Tiny Potions

*I dedicate this story to anyone who has experienced love that seemed unable to work. Love can be as complex and painful as anything else.*

**Part One: All You Need Is Love**

When my father was still alive, I would often visit his house and nearly pull my hair out in frustration. On a particularly frustrating night, I became so mad that I grabbed my father’s old tin garbage bin, picked it up, and threw it several times in the kitchen, breaking things as the bin made impact. My father looked more shocked than angry, as I’m not an aggressive or violent man by nature. His expression stayed surprised, tinged with anger, but then, once my rage calmed, I started to cry. It was a cry of sadness and desperation; seeing this, his expression softened. In his face, I could see that he could see my shame, and without words, he said, “You must have needed that. What the fuck is going on, son?” But with the rage now entirely gone, all of that energy was replaced with my tears, and I shook and couldn’t stop them.

 He sat there for a minute and then got up, making me some lemon herbal tea with a fresh lemon wedge squeezed and dropped into the mug. This was the drink my mother used to make me when I was sick or upset, and the smell of the lemon was so visceral that it was enough to bring me a little bit out of the depths of despair that I felt. My father was a man who never gave himself credit for his compassion because it was never flashy or obvious, but rather subtle and not overt, even to himself. No matter how obvious the comforting was, it was equally effective. He knew instinctively what to do when something needed to be done, and that mattered, but we didn’t speak or fuss about it. And I knew he knew I appreciated what he did for me by my reactions; nothing more needed to be said.

 Then, when my tears stopped, I rested my head in my hands; I felt defeated. My father, feeling the long, awkward silence, decided to say the words that he felt but was never at ease speaking, “Son, is this about Karissa?”

 I nodded my head in the affirmative. He was no stranger to my relationship problems; it had been five of the hardest but happiest years of my life. It is hard to understand how one person can make you feel the most purpose and joy you have ever experienced, and the most anger and sadness you have ever felt.

 During one of our first fights, my brother, Luke, asked me, “Do you think this is a chasing the dragon type of thing? Where the heroin makes you fly the first time, but then two months later, your arm is full of track marks, and you’re stealing from the people you love, just trying to get a feeling that will never be achieved again?” Luke has always been my constant companion, but he never could relate to what I was going through, as his wife, Lexy, was his high school sweetheart, and they seemed to fit each other perfectly. Not that they didn’t have disagreements, because all couples do, but they never had these knock-out fights, and whatever their disagreement, they always seemed to work things out quickly. But then again, my brother and I are very different people, just as Lexy and Karissa are. Luke and I are both more like our partners than anyone in our family, which worked out in his favor because he has always been careful, solid, and stable, so that’s what he attracted, or maybe was attracted to.

 When I was younger, I tried to date women like Lexy and emulate what they had. Those two are the type who wear matching sweaters and are in the same bowling league. Their lives are good but lack the kind of excitement that I crave, and I suppose that was the issue. At times, I had what I wanted most, which was the potential for lasting love, but I also felt this stagnation of the soul. Still, I gave it my best shot, trying to date someone more like Lexy, and I had stability and love for a time; yet, it was never quite right. It was after many attempts that I had to come to terms with the fact that trying to be something I wasn’t didn’t benefit me as much as I had hoped it would. I was the risk-taker and the one constantly pursuing adventure. I was always restless.

 It’s amusing to look back at the many photo albums my angel of a mother kept and see the two of us in each one, along with our personality differences. Luke is always wearing a pressed button-down shirt, and I'm covered in mud; Luke is at his debate matches, and I’m in my motorcross gear. With all the trouble I got into and how much honor Luke constantly brought to the family, you would think my mother would have favored him, but she never did. She saw the good in both of us. Luke was always a mama’s boy, but she always seemed amused by me in a way she could never be with Luke. Luckily, there was never any rivalry between him and me. I loved my baby brother, even though he was just 11 months younger. He was never a kiss-ass intentionally; he was just born the accountant that he later became. I used to joke with him that he came out of the birth canal wearing a polo shirt with ironed slacks and a calculator in his tiny hand. If you knew him, even when he was younger, you would think that was totally accurate.

 When we were 9 and 10, Luke and I had bunk beds resembling two rocket ships. I slept on the top bunk because his risk assessment told him the bottom would be safer. We both grew up with many toys; my mother couldn’t help herself, and my father wouldn’t stop her, even when the credit card bills would usually make his eyes bug out like in the cartoons. He loved her so much, and she loved us more than anything; so, if overdoing it for us meant she was happy, he would work a little later. My brother was always tidy; even as a youngster, he liked things to be overly organized. Everything had its designated spot and faced a specific direction, and so on. I was, however, a complete slob; I never organized or put things away, so I was lucky to find anything at all. I figured, why put them away when I’m going to use them again? So, needless to say, we were the odd couple. His way of life didn’t bother me because I found his classification and organizing system, which he had created and implemented, entertaining; however, my lifestyle nearly gave him a tiny myocardial infarction daily. I would often find it hilarious to watch his mind become frazzled, unable to compute, looking at my never-made bed while he had hospital corners. He tried to show me that if I put everything away, I would be happier, but I thought that was ridiculous, so I would never comply.

 Not long into our time rooming together, he composed an agreement for me to sign. It was my first rental agreement and his first time writing a contract, which would become a lifetime love. I took it gracefully and signed it, “You smell like farts,” and walked away. He was livid. So, in true sibling disagreement fashion, he ran to my mother. My mother then sat me down and asked me if I could be more sensitive to Luke’s feelings and try to be cleaner because he hated things being messy. To which I said that I hated things to be so tidy. It could be argued that Luke was still in the right because clean is the righter of the two, but my mother understood what I was trying to say and honored that Luke and I were different people. When you are so opposite, someone is always losing, and I was such a force that it would’ve always been Luke. So, my mother had me move to the guest room, as she felt we were different enough to need our own space. I was ecstatic that I wouldn’t have to sign papers or clean, and I was able to move.

 The first night was great; I had things the way I wanted them, with plenty of space, and no compromises were necessary. However, after that first night, I missed him badly. Still, I had too much pride, even at that age, to back down. I couldn’t say that I’d try to be cleaner or that I missed him, but with enough missing him, I came close.

 Then, about a month into living separately, Luke came into my room and had a compromise. It was fair, but I pretended it was too much and then conceded. Then we were back to being space pilots in our room for two. I never had to swallow my pride; he was willing to do it for me, and I was so glad he did. That was love. He knew I missed him, but he knew who I was and that I would never have come to him and said that I was wrong, or at least not entirely right.

 From then on, I protected him because his OCD, overly analytical, and teacher’s pet personality made life a bit harder for him. Perfectionism is isolating because it’s a train that most people don’t want to ride, as it involves too much expectation and too little room for error. So I made sure that everybody knew he was my brother and that they would have to answer to me if they messed with him. He never asked me for protection, but he never had to because I knew he needed it and would never ask for it.

 And really, after the short separation, we stayed close. Our differences kept us from being too competitive and made our relationship interesting. In this case, opposites worked quite well together, not without some friction, but with plenty of learning and discovering the best in each other.

 Then, when we were both freshmen in college, as I had taken a year off so that I could be with Luke, we found out our mother was dying of breast cancer, and we came to really rely on each other.

 Our mother was the type of mother who always put us first and showered us with attention. I have so many good memories of our childhood, which she made so special. And it is evident that our mother was our father’s soulmate and once-in-a-lifetime love. Some years before she passed away, he told us how they met and how he had always wondered why she was with someone like him. To my mother, my father was everything; she came from a home where her father was emotionally abusive and vacant at best. My father was the opposite; he was calm, loyal, and steady, which my mother found most attractive. He provided her the stability she never had growing up in absolute chaos; she would’ve rather had that than anyone else. She also loved the type of father he was; he was never extremely expressive, but he was always there. He always let her spend the money to ensure we had the best childhood possible, probably overcorrecting from her own. We never ended up spoiled because while we had things, she also taught us how to be. They had the type of marriage that was nearly perfect. They always found a way to find common ground, and they never hit below the belt. There was something about them that you knew there could be nobody but each other for one another.

 It may be our perfect, wonderful beginning that we had to pay the price of suffering later on, as it seems that life is never but a dream. Yet, they never really prepare you for what happens next when the dream must painfully end. Watching this vibrant, energetic woman be reduced to skin and bone without hair or eyebrows was the worst thing I have ever seen or will ever see. She never showed fear or cried, and I believe that was her protecting us, even at her worst. During this time, my father only left her side to work. Every other moment, he was in bed, snuggled up next to her. They would binge-watch TV shows or play board games, but mainly hold each other tight.

 When we knew it was a matter of weeks, Luke and I moved back home, and we enjoyed each other as family. This was the only time I had seen my father express himself or show emotion; it wasn’t in front of us, but we caught a glimpse of it in passing. I would be walking to my bedroom, and I would hear him reading all the love letters they had sent each other, or him telling her how beautiful she was; not even chemotherapy could take her beauty down, he said. And I don’t think he was saying that to make her feel better about herself; I know he genuinely believed it. She was perfect to him, completely independent of her appearance or circumstances; she was perfect when she was vibrant and full of life, and she was perfect when she was completely drained and in the worst shape a human can be. True love can be stripped of all the distractions and everything else and remain.

 And as we had prepared for, she died a month and a half after we both moved back home in my father’s arms, in the most peaceful way possible. It was so hard on my father that he was unable to move, and he didn’t alert us right away. He stayed with her body for hours without announcing it. Luke realized this when he was coming to ask a question, and it was clear she was gone; her lips were blue, and she was stiff and cold. Yet, it was as if our father believed that at any moment, he could bring her back to life, or maybe this was just a very long nightmare, and he would wake up, or, more realistically, he didn’t want to let go. I think if it had been legal to keep her body in the house, he would’ve kept her body until she completely rotted and she became putrefied and pungent.

 When my brother called me into the room, I was shocked that the day had finally arrived, even though we had known it was coming; still, we both thought that maybe a miracle would happen or that she would have more time. Clearly, we all had lived in denial, and now we had to come out of it, which was excruciating.

 After the shock wore off a little bit, I told Luke to call the nonemergency police line so that we could schedule for her body to be picked up, but hearing my command, my father yelled at him not to. Neither of us knew what to do, but we thought that keeping her a little longer wouldn’t do any harm. So Luke and I hugged and kissed her on the cheek and cried. She was our everything, and now she was gone.

 Then, knowing that my father needed that time, we both retreated to our old room, which now had one twin-size bed and a cot for me. We just sat there and cried while we wished we had more time or that we could go back and enjoy our time; it’s so easy when you don’t know that death is coming to get busy in your lives and take it all for granted. I wish I had accepted every invitation to anything she wanted, bingo and all, and not been so busy with my own life. Feeling like you should have or could have is probably the worst feeling in the world; regret is one of the most powerful emotions. It was hard to imagine that the three men in her life would ever recover from this. We didn’t have a large extended family, and she was the glue that kept us together.

 Then, after some time, Luke got up to check on our father and came back down to report that our father had threatened to beat Luke black and blue if he called anybody. Luke told him, “We’ve got to call somebody, Dad. She’s gone; she’s not here anymore. This is now just her body, and it will start decaying.”

 To which our father yelled, “Try me!”

 I couldn’t say that I expected my father to take this well, but I didn’t reasonably expect him to react in this way. He was a very reasonable man, so for him to act so unreasonably was totally out of character. He knew that she was gone and this was just her body; it was a shell, and yet, that shell was still “her” to him, and therefore, he refused to give her up. Against our better judgment, we let him stay that entire night with her dead body in his arms because we didn’t know what to do. Mom was always the one to take charge, and he was the backup; now, no one was there taking the lead.

 During this time, my father was reluctant to use the restroom because he was worried that one of us would call somebody and take her away when he was gone, so he peed in a bottle. Dad could withstand many challenges and hardships in this life, and he certainly had, but he could not and would not accept this one.

 We would pass by periodically to make sure he was still breathing and hear him continue to read those love letters, just as he had when she was alive. He also pulled out photo albums, which were something to behold; she made them all special and organized, and there were so many of them because she was always taking photos of everything, and those photos now are the only proof that she was ever here with us and that we were ever happy and together. And the evidence showed, picture by picture, what a beautiful life we had created together. There were just so many good memories.

 But after that night, Luke made the decision that he knew I never would, and he called the nonemergency police office to coordinate with the coroner’s office to come pick up our mother. This was a hard decision, but we didn’t know what to do. Let him keep her body until she’s full of maggots? This would have to come to an end at some point. It is illegal to keep her body, and it is impossible to hide the stench.

 Luke, wanting to be fair about everything, decided that warning our father would be the best thing, so he wouldn’t be blindsided and could enjoy the last moments before they carried her away. And so he warned our father, and for the first time in my life, my father was flaming angry and started getting violent. He asked which one of us had called, and I took responsibility for it. Luke was always making tough decisions, and I figured the least I could do was assist.

 My father came very close to hitting me, but then, realizing that the coroner was on his way, decided instead that he would rather kick us out and have his last moments with his wife. My father wasn’t selfish, and I can’t think of any ways I would describe him this way, except with her. He did not care about his sons and how they were dealing with any of it, but instead could only see his gorgeous angel being removed from his arms. She was all that he had ever wanted in his entire life. So, for the almost 2 hours that it took for the coroner to arrive, he continued to hold her and go through those photo albums.

 Then, when there was a knock on the door, Luke answered the door as Dad latched onto her tightly as the coroner and the police, who must come regardless of her terminal illness, headed up the stairs.

 When the entourage of people entered his room, we all assumed that he would let go and they would be able to remove her, but he wouldn’t. Like an errant child refusing to give up a toy, he remained completely wrapped around her body and hunkered down. I’m not sure what that team usually sees when they come to collect a body, but I’m sure it’s an array of different reactions; it’s difficult for people to let go, but judging by their faces, I think my father’s response was new to them. The group asked the female police officer to take the lead, feeling that she could coax them more effectively. You could tell that it was awkward for her to tell this grown man to let go of his dead wife because they needed to take her, as this clearly showed in her voice and mannerisms.

 But to all of the very valid points she made with compassion, his only response was to look at her as if she were a complete idiot. So she backed up, pulled the two of us out into the hallway, and said she thought it would be better if we convinced him to let go. So we both went back in and tried to convince my father to let her go by using all the reasoning behind it. We explained that she would want him to let go so she could have a beautiful burial and that she would not want to start decomposing in the lovely, warm place that she made a home of. We also explained that it was illegal to keep her body. We got a little bit of a different reaction than the officer before us, as he looked at us both with pure anger and hatred.

 When minutes of our reasoning and pleading with him didn’t work, the officer called us again to a meeting in the hallway. She wanted to figure out how to do this without exacerbating an already dire situation. Still, she didn’t know what to do because she had never encountered anything like this happen in her entire career. So she thought that maybe we should be the ones to remove him from Mom. I could understand that it might be better coming from a family member, but at the same time, we both didn’t want to be the object of his hatred when we did the thing he wanted the least in the world. But what can you do in a situation like that? It was a hostage negotiation where the hostage was also the primary reason for the negotiations, and nothing else.

 When we returned, we tried our best again to reason with him, and we even warned him that if he didn’t give her up peacefully, as she would want, we would have to remove him from her. And to that, our father said, “You better not! You just better not!”

 So after too many unsuccessful negotiations, Luke and I gave each other a look that said, “Well… We’re gonna have to remove him from her,” and that’s what we did. But this was much harder than anticipated, as he began to fight us as if we were all in the MMA together. My father was no small man, either; he was huge and extremely strong, considering he used his arms for his job every day. He fought us with every ounce of his being. I kept telling him he shouldn’t because he could get a criminal charge, which was not what Mom wanted. To this, he punched Luke in the face, and he put me in an armbar. He didn’t care if he became a felon or hurt his sons; he didn’t care about anything but her.

 It wasn’t too long into “Rocky: Family Takes Down” that the officer decided that while our father was distracted, they would come in and grab her. I felt that this was as challenging a decision as can be; it’s not something that you walk away from feeling great about. They all had empathy for what it would be like to lose the love of your life, but they had their duty, and they had already been there way too long. So, they had to come in and grab her body up briskly and with great force. It was not a winning situation.

 Once they had her off the bed and headed to the gurney, he noticed, turned around, and headed straight towards them. This is when Luke and I both grabbed an arm and took him to the ground. It was hard to watch our mother’s retrieval as she was bounced around like a rag doll, but it was even more challenging to take a grown man to the floor, who was still fighting with all his might for his wife’s dead body. As my father continued to thrash about, screaming and crying, we all watched as our mother was pulled away from us. Unfortunately, it was as disturbing a scene as it was sad.

 When he heard that door close and realized there was nothing else he could do, he began to cry and shake. This is the kind of cry reserved only for life’s worst experiences; tears were puddling on the floor like tiny lakes.

 Once we knew the officers were safely on the road, we released him, and he looked at both of us with utter disgust before climbing back into bed. I think most children would have been appalled by this behavior and frustrated that he hadn’t put them first, as one would expect a father to do. It was as if he didn’t realize that we had lost our mother; it was only that he had lost his wife. He didn’t comfort us; instead, he made us feel worse by making us the enemy.

 After Luke and I returned to our room, we didn’t know what to do about the funeral arrangements because we felt that he was crazy enough to try to steal her body or jump in the coffin with her. I’m not sure if anything like this has ever happened before, but we were confident it would in this instance. Yet, what could we do? My mother had people who loved her, and she wanted a wake so everyone could view her one last time before she was lowered into the dark ground.

 Then Luke suggested the possibility of cremating her so it would be a non-issue while still doing a memorial service. I thought about it because this was the only way to ensure dignity and expel the crazy. Still, she had never expressed to us that this was something she wanted, so we had to go with her wishes.

 Then we considered maybe he would get his shit together, and his “father mode” would kick in, and he would be able to realize how completely insane what had just happened was and not repeat it. My father had always been such a strong man and there for us, so his reaction was difficult to understand completely. But after we bounced this last thought off each other, we realized that there was a good chance that our father would try to grab her body, put her in the car, and then take off with her, and soon he would be involved in a high-speed police chase that would end up on the news, and people would forever remember that. He would then be known as “the corpse guy” or something similar. It’s just not something you hear about often: a man running off with a dead body, refusing to stop for the police. I’m sure there are all sorts of criminal charges for that.

 So we finally decided that we would have to hire security. I don’t know that anybody who isn’t famous has ever had to do that, and we were certainly met with complete disbelief. We had to call many private security places before finding one that would because the circumstances were so bizarre. The security firms had provided everything from bank runs and personal security to event security and any other service that required security. Still, none had any experience with this particular task. Finally, after promising much more money than they would make doing anything else, we found one that would provide security.

 Then, we planned her wake as Mom wanted, with her sister doing almost all the heavy lifting. While working with our aunt on the finishing touches, I had to explain the situation about our father because it would be strange to see two heavyset security officers on either side of the coffin without warning. She was as stunned as you can be, and honestly, she understandably didn’t want them to be there. My mother wasn’t the queen; she shouldn’t need a funeral security detail. We had to insist, though, because the strong alternative possibility was much worse.

 After I insisted, her confusion turned to anger. Our aunt loved my father; he was everything you could ever want for someone you love. At times, my Aunt Helen was jealous of what our mother had because she could never find that for herself; yet, her happiness for her sister always won the war against her jealousy. Additionally, my aunt got to have the children she could never have by proxy, and we loved her very much.

 Still, even with the love and appreciation she had for my father, she was stressed out and doing almost everything, and she was hurting, too. My aunt and mother were about the same age distance as Luke and I, and they shared similar struggles and benefits; it’s funny how that worked out. I tried to imagine losing Luke, and I couldn’t fathom it because all those years of closeness had formed a bond that intertwined us together, and once something is intertwined, you must nearly destroy it to untangle it. I don’t even know if I could go on without him, and I’m certain that if I did, I would always feel incomplete. So, I could absolutely understand what she was going through, and my father did not need to add to her stress and grief.

 After I expressed similar feelings but did not agree not to have the security, her face turned red, and she pulled at her hair and said, “What is he, five years old? Will he be selfish and make this harder for the rest of us? This would not be what sissy would want.”

 I said, “Aunt Helen, the type of man that does this has completely lost his mind. He is not right; this broke him. I’ve never known him to do anything like this; he’s not doing it to be selfish or make things harder.”

 My aunt took the words in, and you could see the wheels of her mind turning as she absorbed and dissected them. She had never known my father to be anything but selfless. Not that my mother asked for the world, she wasn’t greedy. Still, all of the things she did for us added up: Luke’s cello lessons, my soccer lessons, our educations, special holidays, there was so much she did for us, and he covered most of the expenses since my mom was only able to work part-time because she had another full-time job as a tutor, chauffeur, maid, chef, nurse, and the other many things she was. My father was a successful plumber, but with mortgage payments, utilities, food, and other expenses, his life was expensive, so he worked longer hours. My father never begrudged her because he knew that everything she did matched his hours, and he saw the care she put into raising us and how well we were turning out; he was so proud of her. My father never raised a voice to our mother; he always told her how much he loved and appreciated her.

 Also, he was good to Aunt Helen; when Helen’s husband’s verbal abuse escalated, she stayed with us for quite a while, and she was never treated like an inconvenience; our father treated her with compassion and made it known that we would support her if she left him or if she stayed, but he hoped she would not go back to her abuser. My father reminded her that our house was her house… forever if she needed it.

 All of this ran through Helen’s head; she wasn’t happy about his behavior, but in all the years, he had bent over backward for everyone else, so she thought that bending over for him once was what he deserved. So, we devised a plan to do Mom’s viewing in parts. The first would be for her many friends, bowling team, extended family, colleagues, and anyone else who cared about her. Then, there would be one for my father, Luke, and me. This would prevent us from explaining this strange situation and causing embarrassment to our father in front of a large group of people.

 Our aunt then suggested that we make it seem like there would be just one viewing; my father would never know because he was holed up under the covers, surrounded by pictures, letters, and momentous, as if he could absorb them and conjure her up using these remnants. But I worried about what he would do when he realized that we had been dishonest and that we had hired security. My father was unhinged in a way that I had never experienced, and so his behavior was unpredictable and volatile, which was exceptionally hard to plan for. But even if, by some miracle, we got through the event without a “dead Bonnie and insane Clyde” incident, then I wondered if our relationship would recover. Before this, I would have said 100% yes; my father always showed unconditional love and patience, but this was as if my father had been body snatched and replaced by a lunatic, who, for the first time, had been violent with his sons, so there was no telling.

 Still, I took inspiration from words he had said to us years ago; I can’t remember the situation, but I will never forget the words, “Boys, life is full of hard decisions; there is no way around them. Avoiding them or taking shortcuts never makes things better. You must do your best to make those decisions with bravery and integrity.” So, faced with one of life’s hard decisions, I knew what must be done, even at the price of losing my only surviving parent. Letting him make a scene and get arrested would have placed the problem on someone else’s lap, but it would not have been good for anyone, least of all him, in the short and long term. I knew I had to do what was right for the man who raised me to know how to when the time came. With a plan in place, I left feeling conflicted but assured that we had come up with the best solution. I

 Later, Luke and I grabbed a couple of New Belgium brews and a bottle opener at home. We sat at the white marble table my mother had placed in the center of her once-prized garden. A time ago, this area was lush with plants and flowers in the soft pastels she loved, but now it was dried up, and almost everything was dead. It had once reflected her majestic beauty, but now it reflected her terminal illness, and its loveliness was now just a memory, like my mother.

 In the following days, as I walked around and saw everything that reminded me of powerful memories, it was hard. The “Precious Moments” figurines she loved so much were everywhere; she could have set a record. This was a collection given to her almost entirely by her boys when we were younger, paid for by my father. I could remember her face being so pleased with “Little Boy and Lamb,” which my father had given to her from both of us when Luke was born, or the wedding couple that resembled my parents as if they were the models for this very figurine. But Luke’s and my old bathroom was the worst; she had always shared a bathroom with my father, but when we went to college, she took over our bathroom and placed all over were her cosmetics and skincare; it smelled just like her, which felt like a ghost, as her signature scent of lilac and vanilla could fool you into believing she was right there; it made my heart ache. It’s wild how smells can bring you back so strongly. I stole her old, worn-out robe because it smelled like her, and I took the perfume. Later, on the worst of days, I would spray a little of the perfume on the robe and hold it, as if she were there to comfort me. But I had to be careful because the perfume was discontinued the year after she died, as if to say that it could no longer continue if its most-prized wearer no longer did; it was fitting but inconvenient because I had tried to find what would be closest, even mixing scents, but I could never even come close.

 I eventually hired an expensive perfumer to recreate this perfume, and he assured me that he had conducted the necessary research and was confident he could replicate it for a substantial fee. I paid it because I felt it was worth having her there, in a way, when I needed her to be teleported. What he came back with wasn’t right. He was offended when I said as much, saying he had paid for the proprietary information and created a nearly identical replication. I didn’t know what to say except it wasn’t right. If that specific smell was my portal to her, then this was not it, and therefore stood no different from the hundreds of other perfumes and mixes I had purchased before. He left angrily, slamming the door on the way out, infuriated that I didn’t appreciate all the effort he had put in, which wasn’t exactly the case.

 A year later, he asked me to sell him the intellectual property so he could sell it; I used that money to restore and upkeep my mother’s garden. His fragrance, “Angel of Light,” became one of the best-selling fragrances of all time, and the man who once slammed my door became a millionaire; it’s still sold after all these years. I will even catch a whiff of it now and again and think, “Only mom could give a mistake this much momentum.” Unfortunately, my later relationship with Karissa depleted my fragrance down to a few drops.

 So when the funeral day came, Luke and I decided to stay back and watch our father so he wouldn’t get suspicious. It would be hard for people not to see the men who were Judy’s world, but it had to be done. As expected, it did seem incomplete to everyone. My aunt, not wanting to divulge the family business, explained that it was way too hard on us; we couldn’t handle the crowd and wanted privacy. This seemed acceptable to most people. The first wake went according to plan, with so many people in deep sorrow celebrating a wonderful woman.

 Then, when the time came for our intimate wake, we received the suits we had ordered: three grey suits with purple ties, nodding to my mother’s favorite colors. They were all the same, as that was the easiest option, so her three boys matched in outerwear and grief.

 We then went into my father’s room and told him it was time to get ready; we expected a fight or to have to dress him as we had when we were young. I remember him chasing us around, with us both wanting our nakedness over uncomfortable clothing. But to our surprise, he popped right out of bed, took the suit, and headed to get into the shower. We were so shocked and looked at each other with disbelief; maybe we had underestimated my father’s ability to get his shit together.

 So Luke and I got ready, feeling relieved, until a minute into my shower, Luke popped his head in and said, “Bro, do you remember when we were told not to do something again, and we acted like angels until mom was out of sight and then did the thing again?”

 I replied, “Definitely,” and then realized what he was implying.

 After a second, I said, “Shit… Do you think he is behaving well so we let our guard down?” He said that he did.

 Still, I was sure that if we kept him from her viewing, the slight possibility of him digging her out of her grave would then become a certainty, and the chance of ever repairing our relationship would be nil. Which then made me think, “Shit! Is he going to rob her grave?” with more seriousness than someone should ever have to consider. Worrying about someone harming themselves after a loss is comprehensible, but worrying about them digging up a dead body to head south of the border was beyond comprehension. I don’t think there’s a support group or a book on the subject.

 Once at the funeral home, we had to park a ways away, and we walked side by side with Dad in the middle; we made a suave trio, and I know Mom would have loved us dressed alike and dapper.

 When we approached the door, Luke decided to give Dad a heads-up about the security; he was fucking livid. Immediately, he berated Luke, so I stepped in and said, “Dad, you need to stop. I don’t know what is going on with you, but this is far from normal grieving. We are trying to protect you from doing something you will regret or, worse, getting in trouble with the law. They gave you a ‘get out of jail free card’ once because they had compassion, but they will not do it again. Mom would be horrified at the way you are acting towards us, especially towards Luke. If you’re going to direct hatred, then do it towards me. Get your fucking shit together, man.”

 This was one of the very few times I have ever cursed in front of my father, and the only time I swore at him. He still looked furious but also surprised. I then moved him into the building.

 We then walked into the room where my mother’s casket lay, lilacs placed everywhere, and an enormous bouquet of them on her casket. My father seemed surprised as he looked around, and it was just us and the secret service-looking men posted up at her casket. His mind tried to put everything together; when he realized we had lied and omitted the truth, he looked at us with disdain. In his right mind, my father would have understood that we were doing this to help him, not hurt him, but this man was not like my father.

 After looking at us like he hated us passionately, this different man assessed the situation. He knew the men armed with tasers would have no problem taking him down and removing him, then likely contacting the police. It was evident that taking her body, as we had unfortunately but correctly anticipated, was his now thwarted plan all along. So, realizing that his only two options were to see her one last time or not, he had the sense of mind not to do anything else crazy.

 Luke and I stepped out to give them a somewhat private moment, with the security acting like statues. We could hear him as we waited just beyond the doors to that room; he said, “I don’t know how to live without you. The moment I met you, I couldn’t figure out how I ever lived before you. You were so encouraging and loving; you made my life consistently better. You are the sexiest woman I know; the things we did, most I didn’t even know about until you, shoot, you were so saintly I could have never expected you were such a freak.” To this, Luke’s eyes widened with horror.

 My father continued, “I have loved waking up to you and sleeping together for over 23 years. I don’t want to let you go; I don’t feel like I even can. I just love you so very much.”

 Love has many different potencies; theirs was the strongest; it withstood anything that came at them. It was entirely selfless and never faded, even as their youth did. They had the type of love you pray for, even to get a small portion of it.

 My father then looked at the security again, reassessing the situation, but thought better of it. So, he hung his head and sobbed out of the room.

 My brother and I then had our turn. It was so much harder to say one last goodbye after what had just happened with our father. Still, we stood there with her, each holding one of her hands, like the three of us had so many times before, and we cried. She looked perfect; the wig and makeup nearly restored her to her former self, which was a true gift. Her sister had my mother’s wedding dress turned into her funeral dress; she had it dyed lavender and made a few alterations. Mom would have loved it; her wedding dress was her favorite article of clothing; we would catch her wearing it occasionally, reliving that moment. My father made her feel wonderful and worthy; she was obsessed with him, which was fitting, considering that would be an understatement for his feelings about her.

 Then, I noticed two stuffed animals in the casket: a possum and a duck. These were our first toys, given to us at birth, and they lay on each side of her. Looking back at the photos, she was radiant during her pregnancy and as excited as could be. When she had two boys, she had accomplished every dream she had ever hoped for since she was a small girl, cowering at her father’s rage. It’s genuinely remarkable to achieve all your dreams, and although they were cut short, she accomplished them. And even as she left this earth, she lived on in Luke and me, who were taught never to hurt a woman, to take accountability, and to live with compassion.

 The tears didn’t seem to stop for us, and neither of us wanted to let go of her hands, which gave us more compassion for our father; finality is crushing if you desperately don’t want whatever it is to end. Death is final… but this made it real. And since I knew Luke wouldn’t let go unless I did, I painfully did so, and when I did, he let go as well.

 Then Luke grabbed and hugged me, and we held onto each other. He kept saying, “I just can’t believe she’s gone, bro. I cannot believe it… I mean, I cannot believe it.”

 I couldn’t either, but they needed to get her into the ground, and there was no avoiding leaving, so we left that room hand-in-hand and went looking for our father; he wasn’t in the building, but we saw him aimlessly roaming the grounds once we went outside, so we got my father and headed home with nobody saying a word.

 When we got home, we invited my father to a gathering to celebrate our mother, where food and memories would be shared; he didn’t even reply to the offer and went into his room.

 Then, we made the journey to the celebration of life, and when we came inside, it was immediately apparent how much my aunt loved and intimately knew her sister; she had all these photos enlarged and crafted perfectly. My aunt said she was worried it was too much and explained that it was hard to narrow down the photographs, as she didn’t want to risk leaving out important people or memories. I told her, “It’s not too much at all; I hadn’t seen many of these. Mom always figured that the last thing her two boys wanted to do was sit down and go through old photo albums. It must have taken you forever; you are one amazing woman. I hope to find a partner as thoughtful as you someday.”

 My aunt beamed, then got distracted by someone with thanks and condolences, so I walked away. I worried about what would happen to her now that her only friend and support were gone.

 I then found Luke, who had been examining a concerning mole on our uncle, one of our dad’s three siblings, who had all shown up. The fascinating thing is that Luke is an accountant with no medical background whatsoever, but that didn’t stop everyone in our family from making appointments. I would hear things in person or over the phone, such as, “That’s probably gout, Auntie Rose,” “That sounds like you have gas, Unc,” or best yet, “It is not supposed to look like that. Definitely go to the doctor.” He was also the family tax consultant, interpreter, encyclopedia, and so many other things, but he never complained; this was the giving part of love.

 After my brother finished the “appointment,” we stayed together. It was better with him by my side; it felt like a double tennis team instead of a solo one. We stayed for quite a while and heard more about who our mother was before us; learning so much made me feel so close to her.

 My favorite tale was about a time my mother had gotten way too drunk, way too early, and my father, her boyfriend at the time, put her to bed. He was sure she was fully passed out, so when the doorbell rang, he answered it to our uncle, the one with the concerning mole, saying that he needed my dad to tell him if a clunking sound in his car was anything to worry about… Some things never change. My dad first checked in on my mom, who was snoring loudly, then went to the garage.

 Then, our uncle went to use the bathroom; however, when my uncle was urinating, my mother awoke in a very drunk stupor and had no idea my uncle was there. I should mention that he used to look like my father. She saw the light on in the other bathroom; assuming he didn’t use the one in the bedroom so he wouldn’t disturb her, she jumped on his back, completely nude. She was completely wrapped around him, legs, arms, everything, her bare breasts pressed into his back. After the initial scare of someone coming from behind him, our uncle turned his head enough to see my mother, who also saw my uncle. She let go, and he turned around, and they were face to face for a moment until she projectile vomited all over him. He said the smell was worse than anything he had ever smelled, so many different alcohols and food mixed into a chunky maroon cocktail that he now wore.

 Our mother then ran to the bedroom, mortified. In her drunken state, she just lay there with the spins and wanted to disappear. My shirtless uncle retrieved his brother, so he was a bit confused; it wasn’t a shirtless occasion. Our uncle told him, “Sir… Good, sir… Your girlfriend just jumped on me naked and, not to be outdone, hurled chunks all over me. You can keep the shirt. I don’t think God himself could get that stain out, and if I wore it in public, everyone would assume I stabbed someone to death.”

 My uncle said our father’s expression was one he had never seen before. Seeing this, my uncle said, “Don’t be embarrassed. Anyone who has ever drunk alcohol has at least one of these stories. But I am not kidding about the shirt; it is in the garbage; you may want to take that garbage out.”

 He then went to get in his car, and my father, recovering from the breaking news, said, “Dude! I don’t think you should drive that. I don’t know how you *could* drive it; it’s definitely not safe.”

 Our uncle smiled and said, “You know what? I was thinking I need to work out more; I’m starting to get out of shape. I will walk.”

 Then our uncle headed for his 4-mile walk home, and our father, knowing our mother would need him, didn’t press. Our father ensured all the doors were locked and went to my mother. Slurring her speech and nearly in tears, she apologized profusely, to which my father chuckled and said, “My little doe, it’s no problem. You are such a silly little creature. Let’s snuggle up and get a bucket for you.”

 He called her Little Doe because he thought she reminded him of Baby Doe Tabor: strong-willed and always persevering, with very large eyes reminiscent of the namesake animal. He then held her and comforted her as she continued to vomit the devil’s concoction. He loved to observe her navigate life with exceptional wit and humor.

 It was clear that our mother lived a very full and diverse life, so she was larger than life, and because of this, there was a considerable loss to many people. Hearing those anecdotes, especially about my mother and father, particularly touched me. It was beautiful what they had. They were a dynamic duo and went through life inseparable and unmovable, and it was easy to understand that their love transcended what love means to most people. It was rare. The new detachment was a hardship I couldn’t fathom then. What are your next moves if your world and the game are only about one person? I felt for my father and hoped he would be alright, if never happy again, at least functional. I hoped the discord between us would dissolve when he processed everything.

 When attendance was dwindling, we wanted to return to our father, so we said our goodbyes and headed to the car. Seeing family and hearing about my mother lifted our mood.

 When we arrived home, it was already quite late, and we were exhausted, emotionally and physically. So we took a peek at our dad, who was lying there in almost complete darkness but still alive.

 We then went to our childhood bedroom and fell asleep immediately. That night, I had the strangest dream; it was one where I was in a meadow with a lady dressed in white with long hair, and we were holding hands as we walked; then, the meadow started to fill with green smoke while the dream lady held my hand tightly as if we had known each other forever. As we continued, the strange green smoke grew thicker and rose, and as it did, our lungs started to fill with the smoke, and we began coughing intensely. We then tried to move forward to escape it, but the smoke continued forever; no end was in sight. When the smoke got so bad that I could no longer see her features but still felt her hand, she whispered, “No matter the future—no matter the circumstances, I want you to know that I love you, and I would never let you go. This is me not letting you go while letting you go.”

 The dream was so strange that I wondered if it could be an angel giving me a message from my mother, but that’s not what it felt like. The words that came out of her mouth were not my mother’s. And even though I had never met her, I felt the love that she was describing to me for her. I have never felt that strong an emotion in a dream; it was even more potent than the fear that monsters chasing you gives. Letting my night angel go felt like a real loss, unlike waking up, realizing you no longer can fly, which was sad, but no actual loss.

 I then went downstairs to Luke, who had been up for hours, and a pot of coffee was already finished; this was one of our many opposite extremes. If someone were to mix us, then we’d be the perfect person and dominate the world.

 Once he was in view, he gave me a look that suggested that I fancied myself a diva who waltzes down at noon and requests fresh pastries. I wondered what he had been doing since 4 am while all the sane people slept.

 I sat down and said, “Bro, I had the strangest dream.”

 Then, I described the mystery woman and my feelings for her. His jaw dropped, and he said, “Brother… You just described the plot of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ almost exactly. Did you know her once upon a dream?” He chuckled deeply, revealing his youth, and said, “I dreamed an opossum was the CEO of a company I worked for, and she was very hard to please!”

 We had a lovely morning; being at home brought out our boyhood. We hadn’t been in college long, but there was something about being around our mother’s things that felt so different from the few momentous we kept in our dorm rooms. Things aren’t people, but they also are, as they personify the person they belong to. Those “Precious Moments” figures described my mother’s wholesomeness and served as a constant reminder of all life’s events and gifts. The amount of purple spoke to the fact that when my mother loved something, she overdid it. My brother used to tell me that it felt like we were “James and the Giant Peach,” except we were in a grape. That was not an exaggeration, as she had these curtains and slats on the windows, which, when closed, didn’t block out light but filtered it through purple, making it easy to think you were living inside of a grape. There was just so much of her everywhere, and it was comforting to us, but I figured it would be the opposite for our father. Her strong personality, evident in her things, would not remind him of the happy times they had together, but instead, it would make him remember what he had lost and how nothing in this world could ever make that any better.

 My reverie was broken when my brother asked me if I wanted orange juice, and we headed to the table outside.

 Once outside, he said what I had already been thinking: “What do we do now? We can’t stay here forever.”

 We decided to let our father know that we were here for him and have faith that he would sort it out. And after a decent amount of time, he did, at least in a way. I think after many dark days, he came to the realization that he would see her again and she would want him to be in their sons’ lives, so instead of trying to dig up her body, he decided to stay frozen in her memory and surrounded by her. He kept the house just as she left it and never dated again.

**Part Two: Somebody to Love**

When my father had his shit together enough, he invited us over, and we all had dinner. I picked Luke up, and we talked on the way. We both felt slightly nervous about it, as it’s always hard to come back together after hurt feelings and complex emotions.

 My father had cooked us a baked lasagna, and we all sat down to eat. Before we dug in, he said, “Guys…” Then his throat caught, and you could tell that he was feeling extreme sadness and embarrassment, and the words were too painful to get out. That’s when my brother, seeing some tears fall from my father’s eyes, said, “Enough said,” and he meant it; we were family and all human, so we were ready to move on, and that’s what we did.

 After a bit of silence, Luke broke the ice by telling stories to lighten the mood; he said, “Dad, you’ve got to stop giving Unc those long-distance calling cards; he calls me at all hours about everything. Just this morning, I looked up which of the retailers in his area had the better deal on lightbulbs because he doesn’t like using the internet, as he believes ‘they’ are always watching. And the night before that, he called to ask me if *I* think 2Pac was really alive on an Island, but he asked in a way like, ‘What do your sources say?’ I think he thinks I work in the government and/or am privy to secret information. I told him anything was possible, but it’s best to ask at 8 AM instead of 3 AM. He apologized and explained that he had been lying in bed, wondering, and felt he needed to get to the bottom of it, or he wouldn’t be able to sleep. I think he only thinks I sleep from 1-2 AM, so he was shocked I was not awake when he called. He then respectfully waited till 8 AM for his next call.”

 Our dad laughed; his son didn’t realize how many calls he had intercepted or taken prior. I don’t answer my phone ever; he may have called me at first but then realized that there was a low chance of me answering the phone, so he called the person who was always near a phone and always answered it, even with the caller ID, because he worried that the one time he didn’t answer would be the time something serious happened. So, Luke became a guru and an information line. This story was enough to expel whatever hurt and awkwardness lingered; love waved its magic wand, and we were “the boys” again.

 Then, our lives moved on, mostly separate, occasionally coming together. We all experienced successes and failures, and we continually tried to improve each day. Luke went on to rekindle his romance with his high school love, Lexy, whom he later married. She was an excellent match for him; they were both mature, overachievers, analytical, and extremely tidy. They also gave off the aura of a 50-year-old relationship, as they both adhered to a strict diet, had an early bedtime, and enjoyed sensible shoes. And the two of them were comical together, but not in an intentional way, which always gave me a lot of joy. No joke, they once had a heated debate about what size lead is most practical for a mechanical pencil. Once they looked it up, the answer was, “It varies,” so the only person who won that day was me, thanks to that story to remember. It remains a point of contention between them to this day. Who but God could pair people so well? It’s hard to find somebody who matches your passion for office supplies.

 At first, Lexy felt like a third wheel, but it wasn’t too long after getting to know her that she became one of us. I didn’t tolerate her coming because of Luke; I enjoyed her company.

 As their rekindled romance continued, I had casual dates and even dated a woman for a while, but nothing quite worked out. It wasn’t any one thing, but rather a combination of things. Yet, I wasn’t initially worried because I wanted to experience life without having to answer or be responsible to anybody; I was willing to sacrifice none of my freedom. However, things began to evolve for me over time. At one point, I realized my mom was my age when she had me, and that did make me sad.

 Then Luke got married and had his first child, followed immediately by his second, and I couldn’t help but compare us. I’m sure there were times when Luke envied my life because it was selfish, but even so, I don’t believe he thought my life was better than his; it was just different.

 When the allure of late nights and variety wore off, I began to see more of what my sister-in-law and brother had, and I became more envious. I started to feel excessively lonely and wanted somebody to hold every night and wake up to. I no longer thought that some restrictions on my freedom were a loss of freedom because things change in a relationship, as they should. So, realizing I wanted to have something of substance and a family of my own, I began to date more seriously; I was looking for the woman I would marry, not a fling. Still, nothing seemed to work out; I had this idea of what it would feel like to want to commit myself to this person forever, and if those feelings weren’t there, then I didn’t feel like pursuing it further, even as I became more desperate.

 This continued until I went out for a walk and saw a woman running after a cat attached to a leash that had escaped her. She ran for the cat, screaming his name, with ear-piercing loudness, “Mr. Beauford Jr, IV,” repeatedly. I thought it was pretty funny that she was screaming out his entire name and gave him such a long and strange one. The cat thought the chase made things more fun, so he picked up the pace and ran around her a few times while appearing to be smiling. But what’s more interesting is that the cat seemed to stop to give her hope before he ran off again. The cat training experience was reversed; the cat teased and played with the human. I thought, “This cat appears to be a sociopath,” and he was.

 After fully absorbing the spectacle that was happening in front of me, I decided that I would join in the chase. That cat gave us a run for our money, but working together, I could finally step on his leash and pull him back with it. She seemed frazzled, but I felt this was a permanent state of being for her.

 When the cat was situated, she looked at me and said, “Oh my gosh! Thank you so much. I’m trying to leash train my cat, but I’m certain I’m getting the training, and I’m not even doing well at it.”

 Once she was still, I noticed that she was beautiful. Still, even more so than her outward loveliness, there was another type of attraction, one of familiarity, the unspoken, which was a first and felt powerful. True feelings usually come from actions, yet I had all the comfort and warmth I desired without any time or context. My life had become more lonely than I’d let myself admit, and somehow, I no longer felt alone at this moment.

 There was an intensity when she held out her hand and said, “Hi! I am Karissa.”

 I took her hand in mine, and I said, “Hi. I’m Peter, but everybody calls me ‘Little Juicebox.’”

 Without skipping a beat, she said, “Well, nice to meet you, ‘Little Juice Box.’ Thanks again,” and walked away.

 I jogged beside her and said, “I was just kidding. You don’t need to call me a ‘Little Juicebox.’”

 She took a moment and said, “Well… That’s quite silly! And just for that, that’s the only name I will call you.”

 I told her that was OK as long as she *did* call me.

 She didn’t know what to make of me, and while trying to put it together, Mr. Beauford Jr. IV, Esquire, took off again; that’s not even a joke, as that was precisely the next name she screamed out, so either she had forgotten part of the name when she first chased him, or the cat had just received a law degree.

 As she chased the cat, I ran after them, to the cat’s extreme amusement, screaming, “The artist formerly known as Mr. Beauford Jr. IV, Esquire.”

 To which she screamed, “The ghost of the artist, formerly known as Mr. Beauford Jr. IV, esquire.”

 To which I screamed, “The rendition of the ghost of the artist formerly known as Mr.Beauford Jr., IV, esquire.”

 We went on like this until I could step on the leash again. I have so much to thank that damn cat for; if the cat hadn’t given me an in to continue our friendly, disarming banter, I never would’ve seen her again, as she wasn’t interested in seeing a stranger again, but we became a little less strangers just in time. And the cat came to love me so much; he was my little buddy. The cat’s name also changed from time to time, strangely. I’m not exactly sure why she did it, but it was always interesting to see happen.

 From then on, it felt so natural. Karissa was much less like my mother than my sister-in-law, but she was like my mother in the most important way, as she seemed to walk around with magic swirling around in her head, just waiting to shoot it out in any direction.

She loved that I exhibited patience and leadership, much like a father she had lost at a young age. We could always relate to each other's deepest wounds, which was invaluable; there's something about feeling so deeply understood that's genuinely passionate. She and I were perfect for each other in many ways, and it was tough to imagine that anybody would fit even a little bit as we did. I wouldn’t describe my love as falling, but rather this intense dance between us. I was twirled, swirled, and dipped into love. I feel like falling is never really a good thing, as falling means you’ll eventually have to hit something unless you’re stuck in a wormhole, and that’s a whole other set of problems. First, she felt like me, and then she felt like part of me.

 Then, one day, I was sure she was the one I would spend my life with; by some miracle, I had re-created what my parents had.

 When she was away, I missed her and her highly scattered banter; she would start with a story that led to a completely different territory, and then she would never finish the story that began the journey. I once asked her if she wanted butter on her biscuit, and somehow, the conversation led to her thoughts on the death penalty. Given the leap’s length and confusion, I asked her how she had arrived there; she was apparently thinking of the last meal she would select; her unsolicited last meal was a fillet mignon, sweet potato, mashed potatoes, and gravy. When I reminded her that it would have to be something that the prison kitchen or canteen would have, she then changed her answer to Skittles, only Skittles. After that journey, I confirmed that she wanted butter. There was so much good, and there was nothing else I wanted on this earth other than her. She was the very thing I had manifested, once upon a dream.

 At first, I never thought that she and I would ever separate once we found each other, or that we would ever dislike each other. However, things took a turn, making me wonder how they had gone from incredible to destructive. I realized now that our broken relationship was fractured not by a significant event but by many small things over time, which made me think of how sad breakups are because you know those people once loved each other and were confident that nothing would ever cause them to end the relationship until one misstep after another is taken and that love no longer exists or has been replaced by hate.

 Once upon a time, Karissa hung all these pictures of us over our bedroom door, but now, that same door had been slammed so many times that nearly all the photos had come off and never made their way back up. We never physically hit each other, but we damaged a lot of things. We had all of these good memories that were now being turned into bad ones.

 Karissa would get so angry at me and scream, “Why don’t you understand me? You’re not invested in me and are breaking my spirit,” which was true, albeit subconsciously. The moment that I fell in love with her, I started to worry about losing her, so my life became consumed with constant fear; in response to that fear, I manipulated the situation in ways that hurt her. It was a defense mechanism, and it felt impossible to change.

 Yet, Karissa was also a participant in the deterioration of the relationship, as she had the world’s worst abandonment issues and frequently did things without thinking of the big picture. When she was hurt, she would hit you where it hurt. I would scream, “Why can’t you just not? That was so foolish. You act like a toddler sometimes.”

 And we would scream, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t fucking do this anymore.” Yet, there was a pull to each other. I’m not saying that the good outweighed the bad, but more that the type of good became an addiction. It was not an addiction to chaos or pain but an addiction to the thing that can’t be adequately explained; it was an anomaly that felt as magnetic as it ever felt destructive. That magnetic feeling gave incentive, especially at the beginning, to repair the relationship. But neither of us was willing to entirely give what the other needed, as neither of us was willing to be the vulnerable one, ever.

 My sister-in-law, Lexy, understood our relationship best. I think, at first, she worried it was a toxic relationship because that can be confused with love; still, the more she saw us during our happy times together or heard about us, the more she realized it wasn’t toxic but its own category. So, Lexy consoled me after one of our fights, saying, “Maybe it’s one of those ‘can’t live with them, can’t live without them’ situations.”

 I thought about this before, but in return, I said, “I can’t live without her, so why the hell can’t I live with her?”

 In response, Lexy gave me the best description of Karissa and my relationship that I feel accurately describes it; she said, “It’s like there is this divine, weird game or bet, where someone gave you the ability to be more in love with each other than can ever be, but a curse on you to prevent you from ever being able to enjoy that perfect and all-encompassing love.”

 This is precisely how I felt; that is likely how everyone who knew us felt, as they were aware of our constant tug-of-war. However, no one ever talked either of us out of the relationship; they knew it was complicated but worth fighting for. Even Luke, who never held his tongue and was always the one to give you hard but sound advice when you needed it, refrained. If anyone was going to have a strong objection, it was him, but he felt like all the rest of us did as he observed the magic and the specialness of what we had, and that was enough for him to support me and hope. Sadly, Luke, who was always the man with a solution, couldn’t come up with one, and it was not because of a lack of thinking or trying.

 But even in the darkest of our times, I never hated Karissa, and she never hated me. We may be experiencing extreme anger or sadness and think, “I wish it weren’t like this,” instead of “I need to get out of this.” So, leaving permanently was never an option for either of us; we had the kind of love that endured the many difficult times and the kind of love that caused them.

 Although, after a while, it got so bad that we would spend many nights apart. Before taking a break, I would scream, “You’re too hard on me! You’ve gotta trust me. You’re being unreasonable and needy.” While she would get my keys and throw them at me and say, “Nothing I fucking do is good enough. Your expectations for me are way too high. I always feel like I am measuring up short.” Then, not wanting to involve the police, I would grab the keys that were hurled at me and go to my brother’s house. I hated to do it, but I couldn't stand down. Neither of us felt we could stand down because of pride. Logically, we both knew the answer was probably happiness, but something, whether pride or fear, prevented us from getting what we wanted most.

 Then, after some longer stretches apart, Karissa decided that she would move out, as she didn’t want to inconvenience my brother because we couldn’t get along. I didn't want that, but I couldn’t ask her to stay, even though I wanted her to. I didn’t want to get hurt, so I was willing to watch her walk away, even as I felt like she was necessary to exist.

 After Karissa left, I experienced on a smaller scale what my father had when he lost my mother; it was the worst mix of every bad feeling that you can experience in this world: desperation, anger, regret, loneliness, loss, etc. And her absence was noticeable; the more she was gone, the more I realized there was so much good that never got highlighted or acknowledged. I missed the wonder she exuded and the way she looked at me, as if I were the only man in the world, and that I *was* her world. Time became painful. I wanted so badly to say the words that would bring her back, but I just could not; I’m sure the situation was the same for her. Yet, we stayed apart, neither of us willing to risk being hurt, which ensured our continued separation.

 Then, after some time, we got back together, and it started anew; it was happy at first until it wasn’t.

 So, giving Luke a break, I drank the tea my father made me while we sat there. I had not come to him until recently, so I was worried about judgment or pressure to leave her, especially after destroying his kitchen. Surprisingly, he did neither of those things, but understood a love so intense that it makes you crazy.

 After I regained my calm, I explained that it broke my heart that even the brief happy rendezvous or reunions had started to dwindle. It wasn’t that we weren’t still willing to fight for the relationship, but rather that we were both so tired from fighting, and the exhaustion took over; it wasn't quitting, but the results were the same.

 It was on this day that my father, after seeing or hearing about so many of these days before this one, told me he had a solution for me, but he could only give me minimal details. I could not imagine it was anything that either of us hadn’t already tried, but I was willing to try anything. He then went to his bedroom and returned with a small scrap of crinkled paper. I unfolded the paper and realized it was a flyer for a mystic, which I thought was the strangest thing because my father was not the type of man who would see a mystic. He has never, and I mean never, shown any interest in anything esoteric, and he was always very dismissive of it.

 My father said, “Call the number on the bottom, son. I want to clarify that I’m only giving you this information because I feel it is dire and your only option; still, you must know that whatever is offered comes with a price.”

 I took the flyer in disbelief and put it in my pocket.

 Then, we said our goodbyes; his body language betrayed his conflicted state as if he was questioning whether he had done the right thing. I couldn’t figure out what that meant or any reason that made sense, but these days, reason made less sense than nonsense.

**Part Three: Love Her Madly**

The paper sat on my dresser for quite a while while I went about my life. But after some time, I thought, “Why not?” The plumber, with sleep apnea, who believed a CPAP machine was hocus pocus, gave me a very hocus pocus piece of paper, which was intriguing in and of itself. So I called the number and made the appointment. I explained the situation, and she scheduled me for a three-hour cleanse, clarify, and create a session, which sounded as New Age as they came.

 When the day for the appointment came, I was greeted by a woman who introduced herself as “The Seer.” She explained that “names are not necessary here” and brought me into a completely dark room except for one candle burning intently. She then had me get under thick covers, which felt like a heavy cocoon.

 Once I lay down, she sat beside me and blew out the candle. I was a little scared because I hadn't expected that, and now we were both in complete darkness. She didn’t give me too much time to ponder the potential danger before saying, “I want you to think of your life; go through it from your first memories until now; focus and play your life as if it were a movie.”

 Then, the room filled with the smell of frankincense, which I remembered from the Catholic services my aunt had made us all attend for the holidays. It’s not necessarily a bad smell as much as a distinct one; it’s a smell that lingers and stays with you. Its intensity then became married with smoke, as my mind was racing, but her voice guided me along, “I can hear you are distracted; refocus your attention.”

 It felt silly, but then I thought, “It wouldn’t hurt to try,” so I focused and thought about my childhood with my family. I thought of the big things like our trip to Hawaii, but I also thought of little things like watching “My Girl” or whichever sappy movie my mom picked out, with all of us huddled close with tiny bowls of popcorn. I waded through my memories chronologically, and it didn’t take long before these memories came together unbelievably, streaming together like one connected, compacted home videotape. There were so many good times, but then sadly, the movie entered into hearing about my mother being sick, and then watching her die. Luckily, it moved past that to my time with my father, Luke, and his family, and finally to Karissa. I relived our first meeting and remembered the beautiful dance of love and all the memories and experiences when I was confident we would always be together. I didn’t want to go forward, but it was apparent that I didn’t have the remote control for this video. So, just as I had presumed, all the fights, misunderstandings, and insecurities entered, and the most precious and interesting union became one of deep hurt and collateral damage. I wanted to yell at the screen, “Just give that,” “Just let that go,” and “Work it out” to Karissa and me, but clearly, the movie happened in the past and, therefore, cannot be changed, so I had to watch my whole purpose and love morph into nearly the opposite.

 Then I saw her life after me; I was never entirely sure how she was dealing with everything, but here it showed that we were in the same boat, but not together in that boat. We mirrored each other in many ways; it was hard to watch her be so tormented and hurt.

 Then the movie went black, and “The Seer” said, “Good… Now, I want you to imagine what you want most. What is your heart’s desire?”

 Of course, I thought of Karissa, who was in an empty white room, hoping for improvement, saying she needed me without words. It was hard not to want to run to her. My vision of her then froze on pause when my guide said, “Next, I want you to envision that wish entirely. After you make the wish, I want you to think of how it would go if you got it.”

 I then wished she and I could be together and handle and maintain love. I played the movie of our future wedding, double dates, having kids, snuggling at night, having a constant companion, and more of our good times before our thoughts and insecurities launched into the first of many attacks. The world I created was ideal; I designed and directed the perfect life. And while I knew I wasn’t living it, I wished it didn’t have to end.

 But then the movie went black, and “The Seer’s” words came to me, “There are rules to nature… how things are supposed to be by design; we shouldn’t have power beyond what is natural. To live life naturally is to pay as you go, but to live life supernaturally is to receive and then owe. You can achieve what you desire by taking an alternative route, but when the time comes and a price is required, you must be willing to pay it. But being a big decision, you will see your dream before knowing its payment; you can then choose as you wish.”

 All of this sounded extremely crazy, but then I thought of my very practical father recommending this and how real and intense what I just experienced was. I thought I’d come this far, so why not give it a try? “The Seer” then circled me with the pungent smoke and turned on a small lamp by the bed.

 When there was a tiny amount of illumination, she handed me three little vials and a satchel and explained, “There are three potions to be taken one at a time. The first will be taken today; I will guide you through it. The next two will only be taken when you are advised to, in your dreams. You must not drink it before you are instructed to do so, and you must follow the instructions carefully. If you drink the potion before following the instructions or do not follow the accompanying instructions, things will return to their original state. Do you agree?”

 It all seemed strange to me, but we had tried everything: therapy, acupuncture, and praying, and nothing worked.

 Then, I thought Karissa, after her father died, was left with her mother, who would go from man to man, possibly trying to replicate the love she had with her late husband; as a result, Karissa was both physically and sexually abused, until her mother found God and became a religious zealot. Subsequently, Karissa ended up with deep scars and the worst fear of abandonment. Karissa’s mother was so like my father in the way that they grieved; they were selfless and unreasonable. Karissa wanted someone to save her, and no one did, so now her fear has become a huge issue. We were so alike in many ways, which perhaps could be the issue, as I also gained a phenomenal fear of abandonment after my mother died, which you would think would match us perfectly as codependent counterparts; yet, the problem wasn’t our fears but instead how we dealt with them. I dealt with my fear by trying to control her in a way that I knew wore her down, hurt her, and brought down her self-esteem, and she dealt with her fear through extreme neediness and wanting to suffocate me. I refused to make compromises, and so did she.

 Then, Karissa’s words entered my head, “Do you even love me?” My desperate voice screamed, “How can you say that? I love you more than anything. I would give up anything for you.” The words were true, but there was a disconnect between my words and my actions.

 “Well?” “The Seer’s” voice vibrated.

 I said, “Yes, I accept”.

 “The Seer” immediately said, “Good. The price is $10,000.”

 My voice betrayed my disbelief when I said, “What?”

 When I entered this new age haven with alternate methods for healing, I never thought the price would be what I paid for my car. Seeing my hesitation, she lulled, “Don’t worry. We don’t charge until you get what you want and are satisfied and willing to pay. But remember that there is also a different final payment due eventually, but you will get to choose then to pay it or not.”

 If it weren’t for my father, who provided me with the information, I would have passed, believing this to be a scam. I also figured “$10,000 for the thing I want the most but cannot achieve was absolutely worth it.” So, after some thought, I said, “Sure. Yeah. Let’s try it.”

 The voice, now farther away, said, “Excellent! Take one vial and drink it.”

 I took the vial with a tiny cork lid and drank it; it wasn’t much, but the taste was like perfume mixed with pine needles and maple syrup. It was so intense that my face became flushed, and I felt like I could get sick. The voice said, “Remain lying for a moment. The taste and feeling will pass, trust me. Now, I want you to envision your wish again.” Karissa immediately came to mind; she was dressed in white, smiling, and holding out her hand, saying, “I love you, baby.”

 I replied, “I love you more than anything, Karissa,” and took her hand.

 And the love under all our discord and fears pushed those bad feelings out, and only that magic kept us holding on. The feeling took hold of me, and then she released my hand and was gone.

 After Karissa vanished, “The Seer” said, “Very good.”

 Then, “The Seer” flipped on a very dim light with enough light to see a small path to the door.

 When I got to the front, I handed over my credit card, and “The Seer” ran it for the information without charging it or asking for a signature, and then grinned and said, “If you need anything, you have my number. I hope all your dreams come true”.

 I replied, “Me, too,” with absolutely no faith.

 After arriving home, I started preparing for the next day. Gone were the carefree days with minimal obligations, as now I had a quite demanding career. It was my routine, and not much ever differed.

 When my chores and preparations were done, the phone rang; it was Karissa, and she said, “Baby! Mr. President Grant Todd, also known as ‘The Squirrel,’ is shitting blood! I don’t know what to do!”

 This was not a different cat, just his new name; that cat didn’t listen to her anyhow, and I was sure he believed he was her owner. I quickly replied, “Oh, my God. I am so sorry. Let’s take him to the animal ER. I’ll come get you.”

 She said, “OK,” in the tone she gave when she reverted to the little girl, looking for someone to hold her hand.

 When I arrived at the tiny place she rented, she had “The Mr. of Many Names” in one of those front chest baby carriers; the cat was strapped onto her and facing me with his limbs poking through the holes. She soothed the angry cat as he smacked at her through limited mobility. This was a newer purchase and a hilarious one; it was quite a sight to see this expressive cat looking pissed to be in a chest carrier for infants.

 When we finally got there, we filled out the paperwork and waited. It was not a waiting area that I would want to stay in for long; everyone waiting had red eyes or vacant stares. Animals become such a part of the family as they provide unconditional love and comfort. Still, unfortunately, they don’t live as long, so we have to say goodbye much more quickly than we want or are ever prepared for. Karissa, not wanting the perceptive cat to see the suffering, put on a bonnet meant for a baby and pulled it down to shield his eyes, with the cat strapped in and unable to knock it off.

 When the vet tech came to get us, she looked surprised to see the cat in a bucket hat-style bonnet, strapped in like a newborn, looking homicidal. Who knows what the tech was thinking? But she said, “Oh! Don’t you look cute?” to which he hissed.

 As Karissa bounded away with her newborn, 8-year-old cat, tears were falling quickly from Karissa's eyes. It was hard not to imagine her as a mother; she was frequently frazzled and not exactly the most mature, but she was so caring, loving, and fun.

 When Karissa returned while the cat was examined, her mascara dripped from her lovely eyes down her cheeks. With the cat not attached to her, I noticed that her shirt was inside out and backward, with the tag exposed just above her ample bosom; even disheveled, she was so sexy. She put her head on my shoulder and said, “I don’t know what I would do without that little guy; he keeps me company and has such a big personality. Plus, he brought us together.”

 In response, I put my hand on hers, and none of the reservations that consumed our recent interactions were there.

 Then she flipped her hand, and we held hands, and the magic was overwhelming. We stayed that way until the tech came to retrieve us, and during that time, it was like no time had passed.

 When Karissa’s name was called, she asked me to come with her, which she hadn’t done initially. My love for her had warmed her distrust and coldness towards me.

 When we entered the exam room, the doctor said, “Have you ever owned a tiny rosary?”

 Karissa, not catching on, thought this was the craziest question, “Yes, my grandpa gave one to me. How did you know?”

 The doctor smiled. I liked his flow and demeanor; he had a very laid-back, hippy vibe, and I imagined that when he left the office, he would head home to his menagerie of animals and listen to “The Grateful Dead.” He continued, “Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this little guy ingested them. I guess it’s sort of like anal beads in reverse.”

 I would have never expected a doctor to exclaim that, and for a moment, Karissa’s brain tried to process everything. After the surprise wore off, she started laughing. Seeing it was OK to laugh, I started laughing too. The cat, however, was not laughing but eyeing anything sharp that he could find. The doctor explained that the cat would need surgery, and it wouldn’t be cheap, but he would live, and we had to make the best of the situation.

 After the experience, I’m not saying the cat was more well-behaved, but he never ate something that was never meant to be edible again, so that’s a win. I came and checked on them every single day after work, and the more often I visited, the closer we became. I don’t know if it was the fact that we were focusing our energy on our naughty little cat’s recovery, or maybe enough time had passed to cool off intense feelings, but things were going great.

 Then, a week into my after-work visits, she asked me to stay for dinner and a movie. We watched a twisting, psychological film, which she loves, and ate spaghetti.

 When we had finished our meal, I was surprised when she hopped onto my lap, facing me, and started kissing me. It was with deep feeling and passion. I loved the way it felt after so much struggle. We made out for a while with our hearts open, not allowing our minds to interfere.

 After we finished, we lay there holding hands. She said, “I miss you so much… I miss living with you. I think about us trying to live together again, but then I feel like we’ve done it so many times, and nothing has worked. It just became so volatile.”

 Everything she was saying was exactly how I felt. I didn’t know exactly what to say, but the words seemed to come to me easily: “I know things have been hard, but you always have a place with me. I want you to stay on the inside instead of the periphery.”

 The sentiments were nothing new to either of us, as we had more fights and make-ups than likely anybody in the history of relationships. It was all the right words and all the right feelings until everything went wrong. But something about this time felt different, and I can say that doing this as often as we had.

 She rolled over, put her hands on both cheeks, kissed me, and said, “I would love that.” Afterward, I went to leave, but she grabbed me from behind as I was doing so and said, “Stay.”

 I hadn’t stayed the night with Karissa in a very long time; she loved her space, and I never could be inconvenienced, so it just worked that we lived separately. My first thought was of the selfish man I had become, as I thought, “This will mean I have to get up earlier… I don’t have any of my stuff here… I am more comfortable in my place around my things.” Still, I noticed that my attitude had been uncompromising and unwilling to accommodate her if it was to my discomfort, and this was a self-awareness I hadn’t had until now. I thought about all the times she asked for something, and I had declined due to my preferences or comfort. When there are arguments and fighting, it’s easy to see the other person as the problem or the enemy, but that's rarely the case. Yet, you start to develop a mentality that they’re just wrong, and I’m right. While I recognize that her extreme abandonment issues were a huge problem, I also could see how I knew this about her and never took enough steps to support her, or at least figure out a compromise. Instead, my attitude, much like hers, was that the other person would change if they loved me enough, or why should I always sacrifice if the other person didn’t? However, the problem with sacrificing is that if one doesn’t, the other doesn’t. Not changing that only means there will never be sacrifices or compromises, and how can you have a healthy relationship without either of those things?

 So, with new mental clarity, I said, “Of course. I’ll stay.”

 She told me she had kept my toothbrush and several of my toiletries in the bathroom, which was interesting, considering she had packed up her belongings when she moved out. Hence, she intentionally took and kept these items. I wasn’t sure if she kept them because she enjoyed being around them or if she always hoped I would stay one day, but either way… she did. She got up and took me to the bathroom, where my toothbrush was out, and my shower and hygiene items were in a nice open cedar box. My belongings were there, just waiting for me to be.

 That night, we slept intertwined with each other, our hearts filled with love, just as we had at the beginning of our relationship.

 From then on, the relationship continued to improve and strengthen; the more time we spent together, the more we realized how well-suited we were for each other, and we continued to focus on the positives. We also started to let go of the hurt and anger we had previously held onto so closely, expecting that wouldn’t completely taint the relationship; gone were the days of constant fighting. When I wasn’t so critical of her and was more present in her life, she felt more secure, which, in turn, made her not feel the need to suffocate me. Both of us frequently thought, “Wow… This is a lot simpler than I expected. You must give a little of what the other person needs or wants to get the same.”

 Even seeing my one true wish come true, I never seriously considered that this could be anything supernatural and had almost entirely forgotten about the strange appointment. I figured this was just an unfortunate accident involving the cat, bringing two people together who had always loved each other and now found a way to make it work. And with the relationship’s success came other successes in all the different areas of our lives; I was friendlier at work, which made me not only a genius but also a personable one, and with the help of my direction and patience, Karissa finally finished her business plan and got approval for a small business loan to design and make cat costumes, which was her dream but only a hobby prior. Although the cat, who became the only model, seemed less than thrilled about things, he still got paid in catnip, so it might have been slightly more than a wash in the end.

 Then, six months into our glorious relationship, a deep voice visited me in my dream, accompanied by the overpowering smell of frankincense and the appearance of thick green smoke; it said, “I see you have received your wish, my dear. I imagine it has been everything you had wanted and more. Now comes the time to decide on the first price you must pay; this price will be monetary. If you choose not to pay the price, everything will revert to how it was before, just with more pain, knowing what it could’ve been. If you decide to pay the price, I will visit you later in another dream with instructions, because there must be another price that needs to be paid to make your dream a *permanent* reality. This is not a dream, and when you wake, you will feel certain of that.”

 I awoke the next day with my lovely Karissa beside me, and when her eyes finally opened, she looked at me and said, “Baby, you smell like old people and church. I don’t want to mandate the cologne you wear, but this makes me nauseous. It’s like… Terrible… I can’t take it; get in the shower. Maybe change back to that Dolce and Gabbana you wore previously.”

 It might have been that the smell was coming from myself that I didn’t initially notice, but when I pulled my T-shirt close to my nose and inhaled, there was the unmistakable stench of frankincense. So I got in the shower, and while I rinsed myself clean, my mind went back and forth between whether this was a dream or real. I found it eerie to have a dream that I was told would happen, but then I considered that my mind might have created it, either subconsciously or consciously, at times. What if this was just a dream, and I paid $10,000? That may be part of the scam; suggestion is a powerful tool, and “The Seer” could understand the power of the placebo effect; if you want something bad enough and manifest it enough, it will likely come true. Had the answers been there all along, and I was unwilling to implement them out of selfishness or fear? If it were any smaller amount of money, I would have done it immediately, just on the off chance that it was real, but the amount of money asked for needed to be considered. And just when my mind had convinced itself that this was a mere coincidence and likely scam, it returned to the smell of frankincense, which someone else smelled and couldn’t be explained away. It wasn’t a usual scent or one that could be mistaken for something else, but a strong, distinct odor. I couldn’t reason away from that final point, but I also didn’t have absolute faith, and $10,000 is asking for quite a bit of faith.

 While getting ready that morning, I noticed the cat dressed as Bob Ross, Karissa speaking to him like a baby, and taking pictures of him with a scowl on his face. She was so creative and now had many different little costumes for cats and dogs, which owners were starting to purchase rapidly. I knew that she made me feel things inside that I could never feel independent of her.

 Karissa ran towards me as I started to leave, threw her arms around me, and kissed me. She said, “I love you so much, baby. Don’t forget we have that dinner with your brother and sister-in-law.”

 Then I walked out the door and thought, “I love her enough to allow myself to be scammed if that’s what this was, even to the tune of thousands of dollars.”

 By the end of the day, I had called the number on the crinkled flyer, and “The Seer” answered on the first ring. I said, “Hi, it’s Peter.”

 The voice responded immediately. “I know. Have you decided about the money?”

 I replied that I had and would be over shortly to sign the receipt.

 Once I got to the little mystical store on the outskirts of town, “The Seer” awaited me. She asked again if I was sure I wanted to run the card, and I told her I was. She smiled and said, “Having your dreams come true is wonderful, isn’t it? However, remember that there will be one more price that won’t be monetary. Enjoy the time you have, for you may not want to pay the price in the end. Therefore, as we have discussed, life will go back to how it was before any of the potions. Drink the second potion when you get home.”

 I had not considered this second payment much because, before today, I had not believed it would work. Now, realizing that $10,000 was quite a bit of money, I worried about what the final payment would be. I asked, “Is it my soul, kidneys, or something?”

 She replied, “I cannot give you more information; this will be done in due time, which is perfect timing. You will not want to risk the process by losing your faith or overanalyzing; instead, try to imagine there will not be a payment and enjoy your dream. Go home and drink the second potion.”

 I nodded, but it was hard not to imagine what this could be or worry about it. Then I thought, “Whatever the price, it will be worth my dream coming true and then staying true,” which is the critical part of wishing people forget.

 As I neared Karissa’s place, I thought, “You need to love her like you trust her, especially with your heart; love her like no price is too high. No games. No tests. Just love.” Maybe that was the way love was supposed to be all along.

 When I entered the door, I saw that her living room was full of animals; there was a husky dressed as “Snow White” and seven cats dressed as the dwarfs, with our cat appropriately playing the role of Grumpy. There was catnip everywhere. She greeted me, “Hey, baby!” Then, she went back to clicking-clacking away at her models.

 I asked her, “You didn’t steal these animals, right?”

 She said, “Ha! Sounds about right. I didn’t steal them but partnered with the animal shelter; they give me models for free, and I add the link to adopt the animals on my website.”

 She had many good ideas, but had never achieved career success like this before, which made her truly shine. She was also starting to make money, spending it unwisely at first, but then she began saving some of it. After kissing her on the cheek, I started dinner on my cloud.

 After the shelter retrieved their animals, our “Mr. Beauford: The Great” attempted his greatest trick yet, but he was nowhere to be found. She panicked, but I calmed her down and said, “Before we pull the alarm, lose our minds, and search outside, we should make 100% sure he isn’t in the house. You check inside, and I will try to stop the caravan before they head out.”

 The shelter volunteer checked all cat carriers; no extra or different cats were found among them. But, knowing that cat well, I asked her to check the husky’s carrier. She looked at me like I was crazy; this large dog barely fit in the carrier himself and was, of course, a dog. Still, she looked through the metal grid in front and the holes at the sides and said, “I’m sorry your cat must have gotten out. Maybe next time we should put them all in a back room and take them one at a time. I’m so sorry. Cats come back when they’re ready.”

 I stopped her again and asked, “Would you mind pulling Sky out? To humor me?”

 As she pulled the husky out, Karissa started down the stairs just in time to see that Mr. Beauford had made a nest under that husky; he had snuck into the back of the husky’s carrier before they put Sky into his cage, which was ballsy, but I guess he felt like, “Let the chips fall where they may.” The animal shelter employee looked shocked that a cat would let a husky pretty much sit on him, but Karissa’s look was one I’d never forget; it was the look of someone who had just been saved from serious peril.

 Then Karissa ran over and flung her arms around me while I firmly held Houdini, and she said, “I love you so much. I would’ve never thought to look there.”

 Humbly, I said, “They would have figured it out eventually.”

 Karissa said, “But what if he got out somehow before they found him?”

 I comforted her and said, “Baby, that cat would find his way back here; he may act displeased all the time, but you wait on him, and he literally eats off of a silver platter you bought him. I’ve seen that cat when he doesn’t see you looking, and I swear to God, he looks like he has much love for you, even if he can’t let you know it. And he doesn’t leave because he hates it here, but because he’s just curious about what’s out there.” This made sense to her, so she led me up the stairs.

 When we got inside, the tiny devil down promptly hissed at her, let out a fart so loud it could’ve been humans, and walked away, indignant. He would come around later and pretend he wasn’t interested but secretly enjoy spending time with her.

 When the great escape’s excitement died down, she asked me to sit down and said, “Baby, I think we should move in together again. I love you staying here, but I miss this complete union with minimal separation between us; different living places feel very separate.”

 I smiled and replied, “Pumpkin, I don’t want space between us; please move in. I was ready for you to come home immediately after you left.”

 **Part Four: Love of My Life**

So it was decided that we would move in together, and I got my family back, the sociopathic cat included. The move was enjoyable because I packed up a lot of her possessions while she was occupied with other things, and as a result, I got to know her a bit better. I looked through all her photo albums and saw much of her life I hadn’t seen before. I also saw many of her mementos, such as her 4-H awards, and realized her love for animals had started very young. The more I packed her up, the more I realized I didn’t know as much about her as I thought.

 Then, as I packed up a vast collection of cosmetics under the bathroom sink, something took my breath away: she had the perfume “Lavender Haze,” the fragrance my mother wore, and it was nearly full. I couldn’t believe it as I sat down, and I started to cry. I opened the bottle, sprayed some onto my wrist, and inhaled it; it was a visceral experience. The scent transported me back to the most important person in my life; it was surreal, so I felt confident that this was my mother’s message from the grave: I had selected the right woman to spend my life with, and that life would improve. Even if there was nothing esoteric about it, it gave me something I needed: my mother. I stayed on that bathroom floor, smelling my wrist and indulging myself in memories until Karissa came home.

 When she walked in the bathroom door, she noticed I had been crying and was understandably concerned; I think she thought I was having second thoughts. She said, “Baby, what’s going on? Is it the move? Are you stressed because of the move?”

 I answered immediately, “You never have to worry about that baby. It’s this perfume. This is the scent that my mother wore throughout my entire life, and it is impossible to find. Where did you get this from?”

 She came to me, sat on the floor, and said, “My dear, I got that at a second-hand store. I got it for the bottle; I thought it looked like a tiny pirate’s bottle. I was going to use it in a photo shoot. If this reminds you of your mother, take it and use it as you wish.”

 It was then that I realized that she didn’t know as much about me, either, for the same reasons that prevented me from learning as much about her. Now that we were out of the storm and in calm waters, we could. So I gratefully accepted her gift of the bottle of perfume.

 Then, as we sat on the floor, we had a long and deep conversation until early in the morning. The more we learned about each other, the more we understood each other, which helped us realize that our actions in the relationship were a result of that pain and had nothing to do with our absolute and genuine love for each other. It made us both feel lighter and happier. With each other’s love, we started to fill the holes that both of us had.

 After a few days, we had her completely moved back into our house, and even though she had two months left on that lease, we never returned to that apartment. Being together in our home was indeed an exceptional experience. This is where we started and where we never thought we would get back to, and now we are here.

 As time passed, our friends and family, who were initially cautious because we had previous periods of good times that would always end in screaming, arguments, and breaks, now

They were also extremely happy for us.

 When I went out to lunch with Luke, he said he was happy to see that we beat the odds and made it work. I told Luke, “I’m going to propose.”

 He looked shocked because he had never seen me as the marriage type or shown much interest in it. Perhaps that’s because Karissa is the only person I’ve ever wanted to marry, but that never seemed possible, considering we could never stay together. He looked at me and said, “I’m so happy for you. I’ve never seen you this happy. You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

 Then, he grabbed a handful of my fries, and I said, “So you’ll be my best man then?”

 He chuckled and said, “I don’t know about that; Unc might fight me for that position. Also, you'd better purchase his suit.” He was correct; my uncle only had my father’s hand-me-down suits, which were an inch or two too short in both the arms and the legs, but he was too thrifty to purchase anything else.

 Then, Luke helped me devise a plan: Lexy would take Karissa shopping for a replacement for her wedding ring, which she would claim was lost but was actually hidden; later, I would collect information covertly.

 Soon after, Lexy took Karissa to the jewelry store in the mall and would say things like, “Karissa, what do you think of this one over here? Do you like a more round style? Do you think it would look good on me?” But Karissa kept batting these things back, saying, “Well, it’ll be on your finger every day, so what I want shouldn’t matter. What do you like?” But she caught on when that comment was met with more questions and decided to play along, saying, “You know what, Lexy? Let me show you what I would choose and see if you like it. How does that sound?” This, of course, sounded great because it made her job that much easier, and Lexy was never great at lying or hiding things; she shared that quality with Luke.

 Then Karissa described her dream ring, using examples from what they had, while Lexy took photos because she said she wanted to run them by Luke before making a purchase.

 After they finished, they went to dinner, where Lexy shared sentiments similar to those that Luke had shared with me about how happy they were that we were doing so well. Lexy always thought Karissa was so much fun and enjoyed their friendship, but she never pursued it much because of our fighting; she was Luke’s wife and would always take my side, so she knew it would inevitably put her in an awkward position. But now we had crossed that bridge over troubled waters and made it to the other side, so she felt comfortable opening up and pursuing the friendship she had always wanted.

 Soon after, Lexy turned in the notes and photographs to the jeweler who created Karissa’s dream wedding rings.

 Then, Zales called to say the ring was ready, and Lexy and I went to pick it up.

 When the jeweler handed me the ring, I was surprised to see her choice; the ring was an infinity sign made of diamonds with a lavender gem in the center. Karissa gave a nod to my mother, whose life was purple. I should’ve known that clever girl would figure it out, and the fact that she included my mother meant the world to me.

 Then, life became so wonderful that the looming price hardly ever entered my thoughts.

 Later, Luke and I got our mother’s garden ready, which was perfect, and I proposed. She squealed in excitement and said, “Of course!”

 After, her mother came out from inside the house with my family, and we all celebrated. It was so perfect and special, and what made it even sweeter was knowing the continuous challenges it took to get to this point.

 From there, we started planning a wedding. During this process, I saw Karissa’s creativity shine and her friendship with Lexy blossom. Karissa even selected Lexy to be her maid of honor. The four of us spent a lot of time together, as the duo became obsessed with wedding planning.

**Part Five: Will You Love Me Tomorrow?**

That year was magical; there were many great times and lots of laughter. But just as I was about to achieve the security and cementation of our most beautiful love, I was visited in a dream with the smell of frankincense and the appearance of green smoke surrounding me; I could see nothing but that smoke.

 After a bit of time, a voice accompanied that smoke, saying, “I see that you are enjoying living out your dream and that it has brought you joy and completion, but as you were advised in the beginning, there would be a final price to pay before your dream becomes a permanent reality.”

 These words made my heart sink, and I felt incredibly ill. The voice came from all directions and said, “The price you must pay is not a price that *you* would pay, but would come from Karissa. The price of your dream becoming a reality is sacrificing that dream eventually. To have what you want, you must give it later on. If you accept this deal, your dream will become a permanent reality. Once you make the deal, there will be no other price,” then there was a pause, and I imagined the certainty of knowing this would never end; we were both incredibly happy.

 Then, I imagined life without her; it was impossible to let her go when our relationship was turbulent, so I couldn't imagine it now that we had built something transcending and planned a solid future. My heart-wrenching thoughts ended when the voice became louder, saying, “If you want this dream to become permanent, then you will give Karissa’s life; if you agree, she will fall ill and die in twenty years, which is enough time to enjoy what you want and build so much beauty and memories. However, I must ensure that you understand the terms of this deal with your eyes wide open, allowing you to accept them. Let me start by saying there is no way to prevent payment; your money, medicine, and love will not be able to save her. The magic cannot be outsmarted or changed. There will never be a way to extend her life or amend the deal. So you must enter it, knowing that this is certain.”

 Then there was a brief pause, and the voice continued, “I also want to make sure that you know that the magic is making this happen and holding it together, so if you remove the magic, the dream will stop. If you do not drink the potion within three days, things will return to how they were before. It is your choice. We make deals; we don’t force them. You have three days; choose wisely.”

 Then, my dreaming continued, and eventually, I woke up with Karissa beside me, her beautiful lips shaped in a sexy pout and her hair flowing everywhere; she looked like a sleeping angel. The feelings that I had for her and the feelings that she had for me were never made by magic but authentic; this potion never forced us to love one another because we always had that, but instead, it prevented all of the hurt and fears from manifesting into actions that damaged the relationship and ourselves.

 Then Karissa opened her eyes and said, “Baby, you stink. I thought you were going to stop wearing that. I love you, but the smell makes me sick. I need to get out of here.”

 She then headed to the shower while I explored the darkest parts of my mind until I heard her call for me, “Peter! Come here!”

 When I got there, I saw one of the funniest things: Mr. B, extraordinaire, somehow escaped out of the shower with her and got into the wedding glitter, so the little guy was almost entirely covered, except for his little nose and eyes; he looked like an angry little disco ball. We started laughing, and he kept meowing angrily as if we had done this to him. So I showered him again, and the distraction was a welcome one.

 Once he was dried, she hopped into the shower with me. I grabbed her and pulled her in so tight that I started to cry. She seemed surprised and said, “Baby, don’t worry; I have much more glitter; that’s only a small part of my arsenal.”

 It was comical that she thought I was devastated over glitter, which made me cry harder. But I couldn’t speak because I was crying in a way that made that impossible. So, instead, she squeezed me so hard that the air expelled from my lungs, and we were breathless in each other’s arms. Yet, her embrace worsened things because I knew I could lose what was most important to me while looking at it. I didn’t want to give up this dream and didn’t see how I could.

 When I could speak, I said, “I just love you so much. I never want to lose you; that thought hurts me.”

 She looked at me and said, “Baby, I love you, too! You don’t need to worry about losing me; I’m not going anywhere.”

 As we got ready for our day, my pain just increased, but I had to keep it together because I couldn’t explain it to her.

 On the drive to work, “Love Me Stupid” by the Sneaker Pimps (David Westland remix) immediately started playing from the CD that Karissa left in there, which made me start crying again, and I felt like I did when I found out my mother was dying. I had to pull my car over to cry as it became too dangerous to drive.

 While on the side of the road, I realized what my father had done: my father took that deal and our mother away from us. I thought, “That mother fucker,” and called in to work and furiously headed to my childhood home.

 When I arrived, I knocked loudly in anger, and my father answered the door, surprised to see me. I immediately pushed him and started to cry, “You took Mom from us. You sold her for your own happiness. I can’t believe you.”

 My father sighed; he knew there was a great chance that I would put it all together. He didn’t fight but absorbed my anger and said, “Son, I am so sorry. Your mother and I loved each other, but we had a similar plight as you and Karissa; your mother had a lot of scars like Karissa, and you have my personality, which can be unmoving and uncompromising. We tried everything, and nothing worked. We had the type of love that makes you do foolish things.”

 I laughed at his explanation, and then my father continued, “Please hear me out. There was a man at work whom I considered a friend, whose relationship woes were similar to mine. I remember getting beers with him or meeting up so he could vent, be angry, and often cry. I observed frequent jealousy issues and disagreements during the few times we double-dated, which I secretly enjoyed because it made my relationship appear more normal. I would’ve asked him why he didn’t just leave, except I knew from experience. They stuck it out, even as they tore each other apart.

 “But then, one day, uncharacteristically, he came to work with a smile and continued this attitude many days after. After a few weeks, he invited me and your mother for a double date; this date, however, was much different, as they were getting along famously. Unfortunately, our relationship issues were much more highlighted without their drama and issues to distract us from our own; now, even the worst couple we knew was getting along better than we were. Still, I thought that maybe this was just a short-term thing, but the more time passed, the more I realized it wasn’t.

 “Then your mother and I had a terrible breakup, which resulted in a long stretch apart; I was inconsolable. My friend comforted me in the usual ways, but no amount of comfort would help.

 “After some time of seeing that we were not coming back together and that I was getting more deeply depressed and, quite honestly, suicidal, he offered something more than comfort. He asked, ‘Do you see how well Zhen and I are getting along? What do you think my secret is?’

 “I had no idea what the secret was, but I was open to hearing about it and trying anything, so I thought of plausible reasons that their hurricane of a relationship could improve: counseling, communication, sex toys, more date nights, fear of losing each other, religion, and anything else I could think of, but then I thought it couldn’t be these things, as they could help a struggling relationship, but this had essentially repaired the world’s most problematic one. So I wanted to guess they had lobotomies or were now both robots, only partly joking; instead, I stayed silent.

 “So, my friend said, ‘You know we tried so much, but it felt like we were cursed; we loved each other deeply, but couldn’t make it work functionally, which took an enormous toll. Being apart was even worse than being together. But what do you do? I did not know the right answer, so we lived like you are living now, one fight to the next, wondering each time if it would be the last, and then fearing what life would be like if it were. It was in this state of misery that I decided that I would end my life.’

 I was shocked to hear this, but my friend immediately continued, ‘When I took that time off work, I made the trek to Japan for this reason. If I couldn’t live with her, I had no delusions that I ever could without her.

 ‘After arriving in Japan, I backpacked to the area I planned on becoming no more when I came across a man with a maroon Jansport backpack who glided along the trails most elegantly. The mysterious man asked what I was doing up there, even though it was evident that this forest was a collective place for lost souls, some of whom find themselves and go on, while others never do. My first inclination was that he was a volunteer or concerned person who walked these paths, which were popular among the most desperate people, to save them before it was too late. Then, I thought this must be an angel; I felt this could be my guardian angel, here to save me from myself. As we spoke, I realized neither of these was true, but it wasn’t necessarily the opposite.

 ‘That day, I was offered a deal when there were no other deals to be had, and I was close to never making deals or anything else again. This masterful, ancient being walked the paths where many ended, offering a final solution to whatever had led them to this point; it could be anything, but it was mostly about love, because that pain can push you further than anything else. The offer was simple: get what you find worth dying for and pay a price later. Seeing as I was about to end my life, any price else save for my soul would be worth it. I could only imagine a life where I got what I wanted most and, as a result, would live to see another day.

 ‘I asked what the price was, but I was told there would be two prices: one would be monetary, and the other would not. I was given three potions: the first would bring me my dream, the second would continue that dream at a price, and the third would be the last payment, finalizing the dream. I was told that I could decide after drinking the first potion if I wanted to pay the money to drink the second, and finally, I could decide if I wanted to make the last payment before drinking the final potion. I had the option to stop at any time before the dream’s finalization, which all seemed very fair as far as deals go. Still, I thought this was too far-fetched to be true, so I intended to keep walking and ignore this fellow traveler.

 ‘But as I continued walking, the apparition followed and suggested I take the three potions, drink one right now, and return to my hotel room to see how I feel. And if I didn’t feel any different, I could return tomorrow and finish what I started.

 ‘So, I thought, ‘What do I have to lose? What’s the difference in one day? Aren’t you just curious to see? If it doesn’t change in a day, I can return here.’ And so I was compelled to drink the potion and head back into the city.

 ‘Once I was back in the city, I lay on the bed; yet, nothing felt different. I was unsure what I was supposed to feel, but I felt no more hopeful or at ease.

 ‘Then, after some time lying on my hotel bed, I felt compelled to call Zhen. During that phone call, she expressed her love for me and believed that we could work anything out, and she just wanted me to come home. This sentiment was nothing new, as the two of us had reunited more times than I could count, but a powerful feeling was attached to the words that beckoned me, suggesting this could be different, so I purchased a return ticket. It’s not that I had absolute faith, as much as I figured this was too strange not to try one last time.

 ‘That night, I thought of what life would be like if I had my heart’s greatest desire, and my mind's picture was glorious. There was so much good between us that had been clouded by so much anger and misunderstandings, but if those were surgically removed, it was as beautiful as a spring meadow.

 ‘Then, I fell asleep with hope for the first time in a very long time and flew home in the morning.

 ‘When I arrived, Zhen waited for me at the airport. On the ride home, she expressed how much she missed me and thought we should give it another try. It was unbelievable to me, but I still didn’t put much stock into this being the potions. Instead, I thought this was the power of manifestation, or better, the effect of almost losing everything that makes you understand what is important.

 ‘As our relationship stayed calm, I reasoned this into the realm of what can be seen and, therefore, can be possible, as a new outlook that transferred to her, or maybe she had experienced a similar dark hour in her soul. And the reunion stayed quite beautiful for some weeks. I couldn’t believe the relationship I had never thought I could leave behind had become exactly what we both had hoped for; there were so many moments of remembering all the beautiful things that made our love so special, and forgiving all the things that had torn it apart.

 ‘But after those weeks, the dealmaking traveler visited me in a dream, reiterating that a price must be paid for every dream, showing the dreamer’s devotion. The first payment would be $5,000; then, I would drink the second potion to keep the dream alive but not cement it, as that would come later after the final payment.

 ‘Then I woke up smelling of smoke and frankincense. I knew very well that I could be taken for a ride, but I couldn’t chance losing what I had over money. So, I offered the money, as directed, in an envelope, and then I took the second potion; things only continued to improve. It was love without all the pain. It was the happiest time of my entire life.

 ‘Then, after some time, the final price was requested in a dream, and once that final price was agreed, the dream never ended for us.’

 “Son, my friend’s toxic relationship became heavenly, so watching the evidence in front of me was enough proof for me. Still, before giving me the information on how to contact the divine transient, he did give me a request and disclaimer; he said, ‘The third potion comes with the highest price, and I don’t want you to get angry at me when the time comes. I know the final price will likely be too high for you, and you may have to watch it go away, but I figured some moments of happiness would be good for you, and the decision is yours.’ I asked some questions, but he said he could not say anything, or we would risk losing our dream. I could not imagine a price that would be too high to have the thing in this world I had wanted for so long. So I took that number and made that call with much more hope and faith than my dear friend because I had seen the miracle with him.

 “And the potion didn’t disappoint; it was all the love underneath all the complications. Every moment we spent together was magical, and I took nothing for granted. There was not a single thing in this world that was wrong for me when we were right together. So, when the time came to pay the $7,000 price, I had no qualms about doing so.

 “Then, after some months, I found out that your mother was pregnant with you, and I was elated because I knew your mother wanted so badly to have children. She was beautiful, pregnant, and beaming with happiness. She couldn’t wait for you to arrive, and I couldn’t either.

 “Then, almost eight months into her pregnancy, I was visited in a dream for instructions on the final potion. I got to see my dream realized, and I proved that the dream was worth more than money could buy. Now, to finalize the dream, I would have to pay with what truly meant everything to me: your mother’s life. I wanted us to be a family, but I didn’t want to be the reason that she had to leave this earth early. It was especially hard because those days were so perfect, and it broke my heart to think about how it would end.

 “I went back and forth but decided on the third day to take the potion. I know it wasn’t right, and it eats away at me. It broke me when she got sick, and I knew I was responsible.

 “Then, when the time to pay came, I couldn’t accept it; when I made the deal, 20 years felt like forever, and that was enough time to have plenty of happiness, but the time had flown by, and now it was too late.

 “I was, of course, angry that my friend had offered this to me, knowing the choice that he had to make; I thought that he should’ve known that once I saw my dream come true, I wouldn’t be able to let go and, therefore, have to make a decision that torments me and cost your mom her life. The only solution to not making that decision was not to have known; if I hadn’t been in that position, it would never have happened. But I know that it was my decision, regardless of being put there. I was warned that to pay for the dream you received with magic is to sacrifice that dream back to it. Still, after taking the potion, I loved and appreciated every single moment with her.

 “When you and Luke were born, she fell in love with you boys in a way I can’t describe; she was so completely happy, despite her normal despair, that I felt like maybe I made the right decision. We had so many good times together as a family. So I was able to enjoy the dream by thinking, ‘Let’s not worry about tomorrow, today,’ or telling myself that she could’ve died anyhow; we all must die at some time, but at least we would have some years of happiness. “When she died, we both paid because my life hasn’t continued since; my life has been pretending to be OK for you boys and waiting to see her again. I know you will probably never forgive me for my choice and the choice you have in front of you now. I hope that you forgive me for taking your mother earlier and for putting you in this position. I would’ve never done it if I didn’t think you had run out of options. I’m sorry, son.”

 I was angry that he had put me in a position where I had to make such a difficult decision. There wasn’t any winning; if I chose not to pay with Karissa’s life, I would lose everything, and if I decided to pay that price, I would always know that I would be why Karissa left this earth earlier than she could have. Still, I would never admit it to him, but in some ways, I was so glad that I had the opportunity to see the love that we had blossom free of the confinements that we had self-imposed on each other. She and I both succeeded in ways that we had never before because, previously, all of our energy was focused on trying to repair something when that could not be repaired without magic. I knew she loved me as intensely as I loved her, so there was no question.

 So, not knowing what to say, I looked at him intensely and walked out the door. I was in the front row for this amazing thing that my parents had together, and perhaps, 20 years of bliss is worth 40 or more years of anything else. Watching them together was pure magic, and I suppose that makes sense now. Secretly, it was hard to harshly judge him for making a decision that I wasn’t even sure I wouldn’t be making.

 When I arrived home, Karissa was working and looked excited to see me; she loved me in a way that no one could in this life. Seeing her lovely face was hard because I knew I would only have two days left to decide after today, which was difficult enough to make me want to shut down, but then a greater part of me said, “Just enjoy it; if you decide not to take the deal, then at least you’ll have a few days of bliss.” So, realizing this could be it, I asked her if she wanted to go on a small, spur-of-the-moment camping trip. She seemed a bit surprised because I hadn’t mentioned taking off work, and I wasn’t a “spur of the moment” type of man anymore, but she was excited to go on a little adventure with just us two.

 So, she gathered the camping gear, and we headed to a very nice camping spot. It was perfect; we hiked while holding hands and sat by the fire, making love under the stars and having deep conversations. We frequently spoke of our future wedding and possibly starting a family. There, of course, was that shadow of the decision that made my heart ache, but I tried desperately to push that aside to allow me to make the best decision for both of us. It was hard to think that I was making a pact with the devil, seeing this absolute piece of beauty in front of me. Love can be so beautiful, but this went even beyond that; this was something that couldn’t be put into words.

 We were closer than ever when we came back, but I knew that if I didn’t drink the potion by tomorrow morning, I would lose everything. I enjoyed her, held her, and watched her.

 That night, we both cuddled up together and fell asleep. While dreaming, the smoke and the voice visited me. It gently surrounded me and said, “Have you made your decision? Just remember that what you have is not what you’ve built by yourself but what has been woven with magic.”

 And then it all disappeared, and I didn’t continue dreaming as I had before; instead, I awoke. I could only stare and watch her sleep. I thought about what a wonderful life my mother had, but how it was cut short. I also thought about how wonderful our life had become and how much I didn’t want to see that end. I loved her deeply and felt a powerful attachment to her. I kept going back and forth on what to do, so I got up momentarily and sprayed some of my mother’s signature scent, inhaling it deeply. The smell wasn’t quite as potent because it was mixed with the smell of smoke and frankincense, but it was definitely there. I wondered what my mother’s life would’ve been like if my father had never made the deal; I know my father’s would’ve been aimless and depressing because that’s exactly how it was when she died. But no matter how many times I ran it, I couldn’t seem to make a decision. I kept going back from one side to the other.

 Then, when the 7 AM deadline arrived, I couldn’t fully decide, so I didn’t drink the potion. I can’t say it was a conscious decision so much as it was a constant indecision. I had run through all the pros and cons of both sides and peeled back the layers, only to be unable to make a decision. She was my everything, and if the price had been anything but her early demise, then I would’ve gladly paid it. If it had been my own life, I would gladly have given it for 20 years of happiness with her. Ultimately, I realized I loved her more than myself, my joy, or our togetherness, so my love for her prevented me from drinking the potion. True love is sacrifice. Now, I knew I would watch my dreams and plans disappear.

 Then, once the time had passed, the potion disappeared, and I was left brokenhearted. I cried in the shower and kept thinking that I wished we had more time together, and how much I loved everything about her.

 When she awoke, I made love to her and told her I loved her. Everything seemed just as it was before the magic, and I wondered if maybe we hadn’t created some magic of our own.

**Part Six: Too Much Love Will Kill You**

However, after that day, things eventually returned to their previous state and ultimately fell apart. I could no longer control my controlling ways, and I didn’t help her shine, as I had previously, out of my insecurity. She also became the super needy, overly emotional, and unconfident woman she had been. And just as the grim dealer had warned, things continued to escalate and backslide until we were right where we started, likely even worse.

 Even knowing our history without the magic, I still secretly hoped we had overcome some of these things and no longer needed the magic crutch. However, unable to fight our impulses and insecurities, we ended up constantly fighting, yelling, and crying. Our friends and family watched as what they thought was the power of love returned to the whirlwind of chaos and pain. Needless to say, Karissa and I never got the dream wedding that we had so hoped for. Angry at me for disappearing for a time, she threw that ring that meant so much out the window, and it was gone, never to be seen again.

 When things had become toxic and terrifying, I decided that if I was willing not to drink the potion for her good, I should stay away for the same reason. So I ended our relationship in a way that could never be repaired; I told her I hated her and that I had moved on, and she should, too. I knew that telling her that I had somebody else would be the final straw because the thing that would keep her away was to trigger her intense fear of abandonment. So, believing that I had abandoned her, she had no problem cutting me out.

 Then life felt as it had on many of our previous separations, but this time it was more final. My heart ached for the heart that was the only one that ever fit so perfectly with my own. It was lonely and sad. There were many times when I just wanted to call or text her and continue the cycle of making up and breaking up, because at least there would be the making-up part of it. However, I knew that she would have a better chance of happiness if I let her go.

 Neither of us moved on for some time, but after a few years, we were both able to find someone suitable.

 I kept up on Karissa’s life through Lexy, who was able to maintain a friendship with her, and I’m sure that Lexy also informed her about me. She told me that Karissa married a man named Tony, and he was a compassionate and caring man. They never had the connection we had, but he supported her in all the ways she had always wanted and gave her the security that she needed so badly. She never had to wonder where she stood with him or if he would remain a presence in her life. Eventually, I could also move on with Cary, who was much more secure than Karissa. Cary had so much going on in her life that my constant presence was unnecessary, and she didn’t require the overwhelming reassurance that I wouldn’t leave her and that I loved her. I was also happy enough, but my mind frequently wandered back to Karissa.

 Life was exactly as I had anticipated; it felt like we both got a consolation prize, but we found what we had always wanted in these people, and the things we hated were gone. Yet, I discovered that what you have will never lead to true happiness if it is not shared with the person you want to be with. Life without Karissa was living, but it was missing a part of myself.

 Then, 13 years after our parting, my father fell ill, and we were told it was only a matter of time before he would pass on. Lexy told Karissa about this because she had always loved my father, and he loved her just as much.

 So, when the end was inevitable, Karissa visited him. It was on her third visit that he died while she was by his side. I never felt strange that my ex had seen my father take his last breath because I knew she loved him. She told Lexy she smelled my mother’s perfume very strongly when he passed; she was convinced that Judy came down to walk him to heaven, which made me believe Mom forgave him and loved him as much as he did her. To Dad, death was never a punishment but a reward; it was never the end but a beginning.

**Part Seven: The Way You Love Me**

At my father’s funeral, I noticed Karissa in a black dress that flowed beautifully as she moved. She had aged; we both had, but she was still gorgeous. She smiled at me, and all the memories came back with force. My love never diminished with time, and I don’t think it had for her.

 After the service, she approached me, and we caught up. She had divorced, as had I, but more recently. Her business continued to succeed and made her wealthy. I told her my career was also successful, but I was less enthused. There was so much that had happened all those years apart, and we spoke of it all.

 Then, after the life celebration, Karissa and I continued to talk. She said that Mr. B died years ago, but she now had several cats and a large house and property. Her success no longer intimidated me, but made me proud and attracted to her. She responded so well to my encouragement and ability to reminisce about the better times.

 We then continued the conversation at her home, under the stars on her front porch swing, and it felt complete.

 After several hours, she grabbed my hand and led me inside, and then we made love passionately. It was perfect and effortless. We had returned to the love that was always there underneath the fear, games, resentment, pain, jealousy, and confusion—the type of love you never forget or ever seem to move entirely on from. I thought this felt magical.

 Then, I realized it was magic and that my father had given her the number. Dad knew I had never been happy without her and would gladly take the twenty-year deal as long as it was me and not her.

 From there, we resumed where we had left off before the magic had ended; even as we fell into a routine, that deep love never faltered. We ended up having two boys, aged apart, just like Luke and I. Those boys became my absolute world. I taught them everything that my father taught me and more. Karissa was as doting as my mother, and seeing her as a mother was beautiful.

 We tried to live as though we did not know it had an expiration date. We built a life that was lovely and loving. I enjoyed watching my boys grow up and the family we had created. We also enjoyed spending a lot of time with my brother, sister-in-law, nieces, and nephews. Luke and I had lost both of our parents, but we still had each other and our own families now. I never thought that I would have a family, much less with my soulmate. It was a beautiful twenty years. Then, as the time approached, we started focusing on each other and saying goodbye. Those times before I got sick were my favorite because we were so into each other and connected.

 When I got ill, she was an excellent nurse. The boys came home from college, and we spent time as a family.

 Then, one day, Karissa was lying in bed with me, and we were wrapped up when I smelled the fragrance of my mother. I asked Karissa if she had sprayed this, and she said she didn’t. So, I knew it was my time; my mother was here to take me home. And as I started to drift from this life to the next, looking at my beautiful wife, I didn’t regret any of it. I would do it all over in a heartbeat.

 Then the fragrance became stronger and stronger until I closed my eyes for a final time, thinking that I couldn’t wait to see them all again.