

ONE

Young Once

“I used to be beautiful,” she said.

It was true. Sebastien grew up surrounded by the evidence of his mother’s beauty. Ruby kept most of these faded photographs in boxes stacked on the top shelf of her closet, a hidden archive of tattered prints that spanned decades. Her favourites were trapped in cheap frames throughout their apartment. Sebastien had them etched in his memory, having seen them every day for as long as he could remember.

The young woman was striking. Every image preserved the delicate curve of her neck and the clarity of her eyes. Her hair was worn the same way in each one, a heavy veil black as a nun’s habit. She began to smile more with time, as though age softened whatever caused her younger self to be so serious.

“You’re still beautiful.” Sebastien looked into her yellowed eyes to show he meant it. She laughed, unconvinced. Ruby Goh was no longer the vital woman who stared at them from the photographs. Her body sank into the shallow canyon that had formed in her mattress. A pile of blankets concealed her bloated stomach and swollen legs. She wore her long hair in the same way, but the colour had faded over time.

“I’m fifty-two and I look like I’ve been dead for years,” she said. “There are women my age running marathons. I’m lucky if I can make it to the toilet in time.” Her body shook as her laughter became a fit of coughs.

Sebastien handed her a glass of water, shaking his head. “Don’t talk like that. The negativity doesn’t help.”

“If you think I’m still hoping for a miracle, forget it. Positive thinking won’t do a damn thing. Sometimes the only thing left to do is laugh or cry. Let me laugh.”

A year ago, Sebastien would have argued, but now he knew she was right. The chances of a liver donor materializing in time were slim. He flashed a disapproving look at his mother before moving one of his little black discs across the checkered board.

The only similarity Ruby could find between her native country of Singapore and her adopted home of Québec was their version of checkers. There were more squares and pieces on the board than the more common variation of the simple game. They used to play on a flimsy sheet of cardboard with the squares coloured in with felt pen. Dented bottle caps had been the checkers. When Sebastien started working during high school, he used his first paycheque to surprise his mother with a proper version of the game from the local hobby store. She was thankful for the gift but preferred their makeshift board.

“Bad move!” Ruby let out a gleeful shriek as she thrust one of her white discs over two of Sebastien’s, palming the captives.

He grabbed fistfuls of hair and moaned in disbelief. “I didn’t see that coming.”

She rested against the deflated pillows that lined her headboard and smiled. “I used to play this with your father, you know. He would say the exact same thing.”

He looked up, attentive, though it wasn’t her first time offering this same glimpse into her past. Ruby rarely talked about his father. This man he had never met was a phantom whose absence still haunted their lives. He lived on in the rooms of Ruby’s memory, where he held her face in his hands, kissed the back of her neck. Her mind housed a projection room that played a continuous reel of distant scenes, remembered or imagined, that always ended with his father vanishing before it started from the beginning again.

“I guess you had lots of time to kill on board that ship.”

She nodded, the smile lingering along her lips.

“Was he as terrible a player as I am?”

“I would always beat him,” she said. Her eyes were alive, less clouded than usual. “That’s why he fell in love with me. He wasn’t used to losing.”

Sebastien had collected shards of information from Ruby’s stories over the years to form a picture of his father. The man was charismatic and bold, a young sailor who loved the sea more than any woman. He had the angular features and thick tangle of hair that his ancient Greek ancestors chiseled into stone, traits that were passed on to his son.

There were inconsistencies in Ruby’s stories. Sometimes he was a gentle lover who adored her. Other times he was an ill-tempered brute who viewed her as disposable. Sebastien

was clever enough to know that both versions must have been true.

“I was young once,” she went on, her eyes clouding over again. “And I was beautiful. He promised to take me to France. I couldn’t believe it. A poor girl from Singapore sailing away to Europe with a handsome foreigner. It was like a dream.”

Sebastien had heard this story before. He used to let his mother indulge herself in the fog of these memories. The older he became, the more he realized the danger of selecting the memories that lived on and those that got buried. Ruby did this ruthlessly as though choosing which photographs to display and which to hide in boxes.

“It *was* a dream,” he said, moving one of his pieces aimlessly forward on the checkerboard.

“Excuse me?”

“It wasn’t real. He was never going to take you to France.”

“He was going to —” she said, but Sebastien couldn’t listen to any more.

“You’ve never been to France because he didn’t take you there,” he interrupted, his tone steady and factual. “He brought you here to this nowhere town instead. He got you pregnant, then he left. He ran away like a coward.”

Ruby shook her head. The two captured discs were still clutched in her hand. “That’s not what happened.”

“Then tell me. What happened? Why did he leave?” Sebastien knew he wasn’t likely to get any answers. These questions always upset her, so he had learned to fill in the blanks himself. He hoped one day Ruby would provide an explanation that would redeem his father. Until then, the young foreign sailor who abandoned his mother would remain guilty. This was Sebastien’s own private mythology.

“Things didn’t go according to plan,” she said as she wrapped a blanket around her thin frame.

“You used to make him sound like some sort of hero. I wanted to be just like him, to sail the world, wake up every day in a different port. But he was no hero, was he? He was selfish and cruel. That’s the truth.”

He paused, drawing a deep breath. “We don’t need him, anyway. We have each other.” He offered her a reassuring smile.

“I made some bad choices, but you know what? I don’t regret any of them.” She placed her hand on his warm cheek. “Those choices gave me you. I will always be proud of that. You should be, too.”

Sebastien set the checkerboard on the floor and pulled his chair closer to Ruby’s bed. Her hands were silk gloves filled with bones as he held them. “I am proud,” he lied. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “It’s late. You should get some sleep.”



The last image in the projection room of Ruby Goh’s mind was of Sebastien and his father. They were roughly the same age — two men brimming with such youth they seemed immortal — sitting side by side, laughing. The thought made her smile before sleep washed over her like the ocean’s tide. She never woke up.

TWO

Surprise

The residents of Petit Géant didn't care for the world outside the town's borders, despite the welcoming signs in English and French at either end of the main road. The hand-painted porcupines on these signs, their paws waving in the air, were meant to make visitors feel welcome. The truth was the locals had always been wary of outsiders.

No one was more of an outsider than Ruby Goh. Imagine the confusion and suspicion the unexpected arrival of the young Singaporean woman must have created thirty years earlier. And she had been pregnant, too, with no husband in sight. The local hair salon was filled with gossip from mouths puckered with distaste.

Ruby gave her newborn son a name that would be considered acceptable by the inhabitants of her new home. The name

sounded both strange and beautiful to her ears when she first heard it spoken on the radio. Even so, the young child was excluded no less than his mother. Being the outsider's son was a sin equal to being the outsider.

No matter how much effort Ruby put into helping him blend in, dressing him in sweater vests from the thrift store and trimming his hair with the kitchen scissors, people would still look at him as though he were a wild animal. This little boy with the deep green eyes and bronze skin, with hair as black as his mother's but coiled like a nest of serpents, was like no one they had ever seen before.

Back then, Ruby cleaned the homes of Petit Géant while their owners were busy living their lives. She found a sense of purpose in detergent and disinfectant, taking something neglected and making it sparkle.

The money was barely enough to cover the bills even during the busier months, but she enjoyed the work. She loved having the privilege of spending time in these houses. She would look at the portraits on the walls and admire the fine furniture. Sometimes she'd pretend she lived there, tidying up while her husband worked in a fancy office.

The only place she didn't like to clean was the Villeneuve house. Pierre Villeneuve worked as a councillor at the town hall. His young daughter was Sebastien's age. "She's sweet as a rock," he had once told his mother. But the lady of the house was the reason Ruby dreaded her weekly appointment.

Ruby would arrive with a smile every Wednesday at three o'clock in the afternoon. Overdressed and eager for company, Genevieve Villeneuve would open the door and then follow Ruby from room to room, smoking a cigarette while she supervised. "I just want to be sure you don't feel tempted to take anything," she said on more than one occasion. "I mean,

I'm not saying you're a *thief*, but I've heard stories about that sort of thing happening."

She would offer generous amounts of feedback on Ruby's performance. "I pay you good money. I don't want you getting lazy."

Her favourite topic of conversation, though, was her family. "Chloe and I are so lucky to have Pierre. He works so hard to give us such a good life. I don't know how you single mothers cope. And a wild little boy like that without a father! I just can't fathom it."

Ruby would return home every Wednesday, close her bedroom door, and cry into the red, raw skin of her hands. She knew Genevieve was a silly woman whose opinions didn't matter, but every comment felt like the lash of a whip against Ruby's self-worth. Maybe Genevieve simply spoke what everyone else in town thought.

Sebastien would return from school and sit beside his mother with his little hand in hers. It wasn't fair that women like Genevieve Villeneuve could have such power over women like his mother. "She thinks she's better than you, but she's not," he would tell her.

Ruby would nod and force a smile. "You're right," she would say, not quite believing it.

The weeks went by and every Wednesday was the same. Finally, Sebastien had had enough. One night, when he was nine, he slipped out his bedroom window and walked to the tree-lined streets of the wealthy part of town. The Villeneuve home lay under the moonlight like a sleeping giant. He reached into his backpack. His little hands wrapped around the jagged rocks inside. He didn't stop throwing until the windows were shattered.

Now, many years later, Sebastien heard the sound of broken glass as he cracked the eggs against the side of the

frying pan, an echo from the past. He tucked the memory back into a crowded corner of his mind. The eggs spilled from their shells and sizzled in the heat of the pan. Sunny side up, the way his mother liked them.

The cramped apartment with the faded wallpaper and stained ceiling was the only home Sebastien had ever known. It sat directly above the neighbourhood's convenience store in an old two-storey building covered in stucco the colour of traffic cones. The store had been a laundromat when Sebastien was younger. He would sit on the rusted metal steps of the fire escape outside his window and absorb the scent of detergent like a chemical sauna.

It was barely enough space for the two of them, especially as Sebastien got older, but they'd learned ways of simulating privacy. They had their own bedrooms, though the wall they shared couldn't have been made of much more than sawdust and cardboard. Sebastien used noise as a curtain, dialing up the volume of his music when he needed to be alone.

The moon-shaped clock on the wall counted the seconds as Sebastien slid the eggs onto a plate. He crossed the linoleum floor of the kitchen, bumping into their faux-wood dining table along the way.

"Your breakfast awaits, m' lady," he said, in his best English-butler accent.

There was no answer. He glanced at the clock. It was unusual for Ruby to sleep in so late.

"You awake in there?" he asked with two knocks against the door. "Rise and shine, lazy bum."

He held his ear against the door, but he couldn't hear a thing besides the creep of worry that had a way of altering his senses.

"I'm coming in." His fingers wrapped around the door-knob as he paused, afraid of what he'd find on the other side.

He thought about how silly he'd feel for expecting the worst if his mother was asleep in her bed. He held onto that silly feeling as he pushed open the door.

Ruby's bedroom looked exactly as it had the previous night except for the morning light that slipped through the blinds. She even lay in the same sacrificial pose, cupped by the curves of her mattress.

Sebastien set the plate on her desk and stood over the bed.

"Wake up, Mama," he said, although he knew the truth. She was as cold and still as the morning-after remains of a fire.

"Wake up." His voice was less steady the second time. The pain started out dull, but he could feel it blossoming deep within his chest. "Wake up. Wake up." His face was calm as his fingers felt for the missing pulse in Ruby's thin wrist. It occurred to him how funny it was that absence could be felt more strongly than presence.

He drew a long breath and swallowed it.

The checkerboard was on the floor beside the bed where Sebastien had placed it, the game no longer paused but abandoned.

With a loud exhale, he picked up the plate of eggs and walked briskly out of the room. He stood in the middle of the kitchen for several seconds before throwing the dish against the wall with such force that it snapped cleanly down the middle like two halves of a moon. The sound wasn't satisfying. It was flat and blunt, nothing like the music created by the rocks and shattering windows from many years ago.

The pain now clawed at his lungs. He grabbed a chair and lifted it above his head until its wooden legs scraped against the uneven ceiling. With a groan, he swung the chair downward. It crashed against the surface of the kitchen table, creating a pleasing sound. The chair sliced through the air

repeatedly until his hands gripped nothing more than a splintered frame of wood.

“What’s going on in there?” The shrill words were accompanied by three beats against the front door that led to the hall. “Sebastien? Ruby? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” he shouted back, his voice stuttering. “We’re fine, Elise. Sorry for the noise.”

His neighbour hesitated, but the sound of her slippers could be heard moments later as she padded down the hall.

He looked at the floor. What remained of the kitchen table resembled the beginnings of a bonfire. The clock ticked steadily as he made his way back into the bedroom.

One look at his mother lying motionless in bed was all he could handle. He walked into her closet and closed the creaky doors behind him. It was cool and dark inside. He’d always found it comforting to curl up in a corner of the closet, although he usually took refuge in his own, not Ruby’s. He had forced himself to outgrow the habit. Men mustn’t hide from their problems. He knew that. But he allowed himself this relapse into his past behaviour. He wasn’t strong enough to resist it this time.

He thought he had been prepared for his mother to die. As the weeks and months had trickled by, he could almost see the life escaping through her pores. He’d remained positive for years, but the hope had drained out of him. Eventually, he knew his energy would be better spent preparing for what was to come.

It wasn’t enough. He’d underestimated his capacity to feel. Smashing the kitchen table had been an effective release, but he couldn’t ignore the burning in his lungs. He knew it wasn’t just grief and shock and loneliness. It was rage. He had kept it hidden inside for years. It was fed by every muttered

insult, every Christmas they couldn't afford, every time his mother embarrassed herself trying to fit in with the other townspeople. Most of all, the rage had grown whenever he saw that his mother wasn't also consumed by it. More than anyone else, she had earned the right to be angry.

As he sat on the closet floor with his knees tucked against his chest, he pictured his rage and saw it had a face not so different from his own. It was the face of the man who had left them there, alone, empty-handed, in a town that would never be home.



Kostas Kourakis was his name. Sebastien had made that discovery several years earlier. He'd thought it was a strange combination of letters when he first saw it, an unfamiliar union of hard angles and gentle loops. The sound was even stranger when he said it aloud.

Kostas Kourakis.

Kostas Kourakis.

He'd repeated the name until it began to make sense, until it sounded like it could belong to a person who shared his blood.

His girlfriend at the time, Sophie, was throwing a party. "The theme is *Belle Époque*," she had said. "Just come dressed French."

Sebastien would never normally rummage through his mother's closet, but he had remembered she owned a felt beret that would work with his outfit.

He found a wide rectangular box on the floor of the closet. Inside was something he'd never seen before — a white jacket with brass buttons. A single golden stripe with a diamond

shape in the centre was emblazoned on the epaulet of each shoulder. He knew immediately that it must have belonged to his father.

It fit perfectly. Standing in front of Ruby's bedroom mirror, Sebastien saw that the jacket could have been tailored to his athletic frame. It smelled musty, like dust and dampness, and the colour had yellowed over time, but it was in good shape considering its age. As he ran his hand down the inside lining, he felt something sewn into the fabric. Embroidered across a black badge were bold white letters: *K. Kourakis*.

After carefully replacing the jacket where he had found it, Sebastien spent the next several days discovering who his father was. He didn't go to Sophie's party. He locked himself in his room with his laptop and followed the clues.

It didn't take him long to find an officer in the Hellenic Merchant Marine named Kostas Kourakis. This man had dedicated his youth to sailing the world on Greek cargo vessels but had spent the past ten years in greater comfort aboard passenger ships. One look at the man's angular face and deep green eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Sebastien kept this to himself. He certainly wasn't going to say a word to Ruby. Every now and then he would check in on his father online. Kostas had a wife and two young children. They would huddle together closely in each new picture as though protecting themselves from outside forces. Sebastien watched as the boy and girl grew a little older each year. Their smiles always seemed staged.

The itch to reach out to this man shamed him. He had never longed for a father, even though as a child he sometimes wondered why his family was so much smaller than others. Curiosity grew with age, then transformed itself into blame when he became more perceptive of his mother's loneliness.

Still, he'd always refused to let his father hold more space in his consciousness than the man deserved. He would almost believe himself whenever he told Ruby they didn't need that man in their lives.

When Sophie asked if he'd consider meeting this sailor with the strange name, Sebastien's answer was a definitive *no*. He had enough money saved by then for a plane ticket to Europe, but it would have been an irresponsible expense with Ruby's condition worsening. Besides, what would be the point?

And, so, it bothered him that these images on the screen had consumed so much of his imagination. *What would be the harm of sending a little message? The response could be surprising*, he thought to himself.

He resisted in the end. Knowing Kostas was unaware that his forgotten son was watching over him allowed Sebastien to claim some of the power he was never born with.

"I know who you are," he would whisper to the image on the screen. That was enough for him back then.



Now, as he sat in the protective darkness of his mother's closet, he wondered if it was still enough.

Sebastien needed an explanation that Ruby had never been able to offer. He used to dismiss his father as being too weak and too cruel to take responsibility for an unexpected pregnancy, but he knew the truth couldn't be that simple. It didn't fit his mother's stories. A romance with a young foreign sailor. The promise of a voyage to Europe. Then an unexpected separation on a cold Québec morning. That had been the only thing Ruby would say about that day — she remembered the cold.

The only way to learn why that man fled thirty years ago would be to meet him. But it wasn't just an answer Sebastien wanted. There was something darker stirring in his belly.

His hands reached out blindly until they touched the rectangular box in the opposite corner. He pushed open the closet doors with the box clutched in one arm.

The scent was familiar as he pulled the jacket over his T-shirt. He examined himself in the full-length mirror beside Ruby's dresser, not able to deny liking the way the uniform looked on him. The shade of white was sad with age, but the gold embroidery on his shoulders shone brightly. There was a faint spatter of orange drops across the breast, and he wondered if the colour had been redder thirty years earlier.

Dozens of eyes stared at him from the picture frames that lined the shelves and walls. Since his earliest memories, his mother had been a strong woman who loved to laugh as much as she loved to argue. Even as her body slowly betrayed her, she'd never let herself be diminished. But the earlier photographs revealed a more cautious woman, one whose eyes were mistrustful and whose lips refused to lie. She gazed at her grown son wearing the mysterious man's jacket. She knew the truth.

Sebastien picked up one photograph in a pewter frame. Although he'd been very young, he remembered that day at a local petting zoo. The image captured Ruby as she laughed uninhibitedly while her son held a baby goat barely smaller than himself. Relief came to his red, itching eyes as he blinked away the tears.



Sophie Lamoureux took Sebastien's virginity in her bedroom when they were eighteen. As his face hovered above hers,

sweat pooling in the shallow wells of his collarbone and hair draped around his head like Spanish moss, she decided she would love him, despite his background.

Their relationship didn't officially begin until she returned to Petit Géant after several years of university in Montréal. It was her little rebellion, dating Sebastien Goh. She saw herself as the benevolent princess choosing true love with an outcast over the preordained comfort of her mother's expectations. It was a story she loved to believe even more than she loved Sebastien himself.

Reality was less flattering. Their relationship was often punctuated by indefinite separations as frequent as the solstice. Her friends would exchange glances and knowing smirks during these periods of respite. *We knew this would happen*, she imagined them saying. *If only she had listened*.

With every spiteful remark she would later regret, with every ambivalent shrug of his shoulders, she held on tighter. Sophie had given up too much and invested too many years for this gamble not to pay off.

Sebastien had ended things six weeks earlier. "We've tried for years to make it work. It's run its course" is how he had put it. She begged him to reconsider as she'd done in the past, but she knew it was different this time. It was an anticlimactic end to so many years of intensity. If she were honest with herself, she would have known they were doomed from the start. A romance like theirs wasn't meant to last. They never stood a chance.

Today, though, was special.

"He should be here any minute," Sophie said as she scanned the garden, her hands outstretched in front of her as though she were tiptoeing away from a bear.

It was a surprise party for Sebastien's twenty-ninth birthday. A wooden dining table long enough to seat thirty stood

in the middle of her mother's backyard. It was set with linen napkins and polished silverware. Spring flowers spilled out of ceramic vases. Champagne was being chilled in silver buckets of ice.

The guests were scattered outside the entrance to the solarium that protruded from the house. The mood was tense. Everyone but Sophie seemed to know this was a bad idea.

The party was being organized weeks before they broke up. She could have cancelled it but instead chose to forge ahead. It could be a chance to redeem herself, to prove her love for him.

She viewed the death of Ruby as another opportunity. It was a tragedy, of course, and Sophie was saddened by it, but it was also a path back to Sebastien. Now more than ever, he needed someone to turn to, and she had gladly allowed him to find comfort in her arms. He sobbed against her neck the day it happened. She wouldn't fail him this time.

After two weeks of grieving, Sebastien would need something to celebrate.

"He's coming!" she whisper-growled, waving her hands as if swatting flies. She could hear his voice from the hall, musical and boyish compared to her brother's baritone. The guests took their positions.



The town hadn't changed much over the course of Sebastien's young life. Even now, he felt like a child as he walked along the main street. He used to stand at the window of the same ice cream shop that he passed now, imploring his mother to treat him to a pastel swirl atop a waffle cone like the ones the other kids got to enjoy. Instead of giving in, she would remind

him how much more affordable it was to buy the plastic bins of freezer-burned Neapolitan.

He walked past the bar that got him drunk for the first time, at the age of eighteen, where he had slammed back nine bottles of Blanche de Chambly before getting into a fist fight with a boy who called him a fag. Sophie had pulled him away when it was clear the other boy wouldn't be getting off the floor without help.

"Pas de Papa." French for "No Father," that's what Sophie used to call him when they met in primary school. It caught on and soon all of Sophie's friends, precious and white like porcelain dolls, repeated the name until it evolved into the snappier version of "Pas Papa." It wasn't until high school that Sophie warmed up to Sebastien, when lacrosse and puberty had moulded his body into a different shape. The insults had become less vocal by then, but they persisted in whispers while he was kept several arms' lengths away from being included.

Sebastien didn't care. From boyhood to manhood, he never cowered in the face of their abuse. He learned to like the isolation. It came with a certain freedom. He understood that he simply didn't belong there. He may have been born and raised in Petit Géant, but it was never home. How could it be? It was three hundred kilometres from the ocean.

Sebastien walked past the bar and stood in front of the photography shop where he still worked. "Cameras! Art! Portraits! Passports!" claimed the candy-striped awning above the door. Sebastien had advised against the reckless use of exclamation points, but Jérôme, the shop's owner, insisted on the "excitement" they evoked. Sebastien paused across the street, considering popping in to say hello, but decided against it and continued walking.

“A smart boy like you could work wherever you want,” Ruby used to lecture him. “Why waste your life taking pictures of people in that shop? You should be famous.”

“I could find a better job,” he would respond with a shrug, “but that would probably mean moving to Montréal.” That would be enough to shut her up. It was an empty threat, of course. He would never leave his mother behind.

Sebastien shoved his clenched fists into the pockets of his pants, letting the memory pass through him like a chilly wind.

He strolled along the same route he used to take when Sophie lived with her parents. The houses he passed increased in size and decreased in visibility, hiding behind impenetrable hedges and wastefully wide lawns, the closer he came to the Lamoureux family home. He marvelled at how little the neighbourhood had changed over the years. Its residents weren't known for embracing change.

The house stood at the end of a sloping street that wound its way through a grove of maple trees. He'd thought it was a castle on his first visit as a teenager. Its bay windows and broad balconies had intimidated him with their extravagance.

He climbed the steps of the veranda and pressed the doorbell. Sophie had claimed she simply wanted to cook him dinner for his birthday, but his stomach rumbled uneasily when her brother answered the door with an uncharacteristically warm smile. “Keep your shoes on,” he said, leading Sebastien through the quiet house and into the glass solarium.

Sebastien jumped as he walked through the door amid the screams of “Surprise!” He stood there with his eyes wide, unsure of how to react, before turning to Sophie. She wore a floral dress and the pendant he'd given her once upon a time. Her hair was a cascade the colour of a robin's breast.

“What's going on?” he asked.

“Happy birthday!” she squealed with a smile as big and bright as the sun.

Dinner was served after cocktails. Sophie instructed Sebastien to sit at the head of the table beside her. He forced a smile as often as he could bear and laughed when everyone else laughed.

These weren’t his friends, though. Most of them hadn’t attended Ruby’s memorial service. He doubted Jérôme had been invited. This wasn’t his life they were celebrating. It was Sophie’s party. Her touch was evident in every detail. He tried to fight the resentment that crept beneath his skin.

“You shouldn’t have done this,” he said in a hushed voice, his eyes fixed on his plate.

“Don’t be silly.” Sophie took a sip of wine, leaving a cranberry-coloured mark along the rim of the glass. She patted her lips with a napkin. “We always celebrate your birthday.”

“You should’ve known I wouldn’t want this.”

Her hands fell into her lap, the napkin clutched between her fingers. “You’ve never been good at showing gratitude.”

“It’s just so soon.”

She turned her chair to face him and reached beneath the table for his hand in one fluid motion.

“A little distraction is what you need right now,” she said. “Remember what I told you on your twentieth birthday?”

“That was nine years ago, Soph.”

“I said you could lock yourself in your room, or you could choose to move on. You’ll get through this, too, but only if you get yourself out of your apartment.”

It was a memory he preferred to forget. Now that it had surfaced, it was like an unreachable itch. He knew she was right, though. Locking himself in his room wouldn’t be an option this time.

“Excuse me,” he said, placing his napkin beside his plate. He could feel her watching as he made his way to the door of the solarium.



Sophie looked around the garden, feeling satisfied. The bubbly chatter and clinking of glasses felt like affirmation of the party's success.

When the chair at the head of the table remained empty ten minutes later, she started to worry. Another five minutes passed and she knew something was wrong. The caterers were clearing the dishes from the main course when she stepped into the house.

“Sebastien?” she called out, her voice echoing throughout the halls. Her heels clicked assertively on the hardwood as she checked the powder room. It was empty.

She searched every room on the main floor before she found the note pinned to the kitchen fridge by a magnet shaped like a seashell. The jagged handwriting was unmistakably his.

*I'm sorry. I have to go. You won't see me
again for a while.*