

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Good

Sienna's backyard was her masterpiece.

A tall black fence framed the space in clean lines, softened by vines that climbed from soil to top slat and spilled back down in living curtains. Along one side, a low stone-and-marble casita anchored the view—sleek, simple, the kind of thing you'd double-tap in a social feed. Underfoot, the turf was perfect on purpose: always green, always soft, because she refused to bargain with dandelions or spend weekends fighting a hose. Colour came from the places she chose it with tight flower beds set into the perimeter, blooms staging themselves like a well-rehearsed chorus.

Off-center near the backdoor of the house, a gazebo gathered everything inward. A recessed fire pit waited for long peaceful nights. A deep tan sectional wrapped the flame in a welcoming U, cushions thick enough to swallow second thoughts. Tonight she'd taken the corner seat, tea steaming on the marble-topped table, shoulders dropping in comfort. To the left, the hot tub hummed a low purr beneath its cover, water turning slow circles almost hypnotically.

Against the far fence, a neon-style LED tube spelled LOVE in pink, haloing the vines behind it. The sky was beginning to descend into near dusk, solar-powered pink bulbs would soon wink alive along the fence line—one, two, then all of them—washing the yard in a warm, flattering glow that made everything look kinder. Every corner carried intention. Every detail: the couch's exact shade of tan, the stonework seams, the way the vines framed the sign. This was her way of insisting on beauty in a world that too often forgot.

Here, she could breathe without being useful. Here, the only chart to read was the sky. Here, she didn't act or play a role for a relentless world. Here, she was just Sienna.

As she sipped her tea and let out meditative breaths, she contemplated a dip in the hot tub, but her mind was just as tired as her legs, so she just curled up with Luna and let her thoughts wander.

Her phone buzzed against the table.

Kendra @ HSC displayed across the screen.

It had been a long while since she had heard from Kendra ... years, actually. "This can't be good," she thought to herself. Sienna answered with urgency. "Hey."

"Si," Kendra's voice softened. "Do you remember Rhonda Miller? Late-in-life mom. You were with her on the unit and then in public health for a bit."

Sienna's memory clicked into place: lipstick in labor, a pink robe, a kettle that never rested, the baby called a miracle and the hemorrhoids called 'my cross to bear.' "I remember, of course. How is she?"

A pause drew the outline of the answer. "Aggressive cancer. It's moving fast. She asked for you tonight."

Sienna's eyes lifted to the pink glow, to LOVE humming over ivy. "Is she alone?"

"Staff, a couple friends. Her daughter's flying back from Japan—teaches English there—but ... days."

There was no hesitation in Sienna's mind. She was already ushering Luna to her kennel as she continued. "Text me the room number," she said as she quickened her pace. "I'm coming now."

She touched the LOVE sign as she passed, like knocking on wood, then threw Luna's treats in her kennel, grabbed her keys from the same hook she never forgot to hang them on, then headed out the door.

Health Sciences Centre made its familiar case for sterility—alcohol wipe, warm plastic, something metallic—but the oncology floor had its own hush.

Elevator doors sighed. The corridor lights hummed a note you felt in your molars. Sienna sanitized her hands because reverence always looked like routine. As she turned corner after corner, she steadied herself until she

found the room.

The blinds were half-drawn. Carnations with frilly edges tried their best to provide life and colour in a plastic vase. A magazine lay perfectly unread. In the bed, smaller than before but still herself, was Rhonda. The lipstick had dropped a register to a tender rose that matched everything and nothing.

When Rhonda saw her, her entire face lifted. "There she is," she breathed. "My once and always angel."

"You've always known how to compliment people," Sienna said, taking her hand. "It's like you've made it your mission to make people feel good"

"Takes one to know one, my dear," Rhonda smiled, her sixty-plus years of wrinkles deepening unapologetically. "Sit. Let's pretend this is my ugly living room and you've come to gossip while making sure my baby girl is okay."

Sienna pulled the chair close. The fan moved air around like it had opinions. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been negotiating with a union that finally realized it has all the leverage," Rhonda said dryly. "But my spirit still heckles. How's my hair?"

"Perfectly messy," Sienna said. "Like you just left the salon but ran into your ex-husband."

Rhonda let out a belly laugh that turned into a cough. "I get ready to take off my earrings and let my hair down

every time I see that son of a bitch,” Rhonda muttered darkly, her eyes flashing with old resentment toward the man who left her for a younger model then tried to take all her money.

They let the machines do the talking for a moment: *beep, whoosh*, the small indoor weather of breath and circulation. Sienna kept Rhonda’s hand because bodies accept comfort better than sentences.

“I’m glad you came,” Rhonda said. “I told Kendra I didn’t need anyone to fix anything. I just wanted a good person in the room.”

“I’m here,” Sienna said.

“You know you’re the reason I didn’t quit the first week I brought my girl home?” Rhonda’s eyes brightened with the memory. “Forty-three and suddenly I had a newborn and a body that didn’t feel like my own anymore. Every pamphlet said ‘advanced maternal age’ like I’d committed paperwork fraud. My friends were planning Portugal. I was learning swaddles at 3am. You arrived with a scale and a smile like it was perfectly normal to cry because the dishwasher sounded accusatory. You made tea in my kitchen—my kitchen—so I could sit down. You taught me how to take the stitches out of my shame.”

Sienna laughed as a visual invaded her thoughts. “I remember your yellow tile.”

“And the ‘good china’ I never used.” Rhonda’s mouth tilted. “Turns out ‘good china’ is a myth. Use everything you love every day. Write that in your Nurse Bible.”

“I’ll start a new gospel,” Sienna said.

“You were so young. Too good for your own good,” Rhonda said. “You reminded me of my mother’s friends in the sixties—competent like witchcraft. Three onions and a prayer became dinner for twelve. Your feet never seemed to touch the floor. That’s grace and too few women know what it is anymore.”

She coughed and turned for water; pain flickered. Sienna guided the cup and straw to her lips. *Sip. Breath. Continue.*

“Way back when wasn’t a good time for women by the rulebook. But there was a sweetness to it,” Rhonda went on. “You would have done well in those days. The men in suits would have swooned seeing a girl like you. We were expected to be soft, expected to smile, expected to make things pretty. That demand was a theft, yes, but there were afternoons that felt like mercy: a roast in the oven, the neighbour at the back door with a Bundt cake, babies asleep on bellies while we set our hair and watched handsome men on the news tell lies politely.”

“And then?” Sienna asked, the way she always did when older women started telling the real history.

“Then came blazers and big hair,” Rhonda grinned. “The eighties told us we could be anything if we dressed like our bosses and learned to talk like them in meetings. Aqua Net and copier ink and coffee gone cold. We carried keys between our fingers in parking lots and flats under our desks. By the nineties, we said more out loud. We could roll our eyes at the hand on the lower back. Not free of cost, but the ground moved.”

“You raised your daughter while the ground moved,” Sienna said.

“At forty-three,” Rhonda answered, wonder braided with pride. “After believing my body had chosen otherwise. She arrived and the world rearranged. I cried because she was mine, and I cried because the world would try to take pieces of her, and I could not be the wall forever.” She breathed, steadied. “You taught me where the wall needed to be. Not around everything. Around our time. Around sleep. Around my shower. Around how I spoke to myself at 4am.”

“You did the hard part,” Sienna said.

“Hard can be holy,” Rhonda said, “if you’re not alone.”

They let the hallway contribute a too-loud burst of laughter—the kind you only hear in hospitals and at funerals, where volume is permission.

“Tell me about now,” Rhonda said. “I get my news

from handsome liars and my culture from my daughter's texts about boys who think emojis are foreplay. Is it as cruel as it looks? Does it make room for gentle people? How are you being treated by this world that feels so upside down?"

"It makes room when we make room," Sienna said, exhaling the breath she'd been saving. "But it's sharp. The systems reward fast and loud and transactional. If you're soft, you have to grow a spine twice as strong to keep it safe."

"Mixed metaphor accepted," Rhonda smiled. "Keep going."

"Dating," Sienna said, letting the syllable drag its baggage with it. "It's not the bad dates and mind-numbing conversation that make me want to quit. It's the speed. The entitlement. Strangers feel owed access because an app made an introduction. 'No' lands like an insult, not an answer. I tell someone I'm a public health nurse, and he's arguing vaccines before the appetizer. I spend my days trying to keep mothers and babies safe; he wants to debate a meme." She shook her head, then laughed at her own life script. "And then at work I see both sides. So many young mothers, scared of the present and the future. So much addiction and too much desperation. It's all I can do to get in my vehicle and cry some days. But then there is the

patient, ordinary love that saves people. The mother who gets her baby to latch for the first time. The father who learns skin-to-skin, terrified to do it wrong but still wanting to protect this fragile new human. The grandma who shows up with soup and folds tiny onesies without being asked. Goodness is quiet. You have to be listening.”

“Goodness has always been the quiet one in the family,” Rhonda said. “She brings the casserole and slips out before dessert.”

“I wake up and choose it,” Sienna said. “Not nice. Good. Boundaries and open doors at the same time. Some days the world punishes that. Some days, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“We were raised to be ‘nice,’” Rhonda said. “Not to be good. It is very possible to be nice and do harm. I did it. I didn’t say the hard thing because I didn’t want to ruin dinner. I laughed at the joke so I wouldn’t be the one who ‘couldn’t take it.’ I said yes to carrying more than my share because I mistook it for love. Goodness tells the truth and goes to bed at a reasonable hour. Goodness tells a man, ‘I’m not going to your apartment on a first date,’ and doesn’t hate herself when his smallness calls her names.”

“Sometimes I want to quit the apps,” Sienna admitted. “Quit trying.”

“You can,” Rhonda said. “You can also not.” A tilt of

her head. "If you strip away cleverness and fear, what shape is the man in your dreams?"

Sienna looked beyond the bed to the flowers working hard under fluorescent light. "He's a man that brings those," she said pointing to the colours of nature. "Not a boy with good PR. He's emotionally intelligent and doesn't use it to flirt. He speaks my love language—quality time—without a cheat sheet. He never stops dating me. I want to be making dinner and feel him pause at the doorway and just ... look at me like he can't believe his luck. And I'll feel the same. I want someone who makes me safe in my softness, who doesn't confuse kindness for emptiness. An ordinary, astonishing life."

"You will terrify the wrong men with that," Rhonda said, pleased. "You will make the right man kneel in the produce aisle."

Sienna laughed and wiped her eyes. "Do you always talk like this?"

"I've had decades to practice, and I'm checking into heaven," Rhonda said. "Excellent wife, ex-wife with that backbone you mentioned. Secretary turned manager who discovered she was mostly a mother and then, after that, a woman again only to have a few short years before *this*. I learned to say no without apology at fifty-one. My advice: Be good like a lighthouse, not like a doormat. A lighthouse

doesn't run down the beach to rescue you. It stands and shines."

Sienna let the image furnish the room. "I wish your daughter were here."

"She has her own lighthouses," Rhonda said, and her mouth trembled for the first time. "She sends photos of alleys and shrines and bowls of noodles. She's learning to be alone without being lonely. I told her that's graduate school for the soul." She closed her eyes, opened them again. "She's flying home. We counted—forty-one hours. I said I'd try to wait. I don't know if the union will allow it."

"You don't have to promise anything," Sienna said. "She knows you're trying."

A moment passed between them. "I wanted to say thank you while my mouth can still make the shape," Rhonda said. The fierce humour returned under the grief. "You mattered. You matter. When women like me list why we made it through, your name is enshrined. Maybe not the headline but always there."

Sienna felt a humble warmth at her brow.

"You know, I always followed your journey and really enjoyed your Thrive and health videos. You should do those again. When my girl started to notice the harshness of the world I told her to be like you—not a wallflower, not a weed; a rose."

Sienna let the feeling come out through her eyes.

"Thank you. For letting me in and saying that. Somedays it feels like the world is trying to swallow me whole."

"That's because it is. But try as it might, at the end of your journey I just know you'll claim victory."

Sienna looked down at their hands, clenched to shift the moment.

"Tell me something light," Rhonda said after a beat. "A baby story. Not the blueberry diaper one. I'm done with blueberries."

"Last week a dad kept calling swaddling 'tortilla-ing,'" Sienna said, smiling. "He apologized to his daughter every wrap: 'I'm so sorry—you're a burrito now. I love you.' He took such care with the seam."

Rhonda's laugh was small and perfect. "Proof there is a God. A God who loves burritos."

They traded small glances and light smiles as Sienna continued her stories: a grandmother's Halloween costume knitting, a mother who invented jazz to excuse singing off-key, a nurse who tucked encouraging notes into store-brand diaper boxes.

Rhonda tired quickly but insisted on one more, then one more. Sienna rationed them like candies for SP.

Light disappeared from the room as the sun tucked itself in. The monitor kept its secular time. Rhonda's blinks

lengthened.

"It's a strange thing," Rhonda said, voice conversational again. "To know with certainty this is the last time I will see someone. Usually we learn it afterward. Odd. Heavy, yes. But a gift, too. I get to bless you on purpose."

Sienna's chest opened and ached. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to," Rhonda said. "Just keep doing what you do. Wake up and choose good. Let it cost you sometimes—but not your health, not your self-respect. And if the men of this city wake the fuck up—pardon my french—choose the man who looks at you like you are a miracle he intends to study forever. Choose friends who make you snort when you laugh. Use the good china."

Sienna laughed then cried, and nodded. "I promise."

"Come here," Rhonda said.

Sienna stood, careful of tubes and tape, and they leaned into each other. It wasn't a hug so much as a place they both entered. Lotion and antiseptic and a perfume knocked down to memory. Bones under heat. Breath against hair. Quiet.

When they parted, Rhonda's eyes were clear. "We'll see each other again someday ... but not some day soon."

"Let's hope they're right," Sienna said, meaning the

people who believed.

"Not soon," Rhonda repeated. "You've got work. The good kind. Stay in it. Fight the good fight." Rhonda paused.

"Sienna ..." she trailed off as a tear rolled down her cheek and was caught by her lip. "You have a good life but never close yourself off to the possibilities. I want you to embrace everything because, as an old broad, I can tell you with absolute certainty that if cancer can show up and take me within a month, letting life be dictated by fear and excuses is simply no way to live. Live."

"Okay," Sienna whispered, smiling through glistening eyes and the slight rattle in Rhonda's voice that she couldn't ignore.

Rhonda's eyelids drifted. "Sit. I'll nap. And if you're here, I'll dream."

"I'm right here," Sienna said, and sat.

She watched the delicate industry of a human body negotiating its exit. She thought of lighthouses. Of dinners. Of a doorway and a man paused in it. Of choosing goodness like a discipline, not a mood.

At some point Kendra slipped in, read the air, and slipped out. The beeping changed nothing important. The air conditioner pretended to be rain. Rhonda slept, and for hours Sienna contemplated fear and excuses.

When it was time to go, Sienna bent and kissed her temple. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For telling me where to put the wall.”

In the corridor, the hospital resumed its ordinary noises. She washed her hands and let cool water bring her back into herself. The elevator sighed her down. Outside, Winnipeg’s air had a chill ... a welcome one.

She drove home through streets of elm and light wetness from drizzle. When she arrived home shortly after 1am, she got Luna out of her kennel and stepped into the yard that once again kept its promises. The LOVE sign glowed against the vine-draped fence. The pink solar bulbs had fully woken, casting their warm blush across stone and turf and the deep tan sectional that knew her shape. The hot tub purred its quiet offering and she accepted.

She melted into her corner of the tub and watched the pink glow breathe under a starry night. Luna watched her intently, staring as if she wasn't a twenty-pound pug, but a 300 pound bodyguard.

When the first chill found her ears, she went inside, lifted a dinner plate from the cabinet with a laugh—good china tonight, because why not—and made herself a plate of apple nachos. She looked up from the plate to see a mirage of a tall man standing in the kitchen obsessively smiling at her.

In the quiet, she said it aloud so her mouth would
remember the shape of the vow:

“I will stay good.”

Outside, the pink bulbs stitched their soft constellations
along the fence, and the modern little oasis, designed with
ruthless care and big tenderness, held the line.