on our own.

Our latest addition was named, Kaydin. We liked that we ended up with two of each and stopped after him.

Eloim was doing fairly well in school and we were so proud. It surprised no one when he announced that he wanted to become a veterinarian. The girls became our little terrors causing havoc everywhere, whereas Kaydin turned into the shyest of them all.

My parents came to live here with us for a few weeks every year and video chatted with the kids weekly. We went to Canada a few times during the summer for our holiday, but one year, to indulge the kids, we went in winter, at the peak of snowfall and they got blown away by the fact that the snow had piled high enough in places to be taller than them or even us.

They met the rest of my family and as I had made sure they all spoke both languages, had no barrier of communication, and I only had to translate for Xander as his didn't understand enough to converse.

We made sure to put a few pictures of Enola around the house and eventually told Eloim more about her. We didn't go into details of her ghost with him, he didn't ask and we didn't push. We know that there will be a day when we will have this difficult discussion, but for now, there is no need for us to insist on it. We don't even know if he remembers about it at all. But arranged a little spot in one of the drawing rooms with a picture of her and a few trinkets. We don't do ancestor worship or anything like that, but we found some aspect of it at least a good sign of respect, and built her a little shrine-like space for her.

Now that we know that death is not necessarily the end, it changed our perspective on a lot of things. We encouraged Eloim to craft something for her once a year that he would place in the small cabinet under the shrine, just for her.

We have no idea of her situation now or if she has any awareness at all, but we thought it was the right things to do, and soon the other three decided that they wanted to do the same as their big brother, and we let them.

I added a few things myself. I kept a journal, secretly since that last incident in the basement, and I documented everything about her son. I digressed with time as the other kids were added, and in the end, it had become a project as much for me that for her. Maybe there would be one day when I would show it to them, or Xander, but for the moment, it was something only for myself and Enola, if it was even possible. I documented the first time I met Eloim, to his first school test, his first school crush that he tried really hard to hide from us, the first time he did work around the house and was paid for it, instead of just giving him an allowance. He had been so proud. I put pictures of him holding every single one of his newborn siblings, so that she could see the love in his eyes.

I know Xander would not do anything like that. He had turned the page in his life, and I knew that though he never wanted to express it, especially in front of Eloim, he resented her in how things ended up. I looked deep into myself, but I decided that resentment was not for me. We would probably have never been best friends, but I decided to make my peace.

I didn't think as much about this part of my life as I used to do, but it never left my mind, and there were times when i walked around and I wondered if there had not been something hidden in the corner of my eye. Something other, something immaterial, but this was more than probably my imagination playing tricks on me.

I wondered if there would be another one day. Another loved one that would reappear suddenly in the middle of the night. Does everyone have a ghost?

I found myself scouring the internet one or twice looking for those same answers, and truth be told, I'm not sure anyone knows, at least the internet keeps contradicting itself, again.

I never really found my answers. Maybe it's not something meant to be answered in the first place. Something we may find out only when we cross over ourselves. And I was in not rush to find out.