



It's Me, but Different (Merriweather Sisters #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Eleven years ago, Sloane Merriweather was ready to give up everything for an Olympic medal—even if it meant letting go of Esme Torres, her first and only true love.

Now, with that long-coveted medal displayed in a case, she regrets that decision every single day.

She lives haunted by one question: What if...?

When Esme receives a strange invitation to spend two weeks at a resort in Silver Peaks, Montana, her first instinct is to say no.

It's signed by someone named Julie Winters—someone she's never heard of. She doesn't recall Sloane's family owning a resort there. There's no way she'd ever willingly vacation at one of the Merriweather sisters' hotels.

Still, after losing their father last year, her two children deserve a break—and the offer seems too good to pass up.

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Sloane

“I wouldn't ask if it wasn't absolutely necessary,” Anika insists, shrugging her shoulders.

“You really want me to believe there's not a single ski instructor available to teach this lesson?” I protest, shaking my head before taking another sip of coffee.

“Nobody, all busy or sick,” my sister River rushes to answer, maybe too quickly. “Besides, do you have something important to do that you can't teach the lesson?”

“I run the ski school and only teach advanced lessons. I don't teach little kids,” I remind her.

For a moment, I'm convinced they'll leave me alone.

They stay silent, but there's such obvious complicity between them that it makes me smile.

A few months ago, both of them were going through a crisis in their lives.

Anika had just separated from her ex, sold her company, and was immersed in a very complicated divorce.

And River... River started realizing she wanted something more in her life. Now, they practically shine with happiness every time they're together.

“Okay, can you explain what you're plotting?” I complain when I see them starting to whisper to each other.

“Plotting? Us?” River tries to act innocent, but this is starting to be too obvious.

“Really, Sloane, you have to teach that new guest's kids. It's very important,” Anika insists.

I arch an eyebrow.

“A guest? You're acting very suspicious.”

River glances sideways, as if looking for support from Anika.

“We offered her a special promotional package and...”

“A promotional package that I don't think includes ski lessons with me, right? Besides, we usually make those offers for big corporate clients or newlyweds. A woman with two kids doesn't seem usual. And why are you two handling this? Shouldn't this be Penny's job in sales?”

“Come on, Sloane, after all the trouble it took us to find her,” River says, immediately receiving an elbow to the ribs from her girlfriend.

“Okay, that's enough, damn it. I want you to tell me what's happening once and for all or get out of here and let me drink my coffee in peace,” I demand, giving a small slap on the table.

“Very well, very well, what a temper...” Anika nods. “Do you remember all those nights we talked about regrets? You always tell me there's someone you can't forget and you regret letting her go.”

I let out a long sigh. That happened a long time ago, but it still hurts every day.

“Yeah, I remember it well.”

My sister River seems both excited and regretful.

“I might have asked in some Facebook groups of alumni from your university, trying to locate her,” she admits with a sigh.

“Find her? Find who?”

“Look, don't get angry, because we did this for your own good. I know it might sound a bit crazy, but we located her contact information. We presented Silver Peaks as the perfect vacation place. We sent photos, reviews, and a ridiculously good price.”

“Absolutely, ridiculously good,” Anika confirms.

I stay quiet for a few moments, trying to process what these two are trying to explain to me.

“Are you telling me you found Esme Torres and invited her here? I don't believe it. She would never accept an invitation signed by a Merriweather. And she knows you well, Anika; you were the one who introduced her to me in college.”

My sister simply shrugs.

“Julie signed the offer. Don't get like that; we thought maybe she could use a break. That girl has been through a lot, Sloane. Two years ago, she lost her husband in a climbing accident.”

I almost drop my coffee cup when I hear her words.

“She lost her husband?”

“Yes. She has eight-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. This vacation could be perfect for those kids. She doesn't know you'll be here, or that the resort belongs to our family.”

“That's why Julie signed the offer,” Anika clarifies.

“But look, if you don't feel like seeing her, that's fine, we understand.

This place is very big; maybe you won't run into each other at any point.

Of course, then I don't want you coming around like a lost soul, complaining that you let her escape eleven years ago.

If you're not willing to do anything to get her back now, I don't want to hear it,” she adds with a snort.

I blink rapidly, trying to take in the whole situation. Esme, now widowed with two small children, accepting a special offer to come to Silver Peaks, not knowing I'm part of the package.

“You've lost your minds. And you're also idiots,” I protest, putting my hands to my head.

Before they can defend themselves, I shift my gaze toward the equipment rental area and see a dark-haired woman kneeling in the snow.

She's trying to steady two small children who are wobbling on skis.

The girl beside her laughs. She looks a lot like Esme.

The same big brown eyes, the same high cheekbones.

The boy looks like someone else. Like a life she built without me.

I struggle to keep my eyes from filling with tears as I remember that sophomore student Anika introduced me to in college.

I was the star of the ski team, with my dorm shelves fuller of trophies than books and an Olympic dream burning strong in my heart. We spent two wonderful years until one night, under the stars, she admitted she wanted to spend the rest of her life with me, and I got too nervous.

Besides, I had an Olympic medal to win.

I regret that decision so much...

Without saying a single word, I get up and walk toward them. The boy leans to one side and falls to the ground with a sharp cry. Before I know it, I'm kneeling beside him.

"Easy there, champ, you'll see how soon you'll be gliding down the slopes effortlessly," I assure him.

He looks at me with wide eyes, his cheeks red from the cold.

"I... I lost my balance," he confesses, almost embarrassed.

"That happens to the best of us. By the way, I'll be your ski instructor from now on."

Then I hear her voice.

“Theo, are you okay?” she asks with concern.

She still has that soft Texas accent that drove me crazy when we were in college. She kneels next to her son without noticing my presence until she makes sure the little one hasn't hurt himself.

“Sloane?” she sighs suddenly.

“Hi, Esme,” I greet, not really knowing what to say, and my heart beats so hard I'm almost sure she can hear it.

She gets up slowly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She's just as beautiful as I remembered. More mature, of course, the faint lines near her eyes speak of laughter and tears, but she's the Esme I remember. The one I'm still in love with.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she growls, putting her arms on her hips.

The boy stands up, brushing snow off his pants, and looks at me curiously.

“Mom?”

Esme looks away from me, focusing on her son.

“This is Miss Merriweather. She... We met in college.”

Her chosen words hurt me.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell you're doing here?” she insists, addressing me again.

“It's one of my family's hotels,” I admit in a whisper.

“Yeah, right. I should have figured. An offer too good to refuse.

You've sunk pretty low this time, Sloane.

You must be very proud of taking advantage of my financial needs to bring me here with a special offer.

Insisting on activities for the kids was too cruel a blow.

You knew that after everything they've been through with their father, I couldn't deny them a few days of vacation, right? I expected anything from you, but I never thought you could go this far,” she spits, giving me a look full of hate.

“I swear I had nothing to do with that,” I confess, lowering my voice when I see her anger.

“Now you're a liar too? We're leaving, kids. We're going home,” she orders, and my heart breaks when I see the little ones' faces when they hear her words.

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Sloane

“Please, Esme. I promise you won't run into me while you're here. Don't do this to the kids,” I plead, making a subtle gesture toward the little ones.

Luckily, the girl insists that she promised them it would be an unforgettable vacation. Even so, she stays next to her mother and looks at me threateningly with crossed arms, as if she hates me too.

Esme seems to reconsider for a few moments, and with her children's insistence, she thinks better of it.

“You give today's lesson, and I don't want to see you again in these two weeks, understood? I'm doing this for them; they've had a really hard time, and they need this vacation. If it were up to me, I'd leave right now,” she clarifies, raising her eyebrows.

“Are you good at teaching? I don't want to fall,” her daughter interrupts, who seems to have a very strong personality despite her age.

A smile escapes me.

“I've taught plenty of people, and I'll try to keep you from falling, but falling is part of the learning process,” I explain.

“Mom said I wouldn't fall,” she complains, frowning.

Esme puts a hand to her forehead.

“I might have exaggerated a little so they wouldn't refuse to try,” she admits.

“Are you okay, champ?” I ask the boy, who's still a little scared. “Why don't we start by getting to know each other?”

The girl, who seems much more outgoing, takes a step forward.

“I'm Ana Sofia, and he's Theo. We're eight years old.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Sloane,” I greet, noticing how Esme's hands tremble slightly when she straightens Theo's hat. “Welcome to Silver Peaks, kids.”

I teach them the basic fundamentals of skiing, and when we're reaching the first hour of class, I notice they're already very tired, especially Theo, so I decide to stop.

Esme has spent the entire lesson leaning against a tree, as if fearing that something serious could happen to her children at any moment.

When I approach with the kids, I mentally go over the words I want to say to her to say goodbye forever.

Still, before I can do so, River and Anika suddenly appear and head toward where we are, all smiles.

“Hi,” my sister greets. “How are you doing, kids? Did you enjoy your first day skiing?”

Ana Sofia looks up with a serious expression.

“Good,” she admits, looking suspicious.

“I fell sideways, and Miss Merriweather helped me get up,” Theo announces while Esme wraps her arm around his shoulders and pulls him against her body.

I can see that her treatment of Anika is cold, even though they were very good friends in college. She blames her for what happened too.

“How about I invite the kids for hot chocolate while you and Sloane talk about lesson schedules and that kind of thing?” River suggests.

Esme starts to say something about this being the last lesson they'll take with me, but she stops herself at her children's insistence, who must be hungry after the ski lesson. Before leaving, my sister gives me a look that says, “Don't screw this up again,” without needing words.

For our part, Esme and I stay quiet for a good while, both not really knowing what to say while she nervously rubs her gloved hands.

“I swear I had nothing to do with this, though I'm very happy to see you again,” I admit with a sigh.

“I had no idea you'd be here. If I had known...”

“You wouldn't have come, I know,” I murmur, finishing the sentence for her.

“Probably not,” she admits, nervously rubbing her hands again. “It's been a long time, and the kids need a vacation where they can simply... breathe and forget about what happened with their father. I didn't mean to intrude on your world.”

“You're not intruding on anything. If I'm honest, I'm really glad you came. It's not the time, but I know I treated you terribly, and...”

“No, Sloane, it's not the time to remember those things. You hurt me terribly, but it's better to leave it in the past,” she cuts me off, raising a hand.

“Listen, if you want an instructor to teach the kids, I'm definitely your girl. If you prefer someone else, I understand, really.”

“Thank you. We can try; it seems the kids had an excellent time with you,” she confesses while playing distractedly with her hair.

“This is awkward, isn't it?”

“Yes, a little,” she admits, letting out a nervous giggle. “Now I should...”

“Yes, sorry, the kids. River is probably making them try all the hotel's sweets.”

While I watch her walk away toward the cafeteria, I receive a message from my older sister.

Harper: Anika and River told me about Esme. Julie is also participating, so I can't protest about the VIP client treatment they've given them for an almost free price.

I can't help but smile. Harper always thinking about money. Though deep down, she's giving me the green light to roll out the red carpet. Ski lessons, spa sessions, everything we have.

When I return to the hotel, Ivy gestures for me to come over.

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” my twin sister jokes.

“Esme is here,” I confess, dropping into an armchair next to her.

“River told me. How are you handling it?”

I stretch my arms above my head while organizing my thoughts.

“I'm okay, I guess. Somewhat confused, not knowing what to do. Eleven years, and... boom! She's right in front of me with two kids.”

“I heard River and Anika spent a lot of time planning this. They wanted to return the favor for getting them together.”

“Actually, I tried everything to keep Anika away from River,” I admit, shrugging.

“And later you went to San Francisco to try to get them to work things out, so that counts. What I didn't expect was for Julie to participate too, even signing the offer herself. As serious as she seems, she's already letting those two influence her. Well, tell me, what's your plan?”

“My plan? Teach the twins to ski. Be polite. See if Esme wants to talk about the past at some point so I can apologize, or if she prefers to pretend it never happened.”

“Maybe you should tell her how you feel?” she suggests, raising her eyebrows.

A nervous laugh escapes me.

“And what exactly do I feel? I haven't seen her in over a decade.

She got married, had kids, and lost her husband two years ago.

She's been through a whole lifetime. Meanwhile, I'm still here, with my medal hidden behind a display case, with a screwed-up knee and a bunch of 'what ifs.

' Basically, I'm still stuck in the past while she's moved on.'

Ivy places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Don't put yourself down. You help run this place and the rest of the family's ski schools, and you've matured a lot since then. You're no longer that selfish and somewhat conceited athlete who put her Olympic dream above everything else. Maybe you're exactly what Esme needs right now.”

“Somewhat conceited?”

“Very conceited,” she corrects. “Sometimes you were unbearable, I swear. Why do you think I didn't go to college with you despite being your twin?”

“I don't know, Ivy. I guess we'll see. Right now I'm totally lost.”

On my way to the suite I occupy in the resort, I hear the murmur of conversations in the dining room or children's laughter in the kids' area. Maybe Esme's children are there. My knee hurts, reminding me that despite still being young, I'm far from being the invincible skier I once was.

After a quick shower with very hot water, I put on my pajamas and drop onto the mattress to watch a movie, though a message on my cell phone brings me back to reality.

River: We've scheduled a ski lesson at 10 in the morning. The kids are excited. She's still somewhat... let's say... shocked. Sorry if all this is being a bit intense.

Of course Esme is shocked. She came here expecting a ski resort in Montana, not me, the ex-girlfriend who dumped her to chase Olympic glory.

A new message arrives almost immediately.

River: I hope this can be a second chance. You deserve to be happy.

I don't respond to that sentence. Happiness.

It's not that I can complain about my life, quite the opposite.

I have my sisters, much more money than I can spend, and I enjoy the tranquility of the mountains.

Still, seeing Esme again has shaken me so much that I'm practically in shock. It reminds me of what I let slip away.

I wander to the shelf and take out some family photo albums. In many, I appear at the top of the podium, holding some trophy. In others I'm with Ivy. In some more with my older sisters. There are no photos of Esme. I never allowed myself to keep them. It was too painful.

I close my eyes and let the warmth of the fire in the fireplace lull me to sleep.

Tomorrow, I'll see her again. I'll guide Theo and Ana Sofia down the slopes, teach them to trust the snow under their skis.

But I can't ignore the whirlwind of half-buried feelings: regret, curiosity, and a fragile hope.

Maybe we'll just cross paths at Silver Peaks for a few days, and I'll never see her again.

She'll return to her life, and I'll regret every day that I let her escape.

Or maybe River and Anika's crazy plan will work.

My phone vibrates one last time with another message.

Anika: Are you okay?

Everyone is worried that my head will explode or something like that. I send back a simple “I'm fine” and throw the phone aside, covering myself with the comforter.

Eleven years ago, I thought I had to choose between love and glory, and I chose glory.

That choice ended with a serious knee injury and an empty life.

Esme moved on without me, with a husband, with two children, and with a future.

Even if that future ended in pain, she kept moving forward.

I didn't. If there's the slightest chance she'll at least forgive me, I'm willing to try.

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Esme

My son Theo won't stop talking while his sister jumps nervously from one foot to the other, both so hyper from the hot chocolate and adrenaline that I know getting them to sleep tonight will be mission impossible.

“Mom, did you see the size of these beds?” Ana Sofia shrieks as she enters the room she'll share with her twin brother in the suite they've assigned us.

I simply shrug and smile. I love seeing them this happy. It's been two very hard years. Losing their father at such a young age has to be very difficult, and every time I saw the sadness in their eyes, it broke my heart.

For them, the two weeks we'll spend at Silver Peaks are a great adventure.

For me, it's been a trap. I don't know if Sloane is involved or not.

She assured me she wasn't, and I want to think she's not lying.

But it's still a trap, no matter how I look at it.

If it weren't for the kids, I would have already left.

The promotional offer arrived in my inbox as a surprise, accompanied by a phone call from someone named Julie.

She spoke to me in a very friendly tone and promised me unforgettable days in the

snow.

When I asked if the price was correct, she explained that the resort was looking to expand its reach to families with small children.

I remember blinking several times when I saw the offer; it was too good to be true.

And of course, now I know it wasn't.

However, it fit perfectly with the twins' winter vacation dates, so I said yes before thinking about it more.

I was so focused on my children that I didn't research it. If I had, I would have realized that this place is owned by the Merriweather family, which obviously includes her too.

Theo jumps and bounces off the bed, though he doesn't seem to get hurt because he runs to the small living room of the suite, where he stops dead in front of the welcome basket.

“Mom, there's candy!” he shrieks, getting his sister's attention.

Part of me wants to pack right now and find another hotel. Another voice in my head reminds me of the twins' joy. I can't take them away from here just because I don't feel comfortable every time I run into Sloane Merriweather.

I bite my lower lip painfully as I remember how everything ended between us. I thought we had the perfect relationship. I was tremendously happy by her side. And one day, out of nowhere, she simply told me she couldn't afford distractions while pursuing her dream of winning an Olympic medal.

Distractions?

Was that what I was to her? Just a distraction?

Being abandoned that way by the woman I loved when I was barely over twenty was devastating.

For me, it was almost as if my whole world ended.

I don't know if she's ever been aware of the damage she did to me.

I prefer she doesn't know everything I suffered.

She got her Olympic medal, yes, but as if by karma, she seriously injured her knee before the world championship two years later and never competed again.

It was a very hard time, though the pain gradually faded and life went on.

When I finished college, I found a different kind of love with Luis.

Less intense, certainly, but also more serene.

Now that I've seen Sloane again, I don't even know what to think.

It still hurts, I thought I had gotten over it completely, but I haven't.

And the worst part is that feeling of curiosity, that sensation of wondering what would have happened if she hadn't behaved like such a selfish person.

Maybe we've both changed during these eleven years.

“Can I eat this, Mom?” my son asks, pointing to some sweets from the basket.

“Just a little. We have to go to dinner.”

Something about this place, possibly the decoration or the snow-covered mountains, fills them with energy.

The old Esme would be really furious about the deception that brought me here, I think I would have even slapped Sloane without even knowing if she had anything to do with it or not.

Instead, you can tell I've matured. Now I decide to wait and see.

If River and Anika organized this, they must think Sloane needs to close that chapter.

I'm not naive enough to assume we can pick up where we left off. I don't want to either; Sloane is part of my past. A very beautiful part until she left me, I admit, but it's over forever.

And yet, it would be stupid to deny that this morning, when I saw her on the ski slopes, I didn't feel anything for her.

A knock on my bedroom door pulls me from my thoughts. Ana Sofia pokes her head in, her dark hair covering her eyes.

“Mom, it says here they have a game room on the second floor with arcade machines. Can we go see it?” she asks, waving a hotel brochure in the air. “There are babysitters for children under twelve,” she adds, as if anticipating my possible resistance.

I practically let out a sigh of relief. Some time to myself while the kids are entertained and safe won't hurt. Since Luis died, my whole life has revolved around

them.

As soon as I leave them in the game room, I wander aimlessly through the hotel until I reach a terrace from which you can see an excellent view of the mountains. At least, that's what a wooden sign announces.

When I step outside, the cold Montana air hits me like a slap. The sun is starting to descend, and the wooden sign wasn't lying about the views. The snowy mountains begin to be painted in orange or pink tones, creating a spectacle of wonderful color.

Out here, everything seems to be silent, and for some reason, it brings back memories of my college years, when I thought Sloane was the love of my life.

On a sunset similar to this one, she pointed her finger toward the snowy peaks and told me about her Olympic dreams. Her ambition was contagious, though of course, back then I didn't know that ambition would be exactly what would destroy our relationship.

I shake my head to get those thoughts out of my mind and remind myself that I'm still here, not lost in the past.

I hear footsteps behind me and turn around. A couple comes out hand in hand onto the terrace to look at the views and take some photos. They whisper sweet words in each other's ears while kissing, and I can't help but feel a little envious as I return inside, giving them privacy.

In front of the game room, I watch the twins playing and smile. Theo cried for hours when his father died. He was desperate to find answers I couldn't give him. Ana Sofia tried to be brave, said she would take care of me. Seeing them laugh is wonderful.

“Mom, Miss Merriweather told us this morning that you skied very well in college,”

Theo murmurs when we return to the suite, full of doubts about his ski lesson tomorrow.

“Well, I don't know if very well, but she was certainly much better than me. Do you know she won an Olympic medal? Not everyone can say they're being taught to ski by someone of that level.”

“She seems very nice. And she's super pretty,” Ana Sofia adds, making my heart skip several beats.

Sometimes, I wonder if Sloane regrets her decision or if she thinks it was worth it. I think I'd like to ask her, though I don't feel I have the right to dig into the depths of her heart. And I'm not sure the answer wouldn't hurt me too much, opening wounds that have been closed for years.

I approach the window, and the night sky at Silver Peaks is spectacular.

It almost seems like you can touch the stars with your hand.

Luis loved watching them. He pointed out constellations, making up stories for the kids.

I sigh, and in the darkness of the night, I whisper a promise to him.

If he can hear me from somewhere, I assure him I'll try to give our children the life he would have wanted.

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Sloane

“Good morning. Regretting last night's drinking binge or just terrified to see your ex again?” River jokes, sitting down next to me.

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I only had one glass of whiskey... two,” I growl, forcing an expression of indifference.

“Please, what bullshit. You've spent eleven years barely able to say her name without sighing.”

“I'm still not clear that this is a good idea,” I protest.

“Listen to me carefully. Eleven years ago you let that woman go to chase an Olympic medal.

Maybe at the time you thought it was the right decision, maybe not.

But now she's here, with her kids. You can't just run away.

Close that chapter of your life once and for all, or you'll end up going crazy.

Look, I know it's complicated for you, Sloane.

But they're just kids who want to learn to ski, and their mother...

well, she just wants what's best for those kids.”

The sound of children's laughter interrupts our conversation. Through the window, I can see Esme and the twins approaching the beginner slope. Ana Sofia hops with excitement while her brother clings tightly to his mother's hand.

“Shit,” I murmur, feeling my pulse quicken. “They're already here.”

“Well, get moving,” River jokes, pushing me toward the door.

“I hate you,” I growl before leaving.

“I know. I love you too,” she responds with a smile, giving me a thumbs up for encouragement.

“Sloane!” Ana Sofia shrieks when she sees me. “Do you think I'll be able to go down the green slope today?”

She's wearing the same fuchsia suit she had on yesterday, and it's such a bright color that if she got lost, you could see her from miles away.

She balances on her skis with a naturalness that feels painfully familiar.

Next to her, her brother Theo holds his poles like they're a shield, not trying to hide the fear in his eyes.

“The green slope, huh?” I repeat, trying to force a professional tone. “First, let's see how you handle yourself in the beginner area. We don't want to go too fast. If you do well, then I'll go down the green slope with you. Or Mom can do it too,” I add, shifting my gaze toward Esme.

“I'm ready now,” the kid insists, executing a small, somewhat clumsy turn. “I practiced in the room. Without skis, of course, but it's almost the same thing.”

I can't help but smile. The girl's confidence reminds me so much of Esme in our first days together that it almost physically hurts.

“Ana, not everyone has your spirit,” Esme intervenes, placing a hand on Theo's shoulder. “Your brother needs to go at his own pace.”

“I just want not to fall,” the boy murmurs, gripping his mother's hand tighter.

“You know a secret?” I tell him in a low voice, crouching down to be at his height. “We all fall at first. I fell many times when I was learning. My older sisters always laughed at me.”

“You? But Mom says you were the best.”

I feel myself turning red to the tips of my ears when I hear those words, and I look for Esme's gaze, who suddenly seems very interested in adjusting the zipper of her jacket.

“Your mom is very kind,” I assure him. “But I promise you I fell so many times that my older sisters called me 'Sloane, the snowball.’”

My confession manages to draw a small smile from the boy, dispelling the fear in his eyes for a moment.

“Really?” Ana Sofia asks, joining the conversation. “And how did you learn not to fall?”

“By practicing,” I answer. “And trusting my ski instructor.

But above all, training a lot. When we applaud champions, we don't see all the training hours behind it.

Nobody wins competitions just because they're naturally good at it.

And that's true with everything in life, not just sports," I explain.

"Well, shall we start? If we keep talking, I'll never go down the green slope," Ana Sofia protests.

Esme tries to apologize, but that girl reminds me so much of myself when I was little that I can't help but roll my eyes.

"They'll be fine. You don't need to spend the whole hour leaning against a tree like yesterday. You can go to the cafeteria if you'd like. I'll return them safe and sound, I promise."

A shy smile appears on her lips as she shrugs.

"They're all I have left," she sighs as if trying to apologize.

"Did you live here when you were little?" Ana Sofia asks as we go up again on the beginner lift.

"We lived in Aspen, though we spent vacations here."

"And did you ski every day?" the girl insists.

"Yes. My sisters and I did our homework as fast as possible so we could get out on the slopes before dark. They even took us skiing in the summer to the Allalin glacier in Switzerland."

"How many sisters do you have?" Theo interrupts, who seems more interested in anything that isn't skiing.

“Three. Harper is the oldest, then there's River, who took you for hot chocolate yesterday, and finally Ivy, who is my twin sister.”

“You have a twin? Just like us!”

“Exactly,” I nod. “Though Ivy and I don't look as much alike physically as you two do.”

“And do they all know how to ski?”

“All of them. Though I was always the best,” I add with a wink. “But don't tell my sisters I told you that. I also have a niece a little older than you two.”

“Mom told us you went to the Olympics and won a medal,” Ana Sofia comments once we descend again.

“Do you have it here?” Theo asks. “Can we see it?”

“Of course, I'll show it to you,” I promise, feeling a stab of pain as I remember that same medal was what cost me losing their mother. “It's stored in my sister Harper's office.”

“And you were Mom's instructor in college,” the girl continues, making an almost perfect turn while talking. “She told us you were the best skier she's ever known.”

“She said that?”

“Yes,” Ana Sofia nods. “She said she's never seen anyone move in the snow like you. Like you were a shadow on the mountain.”

Despite my ski goggles, I have to look away so they don't notice my eyes have gotten

wet. Esme said that same phrase the night we made love for the first time, while tracing circles around my nipples with her fingertips.

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Sloane

“Could we talk about something other than Esme Torres?” I growl, slamming my hand on the table.

River's lasagna, normally my weakness, gets stuck in my throat ever since they started talking about her. I've even lost my appetite.

Thursday family dinners are a tradition that not even the worst snowstorms have managed to interrupt. But tonight, it feels more like torture.

“I'm just saying,” Ivy continues, “it's curious how the universe works. Eleven years later, your great college love shows up at Silver Peaks, widowed and with two adorable kids.”

“The universe had nothing to do with it; it was those two,” I protest, pointing toward River and Anika, who have to stop drinking to keep from choking on their laughter.

“As I recall, she was the only person you brought home during your college years,” Harper adds.

“Why are you all suddenly so interested in her?”

“Honey, you just have to see how you look at her,” River interrupts. “You look like an abandoned puppy every time you see her, even from a distance. We're just worried about our sister.”

“You're idiots,” I growl.

“It's been eleven years, and you're still drooling over her,” she insists.

“How are the lessons going with her kids?” Julie asks, offering me a dignified exit from the previous conversation.

Naturally, I grab the opportunity like a drowning person grabs a life preserver.

“Very well. Ana Sofia has a natural talent for skiing, almost instinctive. She reminds me of...” I stop, aware of the trap I was about to fall into.

“Of Esme?” Anika completes with a smile while reaching for River's hand with hers.

I just sigh, defeated.

“Yes, of Esme. She learned to ski with amazing ease. And her daughter is the same. Theo, on the other hand, is more analytical. He's scared, but it's just because he thinks everything through before acting.”

“Sounds like Harper,” River jokes. “I remember when Dad took us to that black diamond slope in Switzerland for the first time. She was terrified, but refused to admit it. She ended up going down with her eyes practically closed. I never saw anyone ski so stiffly and live to tell about it.”

The laughter makes them temporarily forget about Esme. Wine flows, memories and anecdotes intertwine, and for a moment, everything returns to normal. Until Ivy decides to drop another bomb.

“Their father's death must have been really hard on the kids. Especially being so young.”

“They were six,” Anika confirms. “They were just starting school. And now Esme... having to raise them alone... whew.”

Luckily, Ivy comes to my rescue when she sees I'm not comfortable.

“Changing the subject,” my twin interrupts in an attempt to give me a break. “Did you hear there's a woman asking questions in town about our family?”

“What kind of questions?” Harper asks, frowning.

“Nothing specific,” Ivy responds, shrugging. “Meg, the new girl at the coffee shop, told me some woman with an East Coast accent has been asking about the resort, about the family's history, that kind of thing.”

“Probably another journalist looking for an easy article,” River growls with a dismissive gesture. “Ever since Harper appeared on the cover of Forbes, they keep showing up.”

“Whoever it is, if she wants to talk to us, she knows where to find us. Or she can also contact our press department. She doesn't need to go around asking questions in town, unless she's looking for some kind of scandal or something like that,” my older sister protests.

The conversation soon shifts to more everyday topics: the possible Michelin star for River's restaurant at the top of the mountain, Julie's new glass designs, the company's expansion plans.

Little by little, the tension leaves the dinner.

The lasagna disappears, replaced by a delicious chocolate dessert shaped like a snowy mountain that makes us all forget our worries.

It's later, while the others move to the living room to play a board game that has become our tradition after dinners, when my older sister takes the opportunity to talk to me alone.

“Are you okay?” she asks in a low voice, taking me by the elbow. “Really.”

“I don't know,” I admit with a sigh. “Esme is the only person who's made me question what I want in life. If I had been a little more mature and hadn't let her go, maybe now...”

“You can't keep living on 'what ifs.' The decisions we make throughout life define us, for better or worse.”

“I know. It's just that...” I stop, searching for the right words. “In the end, the bronze medal is stored behind a display case, and the injury took me out of competition anyway. I sacrificed what could have been the love of my life for a dream that didn't even last.”

“Sloane, listen to me. You can't change the past. And even if you could, you have to remember that Esme is no longer the same twenty-year-old girl you met in college. She's lived an entire life without you. She got married, had kids, lost her husband...”

“I know,” I interrupt her, raising a hand to quiet her. Imagining all those moments I wasn't part of because I was stupid is still too painful.

“What I mean,” my sister continues, raising her eyebrows, “is that any... any attempt at reconnection between you two would be infinitely more complicated now. It's not just Esme who's at stake. It's also her children and the memories she holds from all these years.”

She's right, but that doesn't make her words hit me any less hard. It's not just a matter

of two ex-girlfriends meeting again. There are two eight-year-old kids who have already lost a father.

“I haven't talked about picking up where we left off,” I murmur, though part of me rebels against that idea. “I'm just processing the fact of seeing her again. Nothing more.”

“I understand,” Harper assures me, squeezing my shoulder. “Just... be careful, okay? With her feelings and with yours. Now, let's go with the others,” she suggests, nodding toward where the rest of my sisters are with Julie and Anika.

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Esme

“Please, can you stop already? My head is going to explode,” I protest, maybe raising my voice more than necessary.

Ana Sofia's complaints about her ski boots are driving me crazy.

She's been complaining all morning that they hurt her ankles, and no matter how much I try to reposition them, tighten the buckles, or loosen them, nothing seems to work.

I watch her limp toward me again, with that characteristic gesture of frustration, identical to the one her father made when some situation overwhelmed him.

“Mom, I really can't,” she insists, taking off her boots and throwing them on the ground. “They're destroying my feet.”

Theo watches us from a few yards away, already tired of waiting. We're an hour behind schedule, and the day threatens to become a real disaster.

“Look, let's go to the ski school, see if they can do something!” I give in, picking up the boots from the ground with a gesture that's maybe too brusque.

But when we arrive, I immediately regret it.

“Well, I didn't expect to see you here,” I sigh.

I find Sloane sitting in an office with the door open, and when she sees me, she gestures for us to come in.

“Anyone can handle this, really; it's silly,” I rush to announce. “It's just that Ana Sofia is having problems with her boots and...”

“Of course, let's see what's wrong with this little champion's boots,” she interrupts with a smile, getting up to approach us.

My daughter nods, handing over the footwear with a look of hope that breaks my heart, and remains seated, swinging her legs in the air while Sloane examines them.

“The problem is they're too stiff for her,” she explains, indicating for me to come closer.

“They're good boots, but see this part? It's designed for skiers with more experience. Look, press here,” she insists while guiding my hand toward the back of the boot, and our fingers brush, making me more nervous than I should be.

“They're from a coworker's daughter, and she assured me they were very good.”

“They are,” she assures me, gently stroking my left arm. “They're just not right for your daughter right now.”

Shit, that caress immediately transports me to another time and another place. To when my naked body literally trembled under her hands.

I shake my head, trying to push those thoughts from my mind.

Luis has barely been dead for two years.

Feeling this, whatever I'm feeling, seems a bit rushed.

And Sloane is history. Maybe it could have worked, maybe we could have had a wonderful relationship, but she was the one who decided to end it, not me.

“The problem is she needs different boots,” she explains. “These are too advanced for a beginner skier, even if she progresses very quickly like she does. They'll end up hurting her or even causing an injury. We have some in the store that would be perfect for her.”

“New boots?” I ask, feeling a knot form in my stomach when I see my daughter's eyes.

“Yes, she needs ones with a softer flex,” Sloane insists. “With them she'll progress much faster, and above all, her feet won't hurt. At this rate, in a couple of days, she might not want to keep skiing.”

The girl looks at me with those abandoned puppy eyes she puts on when she wants to get something, and I break inside.

Since Luis died, every extraordinary expense is a small earthquake that opens cracks in our tight budget.

We had barely started paying the mortgage on our first house, and maintaining ourselves on one salary is complicated.

“Come here for a moment,” I whisper, taking her by the elbow to move us away so Ana Sofia can't hear us.

“You see, things are... somewhat complicated since Luis passed away.

This trip is already a financial effort for me, and I don't even know if the kids will want to keep skiing or if we can afford it. Buying new boots right now..."

"Wait, I think I have a possible solution," she announces, leaving the office before I can respond.

I breathe deeply, cursing the moment I agreed to come here.

It's not that I'm worried about admitting in front of Sloane that I'm tight on money.

There's nothing to be ashamed of. Of course, she probably doesn't understand it; she was born into a very wealthy family and has never had to worry about those things.

What really worries me is disappointing my daughter.

At eight years old she understands I can't buy her everything I'd like to, but I know it's hard for her.

"Look, these boots belonged to my niece Lumi," she explains, sitting next to Ana Sofia when she returns to the office.

"She only used them a couple of times before they started getting too small. You know how much feet grow at these ages. They have the perfect flex for you, kiddo," she adds, addressing my daughter, who looks at them as if they were the most beautiful thing in the world.

The girl smiles while trying on the boots, practically jumping with joy, but suddenly, I discover something that makes me sigh. In her rush, Sloane forgot to remove one of the tags. They're not from her niece; they're new... and the price is absolutely crazy.

"Are they really for me?" my daughter asks.

“Of course, they're already too small for Lumi,” Sloane insists.

I just smile while stroking Ana Sofia's hair.

I don't mention that I saw the tag. I don't mention that I know perfectly well they're new and very expensive boots.

Instead, I give her a look that I hope conveys everything I can't express with words.

Gratitude. Confusion. And something else I don't dare name.

“Thank you so much,” I sigh, placing a hand on her waist.

“The girl deserves it,” she responds with a smile and a wink.

And as we leave her office at the ski school, I wonder how much Sloane has changed in these last years.

The impulsive and ambitious young woman I knew, the selfish one who put her Olympic dreams above everything else, seems to have given way to a much more centered woman.

And that, for some reason, makes my heart race in a way I hadn't experienced in a long time.

“Would you like to learn how to make croissants?” River's question catches us by surprise when she approaches us in the resort cafeteria.

“Mom, can we?” the twins ask almost at the same time.

“I'm sure River has better things to do, besides, it's a very nice afternoon to go to

town and...”

I stop, because it's clear from the faces they're making and the way they're putting their hands together, as if they were praying, that the idea of croissants appeals to them much more than taking a walk.

“I have the afternoon free, and I'm going to be making some croissants and cookies with my niece, so they won't be in my way at all. It'll be fun, and I'm sure you could use a few hours of rest. Being a mother has to be exhausting,” she adds with a wink.

The twins look at me with wide eyes, waiting for my approval, and I can only shrug and let them go. Even so, the idea of having a few hours to myself feels almost strange. Since Luis died, I've barely had time to breathe, always watching them or working. Always in survival mode.

“It's no trouble, really,” River insists. “It'll be fun. Besides, Anika took Harper and Julie to San Francisco to show them some tech investments, and I could use the kids' company.”

Before I know it, I find myself alone, looking out the window and not really knowing what to do with the hours I just gained.

“Would you like to ski for a while?”

Sloane's voice startles me. Suddenly, she's standing next to my table, with a smile on her lips.

I think they've set a trap for me.

“It's been many years since I put on skis,” I confess.

“It's like riding a bike,” she jokes. “You never forget. We can start with a very easy slope so you can gain confidence,” she suggests.

Maybe I should refuse. Perhaps invent some excuse. But there's something in her gaze, in the way the sun coming through the window illuminates her eyes, that makes me forget common sense.

“Okay, but don't laugh if I fall,” I agree.

A few minutes later we're on the chairlift going up to the top of the mountain. Our bodies almost pressed together in the reduced space. Every time it sways, her shoulder brushes mine, sending small electric shocks through my entire body.

“So... environmental lawyer,” Sloane comments, finally breaking the silence. “I always knew you'd do something important with your life.”

“It's not as glamorous as it seems,” I smile. “I spend more time buried in legal documents than saving the planet.”

“Still, it's admirable,” she insists. “How did you end up in that?”

I breathe deeply, trying to organize a story that doesn't include the part about the year I spent crying when she left me.

“After finishing college, I worked for a while at an NGO,” I explain with a melancholic smile. “That's where I met Luis. He encouraged me to study law.”

I notice how Sloane tenses slightly when I mention my late husband, but she continues listening attentively.

“He was... incredible. So passionate about his work.”

The words get stuck in my throat. It feels too strange to talk about Luis with Sloane. It's as if two parallel universes of my life are crossing when they should never do so.

“I'm sure he was an extraordinary man,” she whispers, squeezing my knee with her hand.

“He was,” I nod with a long sigh.

Luckily, we reach the top before we can continue the conversation, because the tension in Sloane was starting to be more than evident.

At first, as we descend downhill, my movements are clumsy.

It's been a while since I skied. Even so, little by little, my body remembers the sensations.

It's as if every muscle, every tendon, preserved the memory of those college years when gliding through the snow next to Sloane was as natural as breathing.

She moves in front of me with that perfect technique that always fascinated me.

With precise, elegant turns, almost as if it were poetry in motion.

It's dangerously easy to fall back into that perfect synchronization with her.

Following her down the slope, as if a part of me had been waiting all these years to return to this dance.

The wind whistles in my ears, adrenaline pumps through my veins, and for a moment, only this exists: the mountain, the snow, and Sloane. Like eleven years ago.

I accelerate, trying to leave behind not only Sloane but also the memories that sneak into my mind.

The first day we skied together in college.

The time she taught me to go down a black diamond slope, the sensation of her hands on my waist while explaining the turns.

That night when we made love for the first time in her room.

But memories are faster than my skis. They catch up to me, wrap around me, awaken sensations I thought were forgotten. And the worst part is they don't feel like a betrayal to Luis's memory. They feel like a part of me that has been asleep, waiting to be rediscovered.

“Esme!” Sloane shouts with concern, stopping next to me. “Are you okay?”

I try to get up, more embarrassed than hurt.

“I'm fine, don't worry,” I assure her, brushing the snow off my suit. “I don't know what I was thinking.”

We do the rest of the route slowly and in silence, as if neither of us wanted to break the moment of connection.

“I've missed you so much,” she suddenly admits when we reach the base, lowering her voice until it becomes an almost inaudible whisper.

I don't know what to answer. I don't know what to feel when I hear her words. I'm practically trembling. That young woman who fell madly in love with Sloane Merriweather years ago no longer exists. She transformed into a lawyer, into a wife,

into a mother, and now into a widow.

And yet, something deep inside me still responds to her presence as if not a single day of separation had passed.

And that terrifies me.

“We should go back to the hotel,” is my only response.

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Sloane

Ana Sofia's scream echoes across the entire slope like the echo of a nightmare. Before I can process it, I'm skiing toward her at such speed as if I were in one of my competitions from years ago.

“Ana!” Esme comes behind me, and I pray she doesn't fall too in her rush.

The girl remains sitting in the snow, with one hand covering the right side of her chin, while her eyes fill with tears. Small drops of blood fall on the snow like tiny red flowers.

“Let me see, honey,” Esme whispers, kneeling next to her daughter and trying to catch her breath.

“It's just a scratch,” I murmur, though I'm not sure if I want to calm the girl or her mother. “You had the bad luck of landing on a branch that had fallen from one of the pines. Nothing serious,” I assure her.

Ana Sofia sobs harder, I think not so much from pain as from surprise and fright.

“Hey, champ,” I interrupt, taking off my gloves to dry her tears. “You know what? All the best skiers have scars. They're like medals of honor. You're nobody without a scar or two.”

Ana Sofia looks at me with wide eyes, as if she had just discovered a great secret.

“Do you have scars?”

“I have a bunch,” I admit, pointing to a barely visible line on my chin. “I got this one when I was about your age. I fell on a slope in Switzerland and thought it was the end of the world.”

“And what happened?”

“My sister River made me hot chocolate with marshmallows and told me the best adventures always come with some scar to tell. And she was right. I’ll show you the one I have on my knee later. That one is really big.”

Esme gives me a look I don’t quite know how to interpret, but there’s something in it that makes me feel like we’re back in those college days when we thought the world was ours and everything seemed possible.

“Do you want to keep skiing, or would you prefer we call it a day?” I ask, though I shift my gaze toward Esme, seeking her approval.

“I want to keep going,” she responds immediately, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her pink jacket. “But... can you stay close, Mom?”

“Of course I’ll stay,” Esme assures her, standing up and brushing the snow off her jeans.

During the next hour, I ski with Ana Sofia down the green slope, not separating from her for an instant; the last thing I need is for her to fall again.

Esme watches us from the side of the slope, talking on the phone intermittently.

Her conversations reach me in fragments, but the words I manage to hear hurt like

stabs to the heart.

“...the opening of the new office...”

“...discussions about the partnership...”

“...I can't commit to full time...”

“...I need the extra money, but the kids are still small...”

“...I prefer to maintain flexibility...”

Small fragments that tell a story of struggle. A mother who is rejecting the opportunity for a brilliant professional future to better care for her children.

Exactly what I wasn't capable of doing eleven years ago for her.

Exactly what I should have done if I had been half as brave as Esme.

“Sloane! Look!” Ana Sofia shouts while making a perfect turn. A shout that pulls me from my thoughts, from a mind divided between the present and the ghosts of the past.

“Incredible!” I yell. “You're a star, seriously.”

When we finish the lesson, Esme puts her phone in her jacket pocket with a gesture I know too well. Contained disappointment. Frustration disguised as kindness.

“Is everything okay?” I ask while helping the girl take off her skis.

“Yes, just... work stuff, you know,” she responds with a smile that doesn't reach her

eyes. “Nothing important.”

But it is important.

I can see it in the way she avoids my eyes or how her shoulders have tensed slightly. In the way she sighs when she thinks I'm not watching.

“Mom?” Theo suddenly appears when we reach the resort, running toward us with his cheeks red from the cold. “River taught me how to make French hot chocolate! She says it's a secret recipe, but now I can teach it to you guys.”

“Really? And is it good?”

“It's delicious. Though I think I need a little more practice. Do you want to try it? And Sloane too?” he adds, turning toward me with adorable shyness.

Before we can answer, the four of us are sitting in the hotel cafeteria in front of cups of hot chocolate. Theo watches us nervously, while his sister drinks the first sip with a dramatism that would be fitting for a professional food critic.

“It's...” she makes an almost theatrical pause that reminds me of River when she presents her desserts. “It's delicious!”

Esme's proud smile could melt all the snow at Silver Peaks.

“Here, let me try,” she says, raising her eyebrows before bringing the cup to her lips.

I watch her close her eyes while savoring the chocolate, the same way she used to when tasting my attempts to replicate River's recipes during the months we shared an apartment in college.

“Oh my God, Theo. This is incredible,” she confesses, and the boy practically melts with happiness. “Did you really make this all by yourself?”

“Well, River helped me a little. But she says I have a natural talent for cooking,” he adds.

As if she had been summoned by mentioning her name, my sister appears next to us with that mischievous smile that announces she's plotting something.

“Did someone mention my secret hot chocolate?” she asks, winking at Theo before stealing a sip from Ana Sofia's cup. “Mmm, not bad at all, little apprentice. Though I think you put too much cinnamon in it.”

She gives me a look that clearly says: “I see how you're looking at her, and you need to relax,” but instead of responding, I just roll my eyes.

“You've practically adopted my son,” Esme jokes.

“What can I say! I think he likes cooking more than skiing,” she jokes, sitting in an empty chair and stealing a piece of Theo's cookie. “Or maybe it's the teacher. I'm nicer than Sloane.”

I try to protest, but River knows me well and attacks first.

“Do you know Sloane has a lot of weird habits?” she asks. “I once saw her do a rain dance because she thought it wouldn't snow enough for a ski competition.”

“It wasn't a rain dance, idiot!” I protest. “I was stretching my muscles.”

“Yeah, while singing.”

Esme lets out a laugh, I think the first since she arrived, and that simple gesture takes me back to those days when just seeing her laugh made me forget any worry.

“Well, to be fair,” Esme intervenes, wiping away tears of laughter, “in college she ate a banana before every exam because she thought it gave her luck.”

“That was supposed to be our secret, traitor,” I complain.

Soon, River dedicates herself to telling crazy stories to the kids while we watch her with a cup of coffee by the fireplace.

We remain in a silence that isn't exactly comfortable, but isn't as tense as the first days either.

It's more... strange. As if we're both waiting for the other to say something, but neither dares take the first step.

“They adore your sister,” Esme finally comments, nodding toward her children.

“She's always been good with kids,” I admit. “When Lumi was a baby, she was the only one who could calm her tantrums.”

“Can I ask you something?” she says suddenly, absentmindedly turning the cup between her fingers.

“Of course.”

“Earlier, when I was talking on the phone... did you hear something? I saw you stop sometimes near me and...”

Shit.

“I really wasn't trying to eavesdrop on the conversation or anything like that,” I rush to respond, gesturing with my hands and getting very nervous.

Esme sighs and leans back against the sofa, as if wanting to take a weight off her shoulders.

“They've offered me to be a partner at the law firm where I work. It's... it's what I always wanted. What I'd been waiting for years.”

“There's a but, isn't there?”

“Yes, I'd need to dedicate time I don't have. The kids have already lost their father. I can't... I can't disappear from their lives too, no matter how much I need that money right now.”

“I understand...”

“No,” she interrupts me, raising a hand and shaking her head.

“Please, don't tell me you understand. Because you...

you chose the complete opposite. And I'm not judging you for it, seriously, Sloane.

I'm not going to pretend I understood your motivation back then for choosing a competition over your girlfriend.

I don't understand it now either, but I guess each person is different.”

“And look where that choice led me,” I add with a bitter sigh.

“It led you to the Olympics. To a bronze medal. Few people can achieve something

like that.”

“It led me to being alone,” I correct. “It led me to lose the most important person in my life for something that, in the end, didn’t last more than a few months.”

“The most important person in your life?” she asks almost fearfully.

“Mom! Sloane! Come see this!” Ana Sofia’s voice interrupts the spell.

We get up from the sofa as if we’d been caught doing something forbidden and follow the girl.

“River is taking us tomorrow to a restaurant that’s at the top of the mountain to make brownies and watch the sunset,” she announces excitedly.

“She says that way you two can be alone,” Theo adds with the innocence typical of eight-year-olds, making both Esme and me blush.

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Sloane

Dinner in Harper's penthouse unfolds like all Merriweather family gatherings: with lots of food, laughter, and at least three conversations happening at the same time, but somehow managing to interweave.

What I didn't expect is how easily Esme and the twins have integrated into the chaos.

When River invited them to dinner with us, I thought it was a terrible idea. I thought Esme would make some kind of excuse, but no. It took her less than a second to say she'd be delighted to join us.

And here we are now. Ana Sofia, sitting between Lumi and River, the three of them engrossed in a very serious conversation about which forest animals would be the best skiers. For his part, Theo has found in Julie the perfect audience for his encyclopedic knowledge about rocks and minerals.

While I observe the conversations, I realize Esme is doing the same from the other end of the table. There's an expression on her face that moves me: the joy of a mother seeing her children happy.

"Are you okay? You look... I don't know, like you're processing something," Harper murmurs, leaning toward me so no one can hear us.

"I'm fine," I lie, though I know my sister doesn't believe it.

"Sloane..."

“Seriously, I’m fine. It’s just... strange, you know? Seeing her here, with her kids, being part of this,” I admit, making a vague gesture with my finger toward the table full of people. “It’s like watching an alternative life somehow.”

“A life you could have had,” she confirms.

I simply nod slowly. I imagined a life with Esme a thousand times. Yet, I can’t get out of my mind what it would have been like to be there when those kids took their first steps, when they said “Mommy” for the first time, when they lost their first tooth.

“Yes, a life I could have had,” I admit quietly.

At the other end of the table, my twin sister pours a new glass of wine while discussing something with Esme about environmental regulations affecting local businesses. It should be a boring conversation, but the intensity with which they talk makes it seem fascinating.

Soon, Harper joins the conversation across the table, discussing the merits of installing solar panels at the resort.

“Long term it would be more profitable and sustainable,” she assures. “Right, Sloane?”

I realize she’s included me in the conversation even though I have no idea what they’re talking about. I simply nod, trying to focus on something other than Esme’s smile. For a moment, it’s as if we’re twenty again and planning how to change the world together.

“Sloane always liked sustainable energy projects,” Esme assures, making my sisters speechless and River practically choke on her wine glass. “Do you remember when you tried to convince the university to install solar panels in the dorm?”

“Sloane?” my twin sister asks with surprise.

“Yes, for a while she was quite the activist in college. When we were... Sorry,” she apologizes, realizing she was about to step into uncomfortable territory.

“An activist?” Ivy insists.

“She once chained herself to a tree they were going to cut down to make room for a new parking lot,” Esme assures, and I don't know where to hide anymore. “Then I don't know what happened, because she suddenly abandoned all those activities when we two...”

The entire table looks at me with amazement, and I can see the amusement in my sisters' eyes. Especially River's, who seems to be enjoying it enormously while listening to the things I was capable of doing for love.

The rest of dinner continues with quite embarrassing stories about my college days (courtesy of Esme), anecdotes about River's mischief (courtesy of all the sisters), and an impromptu competition about who can tell the worst joke (won by Theo with something about rocks I didn't even understand, but that made everyone laugh at how bad it was).

When we finish dessert, Lumi takes Esme's twins to play with the console while the adults stay at the table to make good use of a new bottle of wine.

“Sloane has talked about you a lot over the years,” Julie confesses, and I feel myself turning red to the tips of my ears.

“Oh, really?” Esme asks, raising her eyebrows and looking at me with an expression I can't decipher.

“I have very good memories of that time,” I rush to clarify. “College anecdotes and those things.”

“Mmm,” Esme murmurs.

“You know what?” Ivy intervenes, realizing I’m starting to feel uncomfortable. “I think we should organize some activity for tomorrow afternoon. That way the kids will have the whole day busy. How about a snowshoe excursion?”

“Sounds great!” River exclaims, raising her glass in an imaginary toast. “Morning cooking class and afternoon picnic at the waterfall shelter.”

“Are there waterfalls around here?” Esme asks.

“They’re frozen in winter, but they’re spectacular,” I explain. “It’s about a two-hour hike, perfect for kids Ana Sofia and Theo’s age.”

Esme looks toward the living room, where the three kids are engrossed in what appears to be the electronic version of a rather violent alien invasion.

“I think they’d love it,” she admits with a sigh. “But I don’t want to intrude on your family plans... It’s enough that they’re going to have a cooking class in the morning.”

“Not at all! It’ll be a pleasure to take them,” River interrupts. “For you two I’ve prepared something very special,” she adds, pointing at us with her finger.

“River...” I warn her.

“Don’t give me that look. Tomorrow is the day off at The Peak, our restaurant at 10,000 feet. You’ll be able to enjoy the best sunset views before dinner. It’s something unique, you’ll see. I’ll leave dinner prepared for you, but from there you’re on your

own. Remember the waiters are off.”

I hide my face in my hands so Esme can't see how red I just turned.

My sister is going too far. Luckily, Esme seems very excited about the proposal.

She's read an article about The Peak in a magazine and confesses it'll be a great opportunity to have the small restaurant to ourselves.

Even so, I'm going to kill River as soon as I get the chance. I swear she'll pay for this ambush.

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Esme

The cable car sways gently as we ascend toward The Peak, and I can't help but feel this is a perfectly prepared ambush by River.

The way she announced, along with Ivy that they'd take Ana Sofia and Theo all day, leaving Sloane and me “to watch the sunset from the restaurant without rushing, taking advantage of the day off,” sounded too innocent to be coincidental.

Still, here I am.

And if I have to be completely honest with myself, part of me appreciates this opportunity. All week I've been avoiding being alone with Sloane, aware that something is starting to change between us. Something that terrifies and attracts me in equal parts.

“Nervous?” she asks, leaning against the cable car window with that smile that used to melt me when we were twenty.

“Just curious,” I lie, though the sweat on my hands inside my gloves gives me away. “I've read that the views from up here are spectacular.”

“They are. You haven't seen anything like it, I assure you,” she nods. “Especially at sunset.”

Our eyes meet for an instant, and I feel that familiar tingling in my lower belly that I hadn't felt in years. The way she looks at me, as if memorizing every detail of my

face, transports me directly to our college days.

“Sloane...” I whisper, but she shifts her gaze toward the mountains.

“We're almost there,” she announces, though I detect some tension in her voice.

The restaurant emerges before us like something out of a dream, hanging among the clouds.

A structure of glass and steel that seems to float over the mountains, defying gravity.

As the cable car approaches, I can see the enormous windows that promise unbeatable views of the snowy valley stretching far below.

“My God,” I sigh. “This is incredible.”

“River has cared for every small detail of this place,” Sloane comments as the cable car doors open. “It's like her baby, you know? What do you think?” she asks while guiding me toward the restaurant entrance.

“That your sister is a genius. This is... this is art.”

The interior of The Peak leaves me speechless. The panoramic windows create the illusion that we're suspended in the air. The decoration is elegant and at the same time warm, with rustic touches that remind you of the mountain environment without losing the sophistication of a high-end restaurant.

“River has prepared our table in the private dining room. From there you get the best views,” Sloane indicates, nodding toward a door that remains closed.

Of course she has. Now I'm sure this is an ambush.

We sit facing the enormous windows, and for a few moments, I forget to breathe. The mountains extend to infinity, bathed in the golden afternoon light. The valley unfolds far below like a white canvas dotted with the snowy rooftops of the town.

“It's... it's like being in heaven,” I hiss, pressing my palm against the glass.

“Do you remember that time in college?” she asks suddenly. “When we went skiing in Vail and went up from Lionshead Village to the summit. You said something similar.”

The memory hits me like a slap. Vail. Our first trip together. We spent perfect days skiing, laughing, making love, discovering that what we felt for each other wasn't just friendship, but a passion we could barely contain.

“You told me you wanted to live in the mountains forever,” she continues, and her voice becomes almost a whisper. “That cities overwhelmed you.”

“And you told me you'd build me a cabin on the highest peak we could find,” I add, surprising myself by remembering every detail of that conversation. “That we'd live off snow and pure air.”

“We were very young,” she smiles, though I can notice the nostalgia in her eyes.

“Very young and very naive. Then life interrupted all those dreams.”

We stay quiet for a good while. Neither of us sure we want to advance in that direction, though part of me begs her to do so.

“How are the kids doing?” Sloane asks in an attempt to return to safer ground than memories of that time.

“They're having... a much better time than I expected,” I confess. “This place is doing them a lot of good. Ana Sofia is obsessed with skiing, and Theo... Theo smiles more now. It's been a long time since I've seen him so relaxed.”

“Silver Peaks has that effect on people,” she comments. “Harper always says it's a magical place. As if these mountains could heal the soul.”

I can barely concentrate on the flavor of the first course.

Scallops over roasted butternut squash cream, decorated with leaves that look like small works of art and accompanied by an excellent white wine.

The taste is extraordinary, but I'm too distracted by how Sloane's lips curve over the fork or the memory of her fingers inside me.

“River experimented for months to achieve this texture,” she tells me. “She says every dish should tell a story.”

“And what story does this one tell?”

“Wait, I have it written down,” she confesses, taking out her phone to read the text. “It's the first thaw of spring. The softness of melting snow mixed with the promise of something new that's about to come.”

Shit.

Those words hit me straight in the heart. Because it's exactly what I feel right now. It's as if something inside me is melting after years. As if something new is about to emerge, though I don't dare name it yet.

River has left everything too well prepared. Now I understand why she had that

reputation for driving any woman crazy.

And when the main course arrives—lamb cooked at low temperature with black truffle puree—Sloane ventures into more personal territory.

“Are you happy in Colorado?” she asks suddenly, while pouring me a glass of red wine.

“I couldn't tell you,” I admit. “I think the quick answer is no. And you? Are you happy here?”

“I'm starting to be,” she whispers, taking my hand across the table.

The sun begins its descent behind the mountains as we finish the lamb dish. The sky colors change from blue to gold, then to orange, and finally to a soft pink that reflects on the snow as if the entire mountain were bathed in the light of a million candles.

“Come,” Sloane sighs, standing up and extending her hand. “From the terrace you can see much better.”

The contact sends an electric shock through my entire body, and from the way her fingers tense around mine, I know she felt it too.

The Peak's terrace is a marvel of engineering.

Protected from the wind, but completely open to the views, it allows us to contemplate the sunset spectacle without glass barriers.

The cold air makes me shiver, but the caresses on my lower back that follow make the low temperatures suddenly stop mattering.

“Fuck,” I mutter through my teeth when the sun begins to disappear behind the highest peaks.

The sky transforms into a canvas of impossible colors.

Deep reds mix with bright oranges and soft pinks, while the first stars begin to twinkle shyly in the distance.

The mountains are silhouetted like dark shapes against this symphony of light, and for a moment, the entire world seems to hold its breath.

“This is... the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,” I admit in a whisper.

“It's much better being next to you,” Sloane adds, and when I turn toward her, I discover she's not looking at the sunset. She's looking at me.

“Sloane... please,” I hiss, but I don't know what else to say.

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened?” she asks quietly. “If I hadn't been such an idiot... if I had chosen you and not the Olympics.”

“Many times,” I confess before thinking about what I just said.

“I wonder about it every day,” she admits, placing her hands on my waist and moving closer to me.

I know I should move away, take a step back, keep my distance. But I can't. It's as if I'm enchanted by her closeness, by the intensity of that gaze, by the way her hands cling to my waist.

“Esme...” she whispers my name as if it were the most beautiful thing in the world.

She moves closer, and I can feel the warmth of her body despite the freezing air. She releases one hand to caress my cheek, and I close my eyes at feeling the contact of her skin against mine.

“I haven't done this since...” I start to say, but I stop.

“I know,” she responds, moving closer until her forehead rests against mine.

We remain like this for moments that seem eternal. My heart races remembering her naked skin against mine, the heat of her sex when she was aroused, those little moans that drove me absolutely crazy.

She slowly closes her eyes, and I can feel her breath against my skin. My body responds in ways I had almost forgotten, every nerve ending between my legs wanting much more.

But a strong gust of wind gives me the perfect excuse to separate. There's no point in recovering for just a few days something I know won't continue.

“We should go inside, the wind is picking up,” Sloane suggests, trying to force a smile, though I can see she's clearly disappointed.

Inside the restaurant, we take off our coats with clumsy movements, avoiding looking directly into each other's eyes. Wanting to deny, without succeeding, what we just felt on that terrace.

“What's happening?” I ask, looking toward the enormous windows.

“A storm has picked up,” she explains. “Sometimes, the weather changes very quickly in Silver Peaks.”

“The kids,” I sigh, jumping up. “I have to get back.”

“They're with my sisters. They would have returned to the resort hours ago. They're safe, don't worry.”

But I can't be calm. The image of my children lost in a storm, scared, is more than I can bear. Luckily, Sloane's phone rings just at that moment.

“River, thank God. Are you...?” she pauses, listening. “Yes, we're fine. The kids...? Perfect. How long...? I understand.”

She hangs up and turns toward me with an expression that's a mix of relief and something else.

“The kids are perfectly fine. They'll spend the night with Lumi in Harper's penthouse. River will stay with them, so they probably won't sleep; they'll play console games all night and tell ridiculous stories.”

“Fuck,” I murmur, putting a hand to my chest.

“But...” Sloane continues. “We can't go down tonight. The wind gusts are too strong for the cable car. It's not safe.”

“What do you mean?”

“That we have to spend the night here,” she responds, trying to avoid my gaze. “River says there are blankets and an air mattress in the pantry for this type of emergency. Also flashlights in case the power goes out. As long as we stay inside, we'll be totally safe.”

My heart skips several beats.

Alone.

We're going to spend the night alone. In a restaurant on top of a mountain, surrounded by a snowstorm.

After what almost happened on the terrace.

“Are you... are you okay with this?” she asks, making an uncertain gesture around us, though I notice the nervousness in her eyes.

I prefer not to answer. Part of me is terrified about what might happen.

My body reminds me that we'll sleep together after eleven years of separation, and a certain area between my legs seems very excited about that opportunity.

My mind, however, screams that I'm no longer a college student, but an adult and, on top of that, mother of two children.

And something tells me that if I sleep with Sloane, I'll regret it the next day.

“I guess we don't have a choice,” I admit, shrugging.

“I guess not,” she repeats, though she doesn't seem bothered by the situation.

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Esme

The air mattress makes a strange noise against the floor as Sloane tucks me in with the second blanket.

“Better like this?” she whispers, adjusting it around my shoulders.

“Perfect,” I assure her, though I'm convinced my heart has skipped several beats.

Despite the storm, the moonlight creates perhaps too intimate an atmosphere that makes everything seem like a dream. Or a nightmare, depending on how you look at it. I'm still not sure which of the two options I prefer.

I turn to the opposite side and give her my back. It's a pathetic defense, I know, but I need to put some kind of barrier between us. Even if it's something as fragile as changing position on a mattress that's barely three feet wide.

“Are you comfortable?” she murmurs while covering herself with the blanket too.

“Yes,” I lie. “I'm just very sleepy.”

Comfortable. Fuck, what a stupid word.

There's nothing comfortable about this situation.

I'm lying next to the woman who broke my heart eleven years ago.

We're alone in a restaurant on top of a mountain, surrounded by a fucking snowstorm.

And worst of all is that every fiber of my being is screaming for me to turn around and bite her clothes off.

I listen as her breathing gradually becomes deeper, and the sound transports me to those college nights when we used to fall asleep next to each other after studying late. Those times when the world was ours and the future was nothing more than a promise waiting to be fulfilled.

Now, the future seems more like shit. At least for me. The twins will need more and more time and money. I know very hard years await me.

I close my eyes and try to concentrate on more neutral sounds. On the wind that still lashes the windows. The slight hum of the heating system. Anything other than Sloane's breathing or the way the mattress sinks slightly toward her side.

But then, my left foot accidentally brushes her calf.

The contact is minimal, almost imperceptible, though it makes me too nervous. I tense immediately and pretend to be deeply asleep while withdrawing my leg as if I'd been burned.

Her breathing doesn't change, still installed in that deep, slow rhythm of sleep, but now I'm even more aware of every small movement. Every time she turns slightly. Every time she sighs in her dreams. Every time the mattress creaks under her weight.

It's torture.

Exquisite torture, because my level of arousal is starting to go through the roof.

The hours pass slowly. Every time I'm about to fall asleep, some sound or movement reminds me I'm next to Sloane, on a mattress where we barely fit together and dressed only in underwear and a t-shirt.

At three in the morning, I surrender to insomnia and simply lie looking at the ceiling. And it's those moments of absolute stillness that terrify me. When my mind begins to wander into dangerous territories.

I turn my neck, and she looks so peaceful next to me that it makes me want to kiss her. Fuck, she's beautiful. Her lips slightly parted, her hair tousled on the improvised pillow we made with our jackets. She seems so different from the hyper-competitive woman I knew in college.

Would it have worked? If she had chosen differently eleven years ago, would we have lasted as a couple?

The question hurts. Part of me, one I've tried to silence for years, still believes yes. That what we had was real, that it would have been worth making any sacrifice to try.

But my life now is very different.

I'm a mother. I'm a widow. I have responsibilities that go far beyond my own desires.

Ana Sofia and Theo have already lost their father.

How would they react if suddenly a woman appeared in our lives?

Would they see Sloane as someone trying to take Luis's place?

Or worse yet, as someone coming to steal their mother's attention?

And then there's work. The offer to be a partner at the Denver firm is everything I've dreamed of for years: the opportunity to establish myself professionally, to give my children the financial stability they deserve.

Could I ask them to move to Montana? To leave behind their friends, their school, the few physical memories they preserve of their father? All for the possibility, not the certainty, of trying something with Sloane?

Something that might not work...

It's too much. Too many changes, too many risks, too many unknowns.

My heart says one thing. My head says something entirely different.

And in between is me, paralyzed by indecision, watching the woman who could have been the love of my life sleep if circumstances had presented themselves differently.

That morning, I wake up with the strange sensation that something has changed during the night.

With sleep, it takes me a few seconds to process what feels different, until I realize there's a body pressing against my back. An arm around my waist. A hand dangerously close to my breasts.

Sloane is sleeping, spooning me like when we were in college.

And the worst part is it feels good. It feels natural.

Too natural.

And it's at that moment when I realize I'm aroused. Very aroused. That my body is

responding to her closeness in a way I had completely forgotten. The heat spreads from my belly downward, and I have to bite my lip to keep from moaning when I slide a finger between my legs.

This can't be happening.

I try to move away carefully, to slip out of her embrace without waking her. I need to go to the bathroom and end this sensation, but I accidentally hit her arm.

“Mmm?” Sloane wakes up, opens her eyes lazily, and takes a few seconds to process our position.

When she realizes, she separates from me so fast she almost falls rolling off the mattress.

“Fuck, I'm sorry,” she apologizes, hiding her face in her hands. “I didn't want... really, I didn't realize my hand...”

“It's fine. You were asleep.”

“Yes, but... shit, Esme, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. I swear I wasn't conscious that...”

“It's okay, really,” I whisper, taking her hand in mine to squeeze it.

“Coffee?” she asks, probably trying to forget what happened.

“That would be good,” I sigh.

But when she gets up, my heart skips several beats and I forget to breathe. The t-shirt she's wearing shows her nipples too much and when she stretches her arms upward to

wake up, it reveals black lace panties that cover less than would be appropriate. Shit.

I look away immediately, as if I were a teenager whose parents caught her doing something forbidden. And judging by her smile and how she's blushed, I think Sloane noticed.

"The storm has passed," I announce, trying to disguise while shifting my gaze to the window.

"It seems so. Though they'll probably have to check the cable car before we can go down. It'll take a while, it's very early," she explains. "Look!" she whispers suddenly, approaching with two cups of freshly made coffee.

I turn to see what caught her attention, and I'm breathless.

"River always says the sunrise from The Peak is even better than the sunset, but I admit I'd never seen it. You know I have trouble getting up early," Sloane confesses, positioning herself behind me.

And she's right, because watching the sunrise at 10,000 feet transcends any description. The sun bathes each of the mountains, starting with the most distant ones, and the entire valley spreads below us like a white and immaculate canvas.

"It's..."

"Perfect," Sloane whispers near my ear.

"Do you remember that morning in Switzerland when you came with me to a competition? You said it was as if the entire universe was ours."

"We were very young," I remind her.

“We were happy,” she corrects. “Very happy... until I screwed up. And now I regret it every day.”

She presses against my back, and I can feel her breasts pressing through her t-shirt. I wish she had put on a bra, because I have to make an effort not to lean back and kiss her.

“Sloane...” I sigh, though I'm not sure if it's a warning or a plea.

She doesn't respond, but places her hands on the window on both sides of my body without touching me, and our reflection in the glass projects such an intimate image that I have to look away.

She stretches like a cat, pretending she's waking up, but we're both too aware of what those touches provoke in our bodies. Her breathing has become more erratic, and every time I feel her nipples harden against my back through the thin fabric of her t-shirt, I have to fight to keep from moaning.

It's a dangerous game. Too dangerous. We both know it. Every touch, every breath, every second we remain in this position brings us closer to a point of no return.

“Do you think the cable car will be ready?” I ask in a desperate attempt to break the spell.

“Mmm,” she murmurs against my neck and the sound vibrates like a caress.

She stretches again, pretending to want to reach her coffee cup that must be more than cold by now. She arches against my body, slow and sensual, and I have to gather all my willpower to stop her.

“Sloane...”

“What?”

“You know perfectly well what,” I respond, turning to look into her eyes.

Mistake.

Terrible mistake.

Because now we're face-to-face, separated by barely a few inches, and I know that desire in her gaze too well.

“Esme...” she whispers, slightly shifting her eyes toward my nipples.

“No. We can't.”

“Why not?” she asks, moving an inch closer and placing her hands on my waist.

“Because... because it's very complicated.”

“Life is complicated,” she responds. “But that doesn't mean it's not worth it.”

For a moment I allow myself to enjoy the contact. She draws me toward her with a tenderness that breaks my heart, and when I close my eyes, I imagine we're those twenty-year-old girls who swore eternal love.

But we're not.

“I have children, Sloane,” I whisper, opening my eyes suddenly. “They are my priority. I can't... I can't risk their stability for this.”

“For this?” she repeats with pain.

“I don't know,” I admit, letting out a long sigh. “I don't know what we are. I don't know what we could become either. And precisely because of that, I can't take the risk.”

“Okay, I understand,” she says, moving away from me slowly, though I can see she's hurt.

The sun has come up completely. It bathes the Silver Peaks mountains with a light that makes everything seem less real, as if we were characters in a dream that's about to end.

And maybe we are.

Because when the phone rings, when they announce the cable car is working again, when we return to the hotel, this will become another “what would have happened if...?” to add to our list.

Locked in the bathroom so she can't see me cry, I break inside.

It's too painful to realize that my feelings for Sloane haven't disappeared. It's as if they had just been sleeping, waiting in case she appeared in my life again someday.

That day has arrived, and now I don't know what to do.

My love for Luis was very different from what I felt for Sloane. Not better or worse, simply different. With him it was about building something solid, a predictable and stable life where we could raise our children. It was a mature, calm love, based on respect and the goals we shared.

With Sloane it was always fire. Passion, intensity, that feeling that together we could conquer the world or make it burn completely. It was an almost adolescent love in the

best sense.

But now I'm a very different woman. I can't afford the luxury of choosing love. Not when I have two small children who depend on me for everything.

I hit the wall and cry for everything I've lost. For Luis, for the dreams we shared that disappeared after his death. For Sloane, for what we were and what we could have been. For myself, for the woman I used to be before responsibility and pain changed me forever.

And I cry when I realize something terrible: that I'm not going to accept either of the two opportunities presented to me.

Not the job offer in Denver, not the possibility of having something with Sloane.

I'll choose the safety of the known, of keeping things just as they are.

And I'll do it only because it's easier.

Because changing, making any kind of change, requires courage I'm no longer sure I possess.

And that's what breaks my heart more than anything else.

Because it means I've let fear win. That I've chosen survival over life.

And I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself for it.

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Sloane

The door slam echoes through my entire apartment when I return from The Peak. I drop onto the couch without even taking off my boots, still processing what just happened up there.

“Fuck,” I mutter through my teeth, running my hands through my hair. “I was an idiot.”

I open a bottle of red wine and drink it directly, without using a glass or worrying about manners.

The Cabernet Sauvignon burns going down, but not as much as the humiliation I feel in my chest. For a moment, for one fucking moment, I thought Esme was about to give me a second chance.

The way she looked at me during dinner, how her cheeks blushed when our eyes met, the way her fingers trembled slightly when she picked up her wine glass.

And then, when I suggested we could try something... her response was as clear as a slap.

“I have children, Sloane. I can't risk their stability for this.”

I close my eyes and let out a bitter laugh. It's life's irony. Eleven years ago I was the one who didn't want to complicate my life. I was the one who chose my Olympic preparation over her. I was the one who thought Esme would always be there waiting

in case I decided to come back someday.

Now she's the one returning the favor, and it hurts even more, because I understand how she felt when I left her.

The phone vibrates on the table, and the name on the screen makes my heart race even before opening the message.

Esme: Would you like to give ski lessons tomorrow? The twins are excited.

I read the message three times. She'll let me teach her children, but not be part of her life.

I keep my fingers halfway over the keyboard. It would be very easy to tell her no. I could keep my distance, assign another instructor, and disappear for a few days until she leaves. Maybe it would be better to protect my heart before falling deeper into this hole.

Me: Of course. All the lessons they want. See you at 10 at the base of the green slope.

Because I'm a masochist.

Or a fucking idiot.

Or because I can't resist being near her, even though I know I don't have any chance.

Morning comes too soon, just when I had managed to fall asleep after a night full of memories from the past.

I spend almost an hour choosing what to wear, as if the color of my ski suit would change anything.

“You're an idiot,” I tell myself in front of the mirror. “These are ski lessons for kids, nothing more.”

But when Ana Sofia and Theo appear at the base of the slope, with their little faces full of excitement, and Esme waves at me smiling from the hotel terrace, I know I'm deceiving myself.

“Sloane!” the girl shrieks, running toward me like a small ball of energy. “Mom told us today we'll learn to make more advanced turns.”

“We'll see about that,” I smile, adjusting her helmet and trying not to shift my gaze toward where her mother is watching us. “First we have to warm up those legs. Did you have a good breakfast?”

“Croissants and hot chocolate,” Theo responds with a shy smile. “The ones River makes.”

“Perfect. You'll need lots of energy for today's lesson.”

During the first hour of class, I manage to maintain professional distance. I focus on teaching the correct technique, correcting posture, making sure the twins feel safe on their skis.

Ana Sofia is brave to the point of recklessness, she reminds me of my niece Lumi. She throws herself downhill without any fear. Theo is more cautious; he analyzes everything.

For moments, I almost forget the tension from yesterday at The Peak.

Almost.

“Why does your sister River cook so well?” Ana Sofia asks during a break, while they drink hot chocolate from their thermoses.

“Because she loves cooking and has practiced a lot.”

“Like you with skiing?” Theo interrupts.

“Exactly.”

“Have you skied since you were little?” Ana Sofia insists.

“Yes, pretty much since I learned to walk,” I respond. “My father put skis on us as soon as we could stay standing.”

“Were you better than your sisters?”

“Is this an interrogation, or don't you feel like continuing with the lesson?” I joke, giving the girl's helmet an affectionate tap.

“You didn't answer.”

“I was the most daring, certainly,” I admit, shrugging with a smile. “I always tried to go down slopes that were above my level. River used to say I had more scars than brain cells.”

The twins burst out laughing, and I realize how easy it is to talk with them.

It's during the next break when everything changes.

“Are you okay?” I ask when I notice Ana Sofia is quieter than usual.

The girl swirls the chocolate in her thermos, avoiding my gaze.

“Mom cried last night,” she sighs.

The words hit me like being run over by a freight train.

“She cried?” I repeat.

“We heard her from our room,” Theo adds with that serious voice he uses when talking about important things. “She doesn't do it very often, but I think this time was different.”

“Different how?”

“It's not like when she misses Dad,” Ana Sofia explains, who for a moment seems like an adult. “We know those tears well. Yesterday it was... I don't know. More complicated?”

My heart sinks. The image of Esme crying alone in her room breaks me inside, especially knowing that maybe I have something to do with those tears. That maybe, when I suggested we could try something, I stirred up feelings she'd rather keep buried.

“Did something happen when you were at The Peak?” Theo asks suddenly. “Because Mom was very happy the day before. The happiest I've seen her since... well, since before Dad died.”

“And then yesterday, suddenly, she was sad again,” his sister continues, shrugging.

“I think your mom is going through a lot of things lately,” I respond carefully. “Sometimes adults... well, life is complicated; you'll realize that later.”

“Do you like her?” Ana Sofia asks directly, leaving me breathless.

“What did you say?”

“Mom. Do you like Mom?”

I drop my hot chocolate thermos.

“Ana Sofia... I...”

“Because we like you,” she interrupts again. “You're fun. And you make Mom laugh. And Mom looks at you the same way she used to look at Dad.”

The mention of their father leaves me trembling. I'm sure he was a good man. Someone who wanted the best for his family and who has left an impossible void to fill. And here I am, complicating his widow's life when she just wants to move forward and raise her children as best as possible.

“If Mom were happy again... that would be okay,” Theo adds, lowering his voice.

“Yes, of course, of course it would be okay,” I respond carefully. “We all want her to be happy, right? And your dad, if he can see her, would also want her to be happy.”

“Then why is everything so complicated with adults?” Ana Sofia insists.

I don't have an answer for that. At least, not one I can share with two eight-year-old kids who have lost their father and who see how their mother struggles to find balance in her life.

A balance that I threaten just by being here.

The break goes much longer than normal. I share with them stories about Silver Peaks, about family traditions, about the races I used to have with my sisters when we were little. The twins listen attentively, asking questions and laughing at my anecdotes.

And with each of those stories, with each smile from the children, I realize I'm entering very dangerous territory. I'm getting attached. Not just to Esme, but also to the kids. And I know that when they leave, I'm going to have a really hard time.

"I don't want to go back to Colorado. I'm better here," Ana Sofia blurts out.

"This is very beautiful, but your mom has her job there," I explain.

"And can't she work here?" Theo insists. "There are lawyers in Silver Peaks too, right?"

"Well... there are many fewer lawyers than in Denver, I'm sure of that. This place is very small and lives off tourism. It's..."

"Yeah... complicated," Ana Sofia sighs, rolling her eyes dramatically.

And she's right. Everything is fucking complicated. Especially when I've hurt Esme so much that she'll never open her heart to me again.

That night, I decide to stop by the hotel bar, hoping to run into her. To apologize, to clear things up, to... something.

And there she is.

Sitting alone at a table by the fireplace, with a glass of white wine she's barely touched, watching the flames with an expression half thoughtful, half melancholic.

“Do you mind if I sit?” I whisper.

“Go ahead,” she responds, pointing to the empty chair next to her. “How were the twins today?”

“Incredible.”

“They adore you, you know? They haven't stopped talking about you all afternoon.”

“They're special kids.”

“Sloane, about yesterday...” she starts, but I interrupt her, raising a hand.

“Wait, let me talk first. I'm really sorry. I've barely been able to sleep. I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have tried anything. You're right, you have enough dealing with raising your children alone.”

She stares at me, and suddenly I'm not sure if I just messed up, because I swear there's disappointment in her eyes.

“It's ironic, isn't it?” I add with a bitter smile. “Eleven years ago I was the one who didn't want complications. The one who put her sports career above... above us.”

“Sloane...”

“No, it's true. And now you're the one who doesn't want to complicate your life. And you have every right in the world, really. I understand.”

She stays quiet for too long. Spinning the glass between her hands, watching how the wine reflects the firelight.

“I have to make a decision,” she says suddenly. “About the job offer in Denver.”

“When?”

“This week. At the latest.”

“It's a great opportunity. If you can get the kids to adapt to having a little less time with you, I think it's very good for your future.”

“It is,” she sighs. “Being a partner at a prestigious firm, establishing myself professionally, giving the kids financial stability...”

“Sounds perfect.”

Again, that look I can't identify, but that increasingly resembles disappointment.

“Why do you have to make this so easy?” she blurts out suddenly, after letting out a long sigh.

“Make what easy?”

“Letting me go. Again,” she adds with a snort while biting her lower lip with a pained gesture.

“And what do you want me to do, Esme?” I ask, confused. “Yesterday you made it very clear you didn't want complications. Do you want me to fight for something you yourself said you don't want?”

“I don't know,” she admits, and her eyes fill with tears. “I don't know what I want.”

“I don't understand anything.”

“Yeah, that's the problem, Sloane, you don't understand anything,” she snaps, getting up from the table and leaving me next to her half-drunk glass of wine.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Esme

“Go to hell, Sloane Merriweather,” I mutter through my teeth, throwing my phone onto the bed so hard it bounces against the wall.

The impact doesn't calm my rage. I run my hands through my hair, pacing back and forth across the suite like a caged lioness.

Sloane's message keeps echoing in my head like a slap: “Lessons canceled due to bad weather.

This way, you'll have more time to think about the offer they made you at that law firm.”

This way you'll have more time... What an asshole.

Last night, when we met at the bar, I hoped she'd fight for me. That she'd tell me not to go to Denver. I thought she'd say we'd find some way to make us work... even though I don't even know what “us” is.

For some strange reason, I imagined she'd promise me we'd build something together at Silver Peaks if I gave her a second chance. I thought she'd assure me my children would be happy here.

Like in fucking fairy tales.

But life isn't a fairy tale.

At least not for people like me.

Maybe it is for the Merriweather sisters.

They can do whatever they want with their lives.

They don't have to worry about money, or finding work, or raising two kids without anyone's help.

Sloane and her sisters were born with a fortune that gives them the luxury of doing whatever they damn well please.

I have to go back to Colorado and choose between giving my kids a better financial opportunity by sacrificing the time I'll spend with them, or spending more time together with less money.

It's all a big mess.

And even though it doesn't make much sense, I blame Sloane for it again.

“Mom?” Ana Sofia's voice startles me from my bedroom door and brings me back to reality. “Are you okay? You look angry about something.”

“I'm fine, honey,” I lie, trying to force a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. “I'm just... organizing some things.”

“Do we have to leave already?” Theo asks, appearing behind his sister with a worried little face that breaks my heart.

I can't lie to them anymore. It's been two wonderful weeks for them. I've seen them laugh, run, ski, be children without the constant shadow of their father's loss. And

now I have to tear them away from what they consider paradise and take them back to a reality none of us wants to face.

“In two days,” I sigh, sitting on the bed and opening my arms to give them a hug. “But we still have lots of fun left, don't you think?”

“Why can't we stay longer?” Ana Sofia insists. “We have so much fun here. And Sloane is super cool. And River teaches us to make cookies.”

“Because I have work in Colorado, kiddo. And you have school.”

“There are schools here too,” Theo protests. “We'd go to the same school as Lumi, and she'd introduce us to all the kids. She says the whole town knows her.”

Of course the whole town knows her. Lumi is Harper's daughter, and the Merriweathers practically own this perfect little town where everything is easy and beautiful and where they can spend months and months skiing.

Luckily, soft knocks on the door interrupt my self-destructive thoughts.

“Esme?” River's voice sounds from the hallway. “Can we come in?”

I open the door and find myself face-to-face with River and Anika, both with that perfect smile that makes me feel even worse.

“How are you guys?” River greets, crouching down to be at the twins' height. “I have a surprise to make up for having to cancel the ski lesson.”

“Ivy and Lumi will take you to the stables to see the horses while your mom comes with us to the spa. What do you think?” Anika adds, immediately capturing the children's attention.

“Horses?” Ana Sofia asks, raising her eyebrows and starting to hop from foot to foot.
“Can we ride them?”

“One of them is very calm, I think you can take a short ride even though there's snow,” River explains with a wink.

As expected, the kids run out of the room before I can say a single word, leaving me alone with River and Anika.

“You don't have to do this,” I murmur. “You've already done enough.”

“Do what?” Anika asks. “Try to make you enjoy your last days here?”

“No. Set a trap for me and take the kids away so I'm alone with you two. I assume you're plotting something.”

“Esme,” River interrupts, gently taking my arm. “Come with us, please. It'll be good for you to relax a little.”

And just because I'm too tired to keep arguing, because part of me desperately needs a moment of relaxation, I agree.

As expected, the hotel spa is spectacular. All white marble, dim lights, and the sound of water falling from small fountains. It's the kind of luxury I'm not used to, the kind of luxury that reminds me of everything I can't give my children.

“First time at a spa?” River asks as we enter a hot tub with panoramic views of the mountains.

“Not exactly the first time, but... it's not something I can afford very often,” I admit.

“I understand,” Anika nods. “When I started my company, I lived on instant coffee and precooked noodles. Any kind of luxury was unthinkable.”

I watch her through the steam. Anika, who can now buy whatever she wants after selling her tech company. Anika, who has the freedom to choose where to live, who to be with, what to do with her life. Not to mention she's soon to marry River Merriweather, who has even more money.

“Must be nice,” I murmur almost without realizing it. “Having that freedom.”

“What freedom?” River asks.

“To choose. To be able to do whatever you want without worrying about practical consequences.”

Suddenly, we fall into an uncomfortable silence. Anika and River glance at each other occasionally while the steam keeps rising, creating a mist that makes me feel like we're in another world.

“Esme,” River says finally, “can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What do you really feel for my sister?”

The question catches me completely off guard.

“I don't know,” I admit with a long sigh. “I mean... yes, I do. I still feel a lot for her. Too much. Much more than I should feel after eleven years, especially after how things ended between us.”

“Have you considered giving her a second chance?” she insists. “Trying something together?”

“For a moment, yes,” I confess, and saying it out loud hurts much more than I expected.

“The dinner at The Peak and later, spending the night together after the storm.

The sunrise. All of that awakened sensations in me I thought were forgotten.

Last night, at the bar, we talked for a while.

I hoped that... well, I hoped she'd fight for me.

A little, at least. That she'd try to convince me to stay.

But she didn't. Nothing. Not even a little bit.”

“And what does that mean to you?” Anika asks, lowering her voice to almost a whisper above the water's splashing.

“That she hasn't matured enough. That she's still the same Sloane from eleven years ago, the one who doesn't want to complicate her life,” I respond with a sting of bitterness.

“My job is in Colorado. My children's entire life is there.

Yes, it's difficult, but if she really wanted to try, she would have fought somehow, don't you think? I can think of a thousand things she could have done... and she did nothing.”

River exchanges a look with Anika that doesn't go unnoticed.

“What's happening now?” I ask angrily. “Is there something I should know?”

“My sister is an idiot,” River admits with a sigh. “She has a hard time channeling feelings. She always has.”

“I already know that; it's nothing new. Still...”

“Esme,” she interrupts, “I'm going to tell you something that almost no one knows. And I ask you please not to comment on it.”

I lean forward, intrigued.

“When Sloane got injured before the World Cup and her sports career went to hell, she fell into a very deep depression. So deep we were afraid she'd do something stupid.”

“What do you mean?” I sigh, though I don't want to know the answer.

“She was so down that she barely left her room.

She didn't eat, didn't talk to anyone. Fuck, sometimes she'd go a week without showering. We all thought it was because her career as a skier was over,” River takes a brief pause, as if saying the next words costs her a lot of effort.

“But during therapy we discovered it was something else. At that moment she understood she had let go of the person she had loved more than anything in the world. And all for a sports dream that was over.”

“And that person was...?”

“You, Esme. That person was you.”

I run my hands through my hair, not knowing what to say. Suddenly, the water temperature feels overwhelming.

“Since then she misses you in a way you can't even imagine and regrets every day letting you go,” her sister continues. “Sloane has never been truly happy. She just survives. In eleven years, she still hasn't gotten over it.”

“It's true,” Anika confirms. “Last year, when she came to visit me in San Francisco, she spent the whole night talking about you. About how she had ruined the best thing that had happened to her in life. And that was supposedly when she came to console me.”

“I don't understand,” I whisper. “If she regrets it so much, why last night...?”

“Because she's an idiot,” River responds. “And because she's scared. Scared you'll reject her. Scared of hurting you again. Scared her feelings aren't reciprocated. I don't know, she was always a little weird, no offense.”

“Reciprocated?” I can't help but let out a bitter laugh. “How can she think they're not reciprocated? Fuck, we almost slept together at The Peak.”

“Oh, really?” River asks, arching an eyebrow. “You hadn't told me that. Neither had Sloane.”

“River...” Anika warns, giving her a light elbow to the ribs.

“What? She's my sister. I already told you, that restaurant has a strange effect on people. You stay there alone, and suddenly you feel like... you know...” she jokes, making a gesture with her fingers, and I can't help but smile.

“I said almost,” I admit. “But I backed out.”

“Why? I mean, I just want to know the reason, if you don't mind me asking.”

“Because of the kids. Because of my job. Because I don't know what your sister wants. Because of the fear of trying again and everything going wrong again.”

River nods slowly.

“Esme, there's something else you should know,” Anika interrupts. “Something we're not proud of.”

“What?”

“We set a trap to get you to come here,” River confesses, swallowing before continuing. “All of this, the special offer, the ridiculously good price... we planned it so you'd meet my sister again.”

“What?” I sit up abruptly, suddenly feeling like the world is swaying around me. “Are you telling me that...?”

“That we couldn't watch Sloane suffer anymore,” Anika interrupts. “She's been carrying that guilt for eleven years. And when she told me she was still in love with you...”

“We thought maybe, if you saw each other again...” River adds.

“I can't fucking believe this,” I murmur, punching the water. “I can't believe you played with me like this.”

“Esme, wait...”

“Wait for what? For you to explain how you've manipulated my life? How you've used my financial needs to bring me here with a lie? You Merriweathers are a family of assholes. And that includes you too, Anika. You have life too easy,” I add before getting out of the pool, cursing under my breath.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Esme

Without the kids, the silence of my suite suffocates me.

I've been lying on the bed for two hours, just staring at the ceiling. The television stays on, but it's just background noise. The twins stayed overnight with Lumi after spending the afternoon with the horses and inventing adventures in the snow.

I know I should be happy. I came here for them, and Ana Sofia and Theo have been happier in these two weeks than in the previous two years.

And yet, every time I close my eyes, I can't get River's face out of my mind confessing that it had all been a trap.

That my trip to Silver Peaks, this rest opportunity I needed so much, was just another manipulation by the Merriweather sisters.

And the worst part is it worked.

Because, as much as it pains me to admit it, these days with Sloane have awakened something inside me that I thought was buried forever.

"Fuck," I mutter, jumping up from the bed.

I can't stay here all night, remembering on loop what happened and what could have been. I only have two nights left at Silver Peaks. I'm not going to waste one of them watching romantic movies on TV that will make me cry even more.

I put on comfortable jeans and a white t-shirt and decide to go down for a drink at the hotel bar.

And of course, I have to run into exactly the person I would rather not see.

She sits alone at a table, her back to me.

Three empty beer bottles form a perfect line in front of her.

She's wearing an oversized gray sweatshirt, and her hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail.

When the bartender serves her a new beer, she raises the bottle in a toast directed at no one in particular.

For a few moments, I'm about to turn on my heels and take refuge in my room again. But there's something in her posture, in the way her fingers drum nervously against the wood, that makes me walk toward her.

“Can I sit?” I ask, pointing to the empty chair next to her.

Sloane turns abruptly, as if my voice had scared her. Her eyes are slightly glassy from the alcohol, but the surprise in her gaze is genuine.

“Esme...” she sighs. “I thought you'd be having dinner with the kids.”

“They stayed overnight with Lumi. Ivy promised they could watch all the movies they wanted.”

I sit in the chair and signal the bartender.

“A whiskey, please. With ice.”

“Wow,” Sloane murmurs, raising an eyebrow. “I didn't remember you drank whiskey.”

“There are many things about me you don't know anymore,” I respond, maybe with more dryness than I intended.

I think it hurt her, because we fall into somewhat uncomfortable silence, as if someone had built an invisible wall between us. Sloane doesn't even look at me, she seems very focused on drinking her beer in small sips while I focus on the burn the whiskey produces going down my throat.

They say alcohol gives courage, but it also makes everything hurt more.

“River told me about the trap,” I finally blurt out.

Sloane tenses, and her hand stops halfway to the bottle.

“The trap?”

“Come on, Sloane. Don't tell me you didn't know. The special offer, the ridiculously low price, the fact that Julie signed everything so I wouldn't know it was a hotel from your family... all that shit.”

“I didn't know anything,” she interrupts me, turning to look at me directly.

“At least when they did it. I swear on whatever you want. I found out the morning you arrived at the hotel, when we miraculously ran out of ski instructors for your kids and I had to take charge of giving the lesson. It bothered me as much as it bothered you,” she adds.

There's something in her voice that pushes me to believe her. Or maybe I want to.

“Really, you didn't know anything?”

“I swear,” she confirms, staring at me with an intensity that takes my breath away. “If I had known, I never would have allowed them to do that to you. I never would have let them use your... your circumstances to bring you here.”

The word “circumstances” hurts me. Being widowed with two small children, my financial difficulties, the need for a cheap vacation for my kids. Everything River and Anika took advantage of to set their ambush.

“But I'm glad you're here,” she adds so quietly I can barely hear her. “No matter how bad the way they got you to come makes me feel, I'm very happy to see you.”

“You're glad? Yesterday you seemed delighted to make my decision to go to Denver easier.”

“Make your decision easier?” she repeats, frowning. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about how you encouraged me to accept it. As if you wanted me to leave as soon as possible. Almost as if you were happy I was doing it.”

Sloane runs a hand through her hair and lets out a long sigh.

“Fuck, Esme. Do you really think that? Do you think I want you to leave?”

“And what am I supposed to think?”

“I thought that was what you wanted to hear,” she explodes, raising her voice enough

for some heads to turn toward us.

“Because the day before, when we were at The Peak, you made it very clear you didn't want complications in your life.

That your kids were the priority and you couldn't risk their stability for 'this,'” she adds, making air quotes when pronouncing that last word.

“What was I supposed to do? Beg you on my knees to give me a second chance when you yourself had told me you didn't want to try? ”

“I... I didn't say I didn't want to try,” I sigh.

“Esme, look at me,” she interrupts me, placing two of her fingers under my chin to force me to look up. “I made the biggest mistake of my life eleven years ago, and not a single day has passed without me regretting it,” she confesses.

“River told me about your depression,” I admit, looking down.

Sloane tenses suddenly and withdraws her hand as if my skin burned.

“What exactly did she tell you?”

“That after you got injured, you sank so low they were afraid you'd do something stupid. That during therapy you discovered it wasn't about your sports career, but because you understood you had lost the person you loved and...”

“River shouldn't have told you those things. It's very personal.”

“Is it true?”

Sloane closes her eyes and lets out a very long sigh before answering.

“Yes, it's true. I was very bad, Esme. Very bad. But I don't want to talk about that anymore; it's been a long time.”

“Why did you never try to contact me?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. “After your injury, when you realized you had made a mistake, why didn't you look for me?”

“And what was I going to tell you? Hi, Esme, now that I can't compete and my life is shit, it seems like a good time for you to come back to me? Besides,” she adds, lowering her voice, “you were about to marry Luis. I saw photos of you on Instagram.”

“You saw them?”

“Yes,” she admits. “You were beautiful. And he... he seemed to make you so happy...”

The way her voice breaks tears my heart, and without even thinking, I take her hand in mine to caress it.

“Sloane...”

“You know what hurts me most?” she continues, intertwining her fingers with mine. “That you're right to be afraid, because I probably won't be able to give you everything you deserve.”

“Maybe,” I whisper, “maybe we've both changed enough to try again.”

Sloane looks at me confused, as if she doesn't understand what I just admitted.

“Can we go somewhere more private? I find it hard to talk about these things with so many people around,” I confess, making a circle in the air with my finger.

“Your room?” she asks. “Just to talk, of course,” she clarifies.

“Fuck, River made sure you got one of the best suites in the hotel,” she jokes as she enters.

I stand by the door, not really knowing what to do now that we're alone.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask. “There's a minibar.”

“I know there's a minibar, but no, I've had enough to drink for tonight,” she admits.

“Is what River said true? That you've never been truly happy since you left me.”

“It is,” she sighs. “I've had good moments, I've had fun. I've traveled, I've had some girlfriends. But happy... truly happy, no. I never have been. It was as if part of me had stayed frozen on that January night when I told you I couldn't afford distractions.”

Her words hit me straight in the heart. I know well what she means, because for a time I had the feeling that part of me had died along with our relationship.

“Luis made me happy,” I confess. “In a different way, but he made me happy. It was a calmer love, somehow more mature.”

“You deserved to be happy. And you're right about that. I was immature back then, but I've changed. Or at least, I'd like to think so.”

“I didn't mean it like that,” I rush to clarify. “What I mean is I never stopped

wondering what would have happened if we had stayed together. Especially when I found out about your injury, I often wondered if all that sacrifice was worth it. If you regretted it.”

“Ugh, if I regretted it...” she sighs, dropping onto the bed and stretching her arms above her head.

Shit, she's beautiful.

“How do you think it would have been?” I ask quietly, lying on the bed next to her. “If you had chosen to stay with me.”

“I don't know. We probably would have fought a lot. I was very stubborn, and you were very independent. Maybe we would have broken up anyway.”

“Or maybe we would have found a way to make everything work. Maybe we would have been very happy,” I correct, sitting up to straddle her hips.

“Esme...” she whispers, clearly aroused.

“Yes?”

“Do you think this is right? I don't want you to regret later...”

“Shh. We're two adult women,” I interrupt, placing two fingers on her lips to quiet her.

She doesn't need to be told twice. She raises her hand to caress my cheek with a tenderness that disarms me, and when I lean down to kiss her lips, I feel my last barriers explode.

The kiss starts soft, almost shy, as if we're both afraid of breaking such a fragile moment. But when I wrap my arms around her neck, when I feel how she sighs against my lips, all caution disappears.

“Fuck,” she gasps against my mouth. “I’ve dreamed of this so many times...”

“Me too,” I confess, not caring how vulnerable my voice sounds.

Sloane moves her hands down to my waist, sliding them under my shirt to caress my bare skin. It's a contact that burns and freezes me at the same time, awakening nerve endings that had been asleep for years.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks suddenly, pulling away enough to look into my eyes. “Because if you're not, we can stop right now. It's okay. I understand, really.”

“Shut up already, Sloane Merriweather!” I whisper, starting to unbutton her pants.

She smiles, and there's a sense of urgency in her movements, as if she also needs to undress me as soon as possible.

She makes me turn, positioning herself over me without stopping kissing me.

The weight of her body against mine feels familiar and strange at the same time.

Like a love song you know, but haven't heard in many years.

Sloane gasps while pulling up my shirt, slipping a hand under my bra while rubbing against my thigh.

“Easy there, tiger, we have all night,” I remind her with a wink.

But Sloane doesn't listen to me. She takes off my bra and separates slightly to run her gaze over my bare torso with an intensity that makes me blush.

“You're even more beautiful than I remembered,” she murmurs, leaning down to kiss my collarbone.

I close my eyes to lose myself in the sensation of her kisses, from my neck to my breasts. Sighing, moaning, needing her caresses, and when her tongue makes circles around my nipple, I arch my back, covering my mouth and muffling a moan against my palm.

“I don't give a shit if someone hears us,” she whispers against my skin. “I want to hear your moans.”

That simple phrase makes me sigh. It's as if time hadn't passed between us. Sloane undresses me with the same passion, with the same dominant attitude in sex, and my body remembers it as if it were yesterday.

But at the same time, it's different. We're no longer two twenty-year-old girls who made love with the urgency of someone who thinks they should reach an orgasm as soon as possible. Now every caress seems different, every kiss tastes like a second chance.

My underwear follows my pants. She takes it off slowly, tenderly, without hurry, as if she were enjoying every inch of my sex that's revealed. Then she stops and caresses my pubis with the back of her hand with a softness that almost makes me cry with emotion.

“Fuck, you're so perfect,” she whispers against my skin while kissing my belly.

Sloane takes off her clothes quickly, throwing them around the bedroom.

She bites her lower lip with desire, staring between my legs, and then grabs me by the ankles and opens them suddenly, settling over me.

She pulls my hair while I feel her teeth travel over my chin, she rubs against my sex, mixing her wetness with mine in a delicious friction that takes me back many years.

For a good while, everything disappears. There are just the two of us, lost in a world of sensations, of pleasure, of moans. Rediscovering a language I thought I had forgotten.

And when she gets up and leans down to blow gently between my legs, I let out a very long moan that tastes like surrender.

I open them instinctively while Sloane kisses the inside of my thighs, teasing me while sliding her palm over my sex before licking it.

She takes me again and again to the edge of the abyss, stopping just when she perceives I'm about to have an orgasm to start again.

She continues with that game for a while until finally, I let myself fall onto the mattress, screaming her name while waves of pleasure run through me from head to toe.

“Fuck,” I sigh, running my hands through my hair while she gently kisses my pubis.

“I've missed you so much,” she whispers with another kiss.

“Me too,” I confess, stroking her hair. “More than you can imagine.”

“What are we going to do now?” she asks.

“There is a vibrator in the closet.”

“Idiot. You know perfectly well I wasn't referring to that, but for now it'll do, we'll think later,” she jokes, rolling her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Sloane

The lamb River prepared practically gets stuck in my throat when Harper drops a folder on the table that none of us expected to see during a family lunch.

“Seriously, Harper?” I protest, slamming my fork against the plate harder than necessary. “Work documents during the meal? Are we going back to Dad's times, or what's happening now?”

“It's just an idea,” my older sister defends herself, shrugging with that expression of someone who has the situation perfectly under control that she usually uses in business meetings.

“Esme mentioned some concerns about the partner position at the Denver firm, and I thought maybe she'd be interested in taking a look at this first. Of course, it doesn't have to be right now.”

Esme raises her eyebrows, setting her red wine glass on the table cautiously.

“What kind of concerns?” she asks with surprise.

“The ones you mentioned to me earlier,” Harper indicates, opening the folder. “About the travel the new job would require, the long hours that would take you away from Ana Sofia and Theo, the pressure to bill a minimum number of hours that would practically force you to live in the office.”

From the other end of the table, River gives me a wink while cutting a piece of lamb.

Anika smiles next to her, and I can barely contain my rage.

“Why don't you mind your own business and leave us alone for once?” I whisper, taking advantage of Esme being distracted.

“I wouldn't call them concerns,” Esme corrects. “They're realities of that job. If I want a partner position at the firm, I have to make sacrifices.”

“Of course, of course,” Harper nods. “That's normal in law firms. But what if there was another way? Have you ever considered working for a company's legal department instead of a firm?”

“What do you mean?”

Harper spreads several documents on the table, charts and maps I recognize from the last board meeting.

“Our hotel chain is in full expansion,” she explains. “We have confirmed projects in Colorado and Utah. All in mountain areas, and all present unique environmental challenges.”

“And?” Esme asks, though I can see the interest in her gaze.

“And we need specialized legal help,” my older sister continues. “Not just to comply with existing regulations, but to stay ahead of them. To implement sustainable practices that make us industry leaders.”

Esme takes one of the documents and examines it carefully. It's a report full of technical terms that give me a headache every time I hear them in the few meetings I attend, but seem to fascinate her.

“This project is very well planned,” she comments. “But I see at least three areas where it could be improved.”

Harper smiles proudly. Esme has found in five minutes small gaps that our legal team missed.

“That's why I'm thinking of incorporating a full-time environmental lawyer. Someone who can help us do things right from the beginning.”

Esme looks up from the document, and I can see the wheels turning in her head.

“Are you offering me a job?”

“I'm presenting a possibility,” my sister rushes to respond.

“The headquarters would be here, in Silver Peaks.

Logically, you'd have to travel occasionally to places where new hotels would be located, but most of the work would be done from here.

You'd have a budget to hire external consultants and total autonomy to establish the protocols you consider necessary.”

Esme looks at her surprised, not really knowing what to say.

“The salary would be lower than what you'll probably receive in Denver, but life in Silver Peaks is much cheaper, and accommodation and food could be free if you decide to live in the hotel,” Harper adds.

“That project in Utah is very ambitious,” she comments, looking at the document again. “Do you really plan to build a completely sustainable resort? Renewable

energy, waste management, zero impact on the local ecosystem...”

“That's the plan,” my sister confirms.

Esme leaves the documents on the table and leans back in her chair, processing what she just heard.

“Can I ask you something?” she finally asks.

“Sure.”

“Is this real, or is it another trap like the offer to come to the hotel?”

The question catches all of us by surprise. I, again, didn't know anything, but I don't think any of my sisters expected something so direct. River puts a hand to her forehead, and Anika elbows her in the ribs to make her hide it.

“It's real,” Harper responds without flinching. “The projects exist, the legal problems too, and we need help. If that help comes from you, it would be perfect, but if you're not interested, we'll look for someone else.”

“It's not that I'm not interested,” Esme rushes to clarify. “It's that... this is a lot to process. Two weeks ago I didn't even know this hotel was yours, and now you're offering me to remake my professional career.”

“Not remake it,” my twin sister corrects. “Take it to another level. This is bigger than being a partner at a law firm, Esme. You'll have the opportunity to influence the practices of an entire industry.”

Just what I needed. Even Ivy is in on the plan.

“Wow, it's perfect, isn't it?” River interrupts, who has never known how to hide anything. “If you think about it, Esme needs a job that allows her to be with her kids. We need specialized legal help. Silver Peaks is the perfect place to raise children... Everyone wins.”

“Yeah, it's all too perfect,” I growl.

“It's not that simple,” Esme protests. “We're talking about changing my entire life and my children's, for an offer I didn't even know existed until a moment ago. All when I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“The best opportunities usually appear when you least expect them,” River insists.

Luckily, Harper realizes we're getting into dangerous territory and rushes to intervene.

“Take your time. It's an important decision. You don't have to answer today, not even close. Think about it in Denver if you want and let us know.”

“Can I take them? To study them more calmly,” she asks, pointing to the papers with her index finger.

Harper simply nods, and the rest of the lunch passes in a more relaxed atmosphere, though I can see Esme is distracted, mentally processing everything she just heard.

“Is manipulating other people's lives something you Merriweathers do naturally, or how does it work?” Esme protests as I walk her to her suite.

“I swear I didn't...”

“Yeah, right, you had nothing to do with it,” she completes for me.

“Exactly. But, Esme, you could look at those papers calmly.

River is a loudmouth, I know, but if you think about it coldly, what she said is true.

We need an environmental lawyer, and you are one.

Here you'd lead a quiet life, it's a good place to watch your kids grow, you'd have more free time, and...”

“And you'd be here,” she interrupts, letting out a sigh.

“Yes, that. We've been planning to hire a lawyer for months.”

“Months?”

“Months. You can ask anyone on the board of directors.”

Esme sighs and enters the suite, leaving the door open for me to follow.

“I'm not saying it's a lie,” she clarifies, leaving the folder on the living room table.

“I'm just saying the timing is very convenient.”

“And does that necessarily have to be bad?”

“I don't know,” she admits, dropping onto the couch. “It's that... all my life I've worked very hard to get things. You know I went to college on study scholarships. I've done the toughest internships; I've taken the cases no one wanted. I've earned every opportunity I've had.”

“And you think you haven't earned this?”

“I think this appears simply because I'm here. I think it's been planned from minute one. Because you or your sisters want me to stay. Not because I'm the best candidate for the position.”

I sit next to her on the couch, unable to avoid taking her hand in mine and squeezing it slightly.

“Can I tell you something without you getting angry?”

“Depends on what you tell me,” she responds a bit sharply.

“I think you're torturing yourself for nothing,” I assure her, pinching her chin between my fingers so she looks into my eyes.

“What really matters is whether that opportunity is good for you, if it interests you professionally, and if it would allow you to have the life you want. How it came about is the least important thing.”

“I don't want them to give me something out of pity,” she protests. “Or for convenience. Or because I'm your...”

She stops, as if she doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

“My what?” I ask.

“I don't know, Sloane. What am I to you? Because last night we slept together, and these days we've talked quite a bit, but I still don't know.”

“You are...” I start, but I also stop. Because I don't know how to finish that sentence without sounding like a teenager in love or like a woman who promises things she might not be able to fulfill.

“Exactly,” Esme says. “You don't know. And while you don't know, I can't make a decision that changes my entire life based on the hope that this, us, will work. Because right now, there's nothing at all, just an attraction that hasn't disappeared and one night of sex.”

“But...”

“But nothing. I'm not going to entirely change my children's lives and abandon my job for something that right now looks more like a teenage fling than a serious relationship. I'm not old enough for that kind of thing anymore. At least, not with two small children.”

Her words hurt me more than I want to admit. Because, deep down, I understand her fears well. After what I did to her eleven years ago, how can I ask her to trust that this time will be different?

“You know what? You're right,” I murmur, releasing her hand and getting up from the couch.

“I am?”

“Yes, as much as it hurts me, you can't base such an important decision on something we still don't know if it will continue. But you also can't reject a professional opportunity just because you don't trust me,” I add.

“I didn't say I don't trust you,” she protests, frowning.

“You don't need to say it. It's clear. And you have good reasons not to.”

Esme gets up too, opens her mouth a couple of times, as if she wants to say something, and the words can't come out of her mouth.

“Please, study the proposal from a purely professional point of view,” I suggest, stroking her left arm. “Forget about me, forget about us. Is it good for your career? Would it allow you to do the work you really want to do? Would it be good for your children?”

“And what if I say yes? What if I accept and then things between us don't work? Will I have to leave Silver Peaks? Will I have to take my children out of here when they've already adapted? You realize the conflict I'm facing, right?”

“I only know one thing. Harper doesn't play with money.

I don't even know what that job is about, because half the time I don't attend board meetings or, if I go, I fall half asleep.

But if Harper offered you the job, it's because she's investigated you.

She's asked for references; she's studied cases you've participated in.

She wouldn't hire anyone just for me. River would definitely do it, Ivy, possibly. But Harper, no. I can assure you of that.”

“I need time to think about it,” she admits with a sigh while running a hand through her hair. “Sloane.”

“Yes?”

“Last night... what happened last night, was it...? I'd like to know what it meant to you,” she asks, stopping me before I leave.

“The truth?”

“Yes, even if you tell me it was just sex, I want to know the truth,” she insists.

“It was the most real thing I've felt in eleven years,” I confess, nodding slowly.

Esme

On our last full day at Silver Peaks, Ana Sofia's scream freezes my blood.

My daughter slides out of control down the blue slope, her skis separating in opposite directions, and then she falls, her body spinning like a rag doll toward some trees.

Time seems to slow down until it becomes a slow-motion nightmare.

Despite the distance, I can see every detail with brutal clarity: the panic in her eyes, the snow flying around her, the way her arms flail seeking balance that no longer exists.

“Ana!” I scream with my heart about to burst from my chest.

Before I can process the thought, I'm skiing toward her faster than I've ever skied, making each turn with the desperation of a mother who sees her daughter in danger.

But Sloane gets there much sooner.

She glides with that natural grace I've always envied, stopping Ana Sofia's body just before she crashes into one of the pines. She catches her with one arm while using her skis to brake both of them, creating a cloud of powder snow that envelops them like white smoke.

“Easy there, champ,” I hear her murmur as they stop. “I've got you.”

When I reach them, my heart beats so hard I can hear it in my ears. Ana Sofia is sitting in the snow, Sloane kneeling beside her, making sure nothing is broken.

“Mom, I'm fine,” she protests when I reach her side, though tears are about to overflow. “I just got scared.”

“It's normal to get scared,” Sloane intervenes calmly. “You did very well stopping when you realized you were going too fast. That means you're learning.”

“But I fell,” my daughter complains. “And in front of all those people.”

I follow the direction of her gaze and see that several skiers have stopped to observe the scene. Some look at us with curiosity, others with that mix of relief and nervousness reflected on parents' faces when they see it's not their child who rolled down the slope.

“You know what?” Sloane asks, helping the girl stand up. “The best skiers in the world fall constantly. Don't be embarrassed at all. I fell in two World Cup events, on television, so imagine that. Way more people saw me fall.”

“Really?”

“Really. At your age I fell so many times I was a danger to other skiers.

Once I took Harper down with me, but don't remind her because she got really mad,” she jokes, drawing a smile from my daughter.

“Do you want to keep going down the blue slope, or would you prefer to go back to the beginner area?”

Ana Sofia looks toward the slope she still has left to cover. I can see the conflict in

her gaze: fear fighting against determination.

“I want to finish,” she decides. “But... could you go in front of me? Just to make sure I don't go too fast.”

“Of course,” Sloane assures her with a wink.

And that's how I end up skiing behind them too, watching my daughter go down the rest of the blue slope, with Sloane making gentle S-shaped turns in front of her, controlling the speed and shouting words of encouragement every few yards.

And a silly smile forms on my lips. I completely trust Sloane to take care of my daughter. When we reach the end of the slope, Ana Sofia is radiant with pride and adrenaline. And I suppose I am too.

“I did it!” she shouts, raising her arms in the air. “Did you see me, Mom? I went down an entire blue slope!” she shrieks again, as if I had been far away instead of skiing behind her.

“You were incredible,” Sloane assures, taking off her helmet and shaking her hair. “Tomorrow, when you go back home, you can tell your friends you went down a blue slope. I'll make you a certificate to show them.”

The smile on Ana Sofia's face disappears instantly.

“I don't want to go home,” she sighs. “I want to stay here and keep skiing with you.”

Sloane looks at me over my daughter's head, and I see something in her eyes I can't decipher. Hope? Sadness? Both at the same time?

“Hey, Silver Peaks will always be here. It's not going anywhere,” she tells the girl.

“You can come whenever you want, and someday I'll teach you to go down a black diamond slope.”

“A black diamond?” Ana Sofia asks with wide eyes. “Aren't those super difficult? Lumi went down one for the first time this year, and she skis amazingly.”

“They're for expert skiers,” Sloane confirms. “But I'm sure you could do it very soon.”

While my daughter chatters excitedly about slopes and descents, I watch Sloane. There's something in the way she talks to Ana Sofia, in the way she kneels to be at her height, in how she celebrates her small triumphs, that reminds me too much of Luis.

But at the same time, it's different.

Where Luis was calm rationality, Sloane brings warmth. Where Luis explained with scientific patience why things work a certain way, Sloane uses humor and personal stories.

The comparison doesn't hurt as much as I expected. Instead of feeling like I'm betraying my husband's memory, I feel like my heart is expanding to welcome Sloane too.

“Mom?” Ana Sofia tugs at my sleeve and brings me back to reality. “Can we take a break for hot chocolate? I'm cold.”

The resort cafeteria smells like cinnamon and chocolate, a mix that reminds me of Christmas mornings when the kids were smaller. We settle at a table by the window, from where we can see other skiers gliding down the slopes like colored dots on the white snow.

“Did you like the blue slope?” I ask Ana Sofia while Sloane appears with a tray full of hot chocolate cups.

“I loved it,” she responds without hesitation. “At first I got a little scared, but then, when I went behind Sloane, it was super fun. I wish I could live here all year.”

We fall into an uncomfortable silence. Sloane shifts her eyes toward the window, and her gaze gets lost on the horizon while I play with my paper napkin, folding and unfolding the corners.

Ana Sofia recovers her smile almost immediately when she receives a message from Lumi about something regarding a snowball fight that afternoon.

But I keep thinking about the slopes Ana Sofia will never go down and all the ski lessons Sloane will never give her.

And it hurts much more than it should.

Esme

The hot water drops slide down my skin like small caresses while I rinse my hair.

Here, the shower has perfect pressure, nothing like the ridiculous showerhead in my Denver apartment, which barely manages to produce a trickle of water. In minutes, steam wraps around the marble bathroom like a cloud and I can feel tension leaving my muscles.

I can hardly believe it. Ana Sofia went down her first blue slope. My girl, who two weeks ago could barely stay standing on skis, has descended a slope that would have terrified me at her age.

And all thanks to Sloane.

The lavender soap slides between my fingers as I slowly soap my arms and I can't help but smile thinking about the way Sloane took care of my daughter when she fell. No panic, no overprotection, just calm confidence that got Ana Sofia to get up and keep going.

And the proud smile that formed on her lips when the girl finished the descent... She was almost as happy as I was.

I caress my breasts instinctively while soaping myself, hardening my nipples under my palms. Thousands of hot water drops hit my back.

I bend forward and let my hands venture a little lower, following the curve of my

waist. I smile as I trace with my fingertips the small stretch marks the twins' pregnancy left me.

Two nights ago, when undressing in front of Sloane, they made me feel a little insecure, but the way she kissed them before continuing down to my pubis still makes me sigh. As she said, they're a memory of the most beautiful part of my life.

It's a multitude of small details. Her gaze this morning when she helped me take off my ski gloves entering the cafeteria. Her fingers brushing mine for barely a second, but enough to send an electric shock through my entire body. The way her lips curved in a smile before pulling away.

Almost without being conscious of it, my right hand slides between my legs. The hot water has relaxed every muscle in my body, but a very different tension grows inside me. A tension that appears too frequently every time Sloane is near.

I slide my fingers over my sex, finding that exact rhythm my body needs, and my breathing becomes erratic. I hadn't masturbated thinking of her for eleven years, but this last week it's all I think about when I do it.

I lean against the shower wall, and the cold marble creates a delicious contrast with the hot water.

I moan as I caress my clit while my other hand continues on my breasts, lightly pinching my nipples, imagining it's Sloane doing it.

The sensations multiply: the temperature contrast, the sound of water falling on the floor, the lavender scent. The memories, so vivid they seem real.

I feel her hands instead of mine. Her long, strong fingers, capable of that infinite tenderness that makes my entire body tremble under her touch.

A soft moan escapes my lips, muffled by the sound of water. I speed up the rhythm, losing myself in fantasies I hadn't allowed myself to have in years.

But here, under this cascade of hot water, I'm simply Esme. A woman with desires and needs, like any other. Desires I've kept dormant too long.

The tension grows in my belly like a spiral that expands more and more.

I feel more urgency, more need. Water falls on my skin, now so sensitive that each drop feels like a caress.

And I allow myself to remember our first time and all the others that followed.

That dominant attitude when we make love only to melt like a kitten with each kiss on her clit.

And I think of her moans when she's about to have an orgasm, the way she says my name between gasps, how her back arches and then becomes totally relaxed.

The climax hits me almost unexpectedly, intense, liberating. I press my back to the wall while waves of pleasure run through me from my center. And for a moment, the world reduces to this pure sensation, to this rediscovery of my own sexuality.

To Sloane.

When I finally catch my breath, water keeps falling on me as if nothing happened. But something has changed. I've allowed myself to feel desire for Sloane without guilt. Without memories of my previous marriage.

I rinse one last time, letting the water carry away the soap remains along with the last inhibitions, and when I turn off the tap, the sudden silence feels almost deafening.

Wrapped in a towel that smells like expensive fabric softener, I slide my palm over the glass and clean a circle on the fogged surface.

I observe my face, and it's like finding myself again.

Water still drips from my hair, my chest and cheeks are flushed, my eyes bright.

And I see myself... I see myself alive. More alive than I've felt in a long time.

The sound of soft knocks on the door startles me.

"Esme?" Sloane's voice sounds muffled through the wood. "Can I come in?"

My heart speeds up again, but this time it's not just from surprise. If she knew what just happened in that shower.

"Oh, wow!" she murmurs, looking me up and down, as if devouring me with her eyes.

"I just got out of the shower," I apologize.

"The kids are with River," she announces without preamble. "They're going to make cookies until dinnertime."

"Oh, okay," I respond, not really knowing what to say, suddenly too aware of how Sloane is looking at me. "And what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you," she admits, stepping closer and placing her hands on my waist.

"I wanted... I wanted to make sure you're okay after this morning."

"This morning?"

“Ana Sofia falling. I saw you very scared. I know that since you lost Luis, anything that happens to the kids must multiply your anxiety by a thousand.”

Her words hit me straight in the heart. For two years, almost no one has really understood that constant overprotection, that feeling that if I let my guard down for just a second, I could lose the only thing I have left.

“A little,” I admit in a whisper. “But I trusted the perfect person to take care of her.”

“You're... you're beautiful wrapped in that towel,” she hisses with slightly labored breathing.

“Yeah? Well, I'd say you're taking it off with your eyes.”

“I'm doing much more than taking off your towel with my eyes,” she admits, raising her eyebrows and letting out a small breath.

“Better like this?” I ask, letting the towel fall at my feet and standing completely naked in front of her.

“Much better,” she sighs, moving closer to kiss my neck.

I respond by brushing my lips along her jaw, covering her with small kisses while feeling how her pulse speeds up against my mouth as she gets more and more aroused.

Somehow, there's something special about this intimacy we're rediscovering, as if we're both painfully aware of what we lost once and desperate not to lose it again.

Her heart beats erratically when I unbutton her shirt and slide my fingertips along her sides.

She arches her back, feeling my thumbs slipping under her bra.

Each gentle brush of our lips reminds me how much I want to have her naked body under mine.

I don't want to run from what I feel for her anymore. I want to enjoy it.

Sloane unhooks her bra to rub her breasts with mine, lightly scratching my shoulders, asking for more.

I whisper her name against her throat, tasting her skin, losing myself in the warmth of her body pressed to mine. Each kiss, each caress, weaves our previous story into something new, perhaps stronger and more mature.

She laughs while struggling to take off her pants and underwear urgently, without stopping kissing until we can barely stay standing.

In the dimness of my bedroom, her tanned skin seems to glow as I trace the curves of her body with my fingertips.

Sloane closes her eyes and sighs, feeling my lips on her throat before claiming control.

“Your nipples are like chocolate chips,” she murmurs suddenly.

“What did you say?”

“They're small... and round... and brown... and delicious,” she continues while leaning down to lick one of them.

I just laugh.

“I'm not sure how to take that, Sloane,” I joke. “But continue.”

I tangle my fingers in her hair while she alternates from one nipple to the other, biting them gently, licking them, making circles around the areola, driving me crazy with desire.

She smiles, continuing her journey downward, covering my belly with kisses, the curve of my hips, my pubis... until she settles between my thighs, inhaling deeply.

She separates my folds with her fingers and stays still for a brief moment, as if admiring the wetness already accumulating in that area before kissing my sex.

“Get to work, because you can't imagine how aroused I am,” I order smiling, leaning on my elbows, and looking down.

“You've become bossy,” she sighs, sliding her tongue from bottom to top with a slowness that makes me tremble.

“Stop talking,” I beg between moans, letting myself fall on the pillow.

I gasp, tangling my fingers in her hair while she licks me slowly, as if eating the most delicious ice cream in the world.

“Sloane,” I sigh, feeling her mouth on my clit.

She places her hands on my hips, holding me tight while making circles with her tongue or sucking it between her lips. She stops briefly each time she notices I'm about to have an orgasm, to continue again until she makes me explode with pleasure.

“Fuck, Sloane,” I hiss, pulling her to position herself over me.

“Good?”

I can only nod weakly while catching my breath.

“Incredible.”

Sloane smiles, gently stroking my hair.

“I'm so glad to hear that,” she murmurs before kissing my lips.

We lie there for several minutes, simply giving and receiving caresses and affection. Filling ourselves with small kisses.

“Now it's your turn,” I remind her. “Well, only if you want, maybe you prefer to continue alone without me,” I joke.

“You've become an idiot, you know that?” she mutters, giving me an affectionate slap on the ass before opening my legs and sliding her sex over mine, covering it with her wetness.

I push upward, and we both find a rhythm that makes us scream with pleasure. Sloane moves harder and faster, and my clit is so sensitive right now that any minimal touch makes me tremble.

I feel tension growing again inside me, I dig my nails into her hips, closing my eyes and losing myself in a symphony of sensations and moans until I can't take anymore.

I scream her name while having a wonderful orgasm that seems endless, because Sloane clings to my body, rubbing against my sex until she also reaches climax, letting herself fall on me, covered in sweat.

“That was unbelievable,” she confesses, brushing away a strand of hair stuck to my forehead.

“Better than unbelievable,” I nod, leaning into her palm.

“It drives me crazy how sensitive you are down there,” she admits, biting her lower lip.

“Don't sell yourself short, that's because you know what I need,” I assure her, sitting up slightly to kiss her forehead.

She snuggles next to me, placing her head in the hollow of my neck, and for a very long time, we simply enjoy the silence.

“I've missed you so much,” she admits, while I slide my nails down her back.

“Me too. Although you hurt me terribly eleven years ago. Literally, you broke my heart. You're aware of that, right?”

“Too aware,” she assures with a sigh.

“Do you think it could work?” I ask, leaning on my forearm to look into her eyes.

“Because last time you destroyed me, and now it's not just me. It's also Ana Sofia and Theo. If this doesn't work... If this doesn't work, I don't want them to suffer.”

“It will work. This time it will, Esme. I'm still me, but different. And if you give me a second chance, I swear I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to you.”

“The rest of your life?”

“The rest of my life,” she confirms. “I want to wake up with you every morning.

I want to teach Ana Sofia to ski black diamond slopes all over the world.

I want to help Theo with his math homework.

Well, maybe not that last one, because you know I was never very good at studies.

I guess what I'm trying to say is I want to be part of your family.”

“And if I accept?”

“And if you accept?”

“Harper's offer. Staying at Silver Peaks. Trying this with you.”

“Would you do it?”

“I think so,” I respond, and saying it out loud, I realize the decision is almost made. “I have to think about it a little more, talk to the kids to see what they think, but I'd say you have an excellent chance that I will, Miss Sloane Merriweather.”

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Esme

“Esme Torres speaking,” I answer while watching through the window as my children play with Lumi outside.

“This is Margaret Wilson, from Henderson they always do.

You'll have more money to keep them happy with the latest consoles and all those silly things they like.

I don't know, because I don't have children,” she adds, hanging up before I can respond.

I stare at the phone in my hand like an idiot. I have one afternoon left to decide my life.

But actually, the decision is already made.

These days at Silver Peaks, watching the happiness on my children's faces, have been special.

Seeing Ana Sofia enjoy herself while pushing herself to improve on the ski slopes or Theo lose that constant sadness he's carried since Luis's death...

has made me see reality. Money isn't everything.

I want to be present in their lives. I want them to grow up in a place where they can

breathe fresh air and, above all, where they can be children.

Harper's offer is perfect. A job I'm passionate about, tranquility, a good place to raise my children, and enough money, considering how cheap it will be to live in Silver Peaks.

And also. Sloane.

Sloane, who seems to have matured.

Sloane, who seems to adore my children.

Sloane, who last night made me feel alive in a way I no longer remembered.

I just need to talk to Harper to clarify a couple of practical details and I'm ready to tell the Denver firm to keep their job offer. Because my heart is already here, at Silver Peaks.

I get up from the couch with a smile from ear to ear and leave the suite practically running toward Harper's office.

When I arrive, I hear voices and immediately recognize Sloane's laughter, that laughter that manages to make me feel butterflies in my stomach every time I hear it, as if I were a teenager. Great, so she'll be the first to know I'm staying.

"I have to admit it, Sloane," I hear Harper say, "the plan worked perfectly."

I stop dead. The plan?

"Yes, much better than I expected," Sloane responds, and I hear her laughter again.

"At first I thought she wouldn't accept, but from the first day..."

“Are you kidding?” her older sister interrupts. “From the first day, I knew it would be perfect. The way her eyes lit up when she saw the proposal... it was obvious she was going to bite.”

The world stops around me.

“And the best part is she hasn't even realized what's happening,” Harper continues. “She thinks all this arose naturally.”

Sloane laughs. That laughter that five minutes ago filled me with joy and now hurts as if someone were separating flesh from bone.

“River was right. Sometimes, the best plans are the ones that seem like perfect coincidences,” she adds.

I can't breathe.

I lean my back against the wall, and it feels too cold through my shirt, though not as cold as the sensation spreading through my chest. I tremble from head to toe while the last fragments of the conversation keep filtering through the door.

“Do you think she'll sign the agreement?” Harper asks.

“I'm sure. You can see she's desperate,” Sloane leaves the sentence hanging, though I don't think I could even hear what follows.

After what happened last night. After opening my heart to her. When she told me she loved me. When I believed her feelings were real.

Tears roll down my cheeks before I can stop them. I cover my mouth with my hand to muffle a sob that threatens to escape.

Everything fits with painful clarity. The hotel offer, too good to be true. The “casual” encounter with Sloane as the only ski instructor available that morning. Harper's convenient job proposal just when I was considering staying.

Even the sex?

Was it all just a game? A trap to hire me for less salary? I don't understand anything. I just know everything was calculated. Everything was a lie.

I manage to reach the elevator before my legs fail completely, and the instant the doors close, I collapse against the wall, letting the tears I've been holding finally break free.

I'm an idiot. A complete idiot.

“You're a bitch, Sloane Merriweather,” I mutter through my teeth.

The elevator opens on my floor, and I walk to my suite like a zombie.

I have to get out of here. Now.

But first, I need to make a call.

I breathe deeply and slowly let out the air, trying to calm myself while trembling as I dial Margaret Wilson's number.

“Margaret, this is Esme Torres,” I announce as soon as she picks up on the first ring.

“And? What's your decision? I suppose you're calling for that, right?”

“I accept the offer,” the words come out of my mouth like poison.

I don't want that job, I know it will be very hard on the kids, but I'll show the Merriweather sisters that they can't manipulate me, no matter how many millions they have in the bank.

“Send me the documents to sign as soon as possible.”

Suddenly, there's silence on the other end of the line.

“Really?” Margaret seems surprised by my decision. “What happened to all that shit about having more time for your kids and all that?”

“I've reconsidered my priorities,” I lie, while wiping tears with the back of my hand and trying not to sob. “I could start Monday if necessary. As you said, the kids will adapt, I'm sure of it.”

“Perfect. I'll send you the contracts by email within an hour at most. And let me welcome you as a partner at the firm, Esme. I'm convinced you'll be a great addition.”

When I hang up, I stare at the phone for several minutes. I just accepted a job I know will make me a miserable person for many years. I just condemned my children to a lifestyle they don't want. All for more money and to shut up the Merriweather sisters.

But I can't stay here. Not after this.

I head to the bedroom like an automaton and start taking clothes out of the closet. My hands tremble so much I can barely hold the hangers.

“Mom?” Ana Sofia's voice startles me from the door. “What are you doing?”

“We're leaving, honey. Pack your things,” I murmur, lowering my head to avoid looking into her eyes.

“Leaving?” Theo appears behind his sister, with wide eyes. “Now? But we're supposed to have dinner with Lumi!”

“An emergency came up,” I lie, hating myself for having to do it. “We have to be in Denver tomorrow morning. We're leaving for the airport now.”

“What kind of emergency?” Ana Sofia insists with that annoyingly intuitive sense kids sometimes have. “Did something happen to Grandma?”

“No, honey. It's... it's complicated. Pack your bags, please. We're leaving in half an hour.”

“But Mom!” Theo protests. “We haven't finished our vacation! And Lumi was going to show us her secret place tonight!”

“We're leaving. Pack your bags. Now.”

“Can we at least say goodbye to Sloane?” Ana Sofia asks with tears in her eyes. “Please, Mom!”

“NO!” I shout, making my children jump when they hear my tone of voice.

The twins look at me as if they don't know me. And they're probably right, because I don't recognize myself either.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to shout,” I whisper. “Just... just pack your bags, please.”

They go to their room in silence, heads down, and I can hear worried whispers. They're probably thinking I've gone crazy.

When we go down to the hotel lobby, it's late and there are few people. Perfect.

“Wait here,” I tell them, seating them in a comfortable armchair by one of the fireplaces. “I have to do something at the reception first.”

I approach the counter, where a young girl smiles politely when she sees me.

“How can I help you?”

“Could you deliver this to Sloane Merriweather?” I ask, handing her a white envelope.

I just wrote the cruelest letter of my life. Every word chosen to hurt. Full of hate. Every sentence is designed to wound as much as they've wounded me.

“Sloane,

Congratulations. Your plan worked perfectly. The naive 20-year-old college student no longer exists, but apparently I'm still stupid enough to fall for your games.

Thanks for reminding me why I don't trust people with money. You've always believed you can buy whatever you want. Even feelings.

Well, surprise. That's not the case anymore. I won't make the same mistake twice. You've made it clear that you have indeed changed, but for the worse. Now you've outdone yourself. You're the most despicable being I've ever met in my entire life.

PS: Give Harper my thanks for the performance. She almost convinced me the job was real. She's right, sometimes the best plans are the ones that seem like perfect coincidences.

Esme”

“Of course, Miss Torres,” the receptionist says, storing the envelope in a cubbyhole.
“Do you need anything else?”

“We have to leave, I need you to prepare the bill.”

“Tonight? But your reservation is until tomorrow...”

“Something unexpected came up,” I interrupt very seriously.

Twenty minutes later, I'm driving a small rental car loaded with suitcases, driving away from Silver Peaks on a narrow, winding road.

In the back seat, Ana Sofia and Theo have fallen asleep. They haven't stopped crying while packing their things, and they're tired.

I've taken them out of paradise. Away from laughter and hot chocolate. From ski lessons with a woman they thought loved them.

A woman I also thought loved me.

I stop the car for a few moments when I reach a lookout point. Through the rearview mirror, I can see Silver Peaks' lights shining in the distance like a fairy tale. Except it's a fairy tale with an evil witch included.

“Never again,” I whisper into the night while crying as I start the car again.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Sloane

“Good evening, perfect world,” I murmur while putting on makeup to go find Esme at her suite.

As I walk through the hallways, with a bouquet of roses in my hand, I hum an old song. Outside, the sunlight begins to disappear, and the mountains glow under light that seems like something from a fantasy movie.

Today, everything seems possible.

“Esme? It's me. I brought you a surprise,” I announce, swaying nervously from one leg to the other like a little girl.

Silence.

“Esme?” I insist, knocking a little harder.

Nothing.

I have a strange feeling and start to feel a tightness in my chest that reminds me too much of those months after my injury, when anxiety attacks and depression were constant. Trembling, I search my pocket for the master key all us sisters have for emergencies and that I've never used in my life.

“Esme? Ana Sofia? Theo?”

The suite is empty.

Not just empty. Empty as if they'd never been here. There's no trace of clothes or suitcases. Their things aren't in the bathroom either. She's even left a window open to air it out.

The bouquet of roses falls from my hands, and the flowers scatter across the floor along with my hopes.

“No, no, no. This can't be happening, fuck,” I murmur, slamming the closet door shut.

I leave the room and run downstairs, not even bothering to call the elevator. I need an explanation.

“Sarah?” I gasp, leaning on the counter. “Esme Torres, she was in one of the suites. Why isn't she there anymore?”

The young receptionist looks at me strangely.

“She left about an hour ago, Miss Merriweather,” she responds, confused.

“She left? Where?” I insist, raising my voice more than necessary.

“I don't know. But... but she left this.”

Sarah hands me a white envelope with my name written in large letters, and my fingers tremble so much I can barely open it.

The letter is brief, but harsh. Cruel. It's as if she chose each word just to hurt me. And the worst part is I don't understand why.

“Sloane,

Congratulations. Your plan worked perfectly. The naive 20-year-old college student no longer exists, but apparently I'm still stupid enough to fall for your games.

Thanks for reminding me why I don't trust people with money. You've always believed you can buy whatever you want. Even feelings.

Well, surprise. That's not the case anymore. I won't make the same mistake twice. You've made it clear that you have indeed changed, but for the worse. Now you've outdone yourself. You're the most despicable being I've ever met in my entire life.

PS: Give Harper my thanks for the performance. She almost convinced me the job was real. She's right, sometimes the best plans are the ones that seem like perfect coincidences.

Esme”

The world crumbles around me.

I read each line over and over, hoping the letters will magically change and suddenly say something different. Something that won't completely destroy me.

“Your plan worked perfectly.”

What the fuck is she talking about? My breathing becomes shallow, too fast. Air doesn't reach my lungs properly, they struggle to expand, as if someone had placed a concrete slab on my chest.

“The naive 20-year-old college student no longer exists.”

My hands shake so much I grip the letter tightly. The paper crinkles between my fingers. Plan? What plan? She said she loved me. She said the decision to stay was practically made. Her hands on my skin, the whispers in my ear, the way she looked at me after making love.

All lies?

“Thanks for reminding me why I don't trust people with money.”

I don't understand anything. This is all fucking crazy. A sharp buzzing pierces my ears. The reception area starts spinning around me like a crazed merry-go-round. Other guests' voices become a distant murmur. My heart speeds up so much I feel like it's going to shoot out of my chest any second.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I grip the counter so hard my knuckles hurt. The wood feels like the only solid material I can hold onto while everything moves.

“You've always believed you can buy whatever you want. Even feelings.”

The floor under my feet becomes unstable. It tilts slowly to the left, then to the right, as if the entire hotel were inside a ship in a storm.

“I won't make the same mistake twice.”

The words explode in my mind like bombs. My vision narrows until it becomes a

dark tunnel. The edges turn black, advancing toward the center like pouring black ink into a glass of water.

My fingers loosen. I can't feel my hands anymore. I feel nothing, except sharp pain in my chest, as if someone wanted to rip my heart out with their hands.

“PS: Give Harper my thanks for the performance. She almost convinced me the job was real.”

And that last sentence destroys what little is left of me.

The world tilts at an impossible angle. My knees bend, but there's no strength left in them to hold me up. The letter falls to the floor, floating in slow motion like a leaf carried by autumn wind.

I fall.

It's not an elegant fall. It's not like in movies. It's a collapse. I crash against the floor with a dull thud that makes customers scream.

The impact resonates through my skull like an echo in an empty cathedral. I taste blood where I bit my tongue, but the physical pain is almost a relief compared to the agony tearing me apart inside.

I can't move.

I can't get up.

I can't do anything except stay here, on the floor of my own hotel's reception, trembling like an animal that's been beaten so cruelly it no longer dares to move.

“Miss Merriweather!” Sarah's voice sounds like it's coming from the other end of a very long tunnel. “Someone call a doctor, please!”

But no doctor can cure this. No medicine can fix a heart that's been trampled into dust.

I close my eyes and let darkness swallow me. It's easier than facing a world where Esme hates me again and I don't even know why.

A world where I've lost the only person I've truly loved.

Lost. I've lost her again.

And this time, forever.

“Sloane!”

My older sister tries to lift me while I disintegrate into a thousand pieces.

“She's gone, Harper,” I sob against her shoulder. “She says it was all a lie.”

“What? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Trembling, I clumsily point toward the letter with my index finger. I watch her read it, how her expression changes from confusion to horror.

“Fuck, Sloane. What happened?”

“I have no idea,” I admit with a sigh that can barely be heard.

“Oh, fuck. What a mess!” Harper mutters through her teeth.

“What's going on?”

“I think I know what happened,” she sighs.

“Will you fucking talk already?”

“She must have heard fragments of the conversation in my office. Look at this,” she indicates, pointing to a phrase in the letter. “The plan worked perfectly. Sometimes the best plans are the ones that seem like perfect coincidences.”

“Fuck, the Switzerland hotel,” I whisper.

“Exactly. The acquisition you recommended after your trip two months ago,” my sister confirms. “She thought we were talking about her.”

Harper hugs me tightly while I cry, but nothing can calm me now.

“You have to explain to her that it was all a misunderstanding,” she insists.

“She went to Denver. She's probably already accepted that shitty job that will keep her away from her children.”

“Then go after her.”

I look at her as if she's gone crazy.

“Go after her? Harper, you just read the fucking letter. She hates me. She thinks I'm a rich manipulator who plays with people's feelings just for fun.”

“Prove her wrong.”

Six hours later, I'm standing in front of a red brick apartment building in Denver, with red and swollen eyes from crying so much on the plane that I have no tears left.

I've rehearsed a thousand times what I wanted to say. I've practiced every word, every gesture, every plea.

But now, as I watch the light in the second-floor windows, I'm so nervous I've forgotten everything.

“Esme. It's Sloane. Please, open the door. I need to talk to you,” I beg, knocking with my knuckles.

Silence.

“I know you're there. Just... please, just let me explain. This has all been a terrible misunderstanding.”

More silence.

“It's Sloane, Mom!” Ana Sofia's voice comes from inside.

“Get away from the door,” I hear. “Now.”

“But Mom...”

“I said, get away! To your room!”

I hear the sound of small feet running. A door slamming shut. And then, nothing.

I stay there for two hours, calling occasionally, begging, pleading, knocking until my knuckles are raw.

A man threatens to call the police.

But Esme doesn't open the door.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Sloane

The next day, I intercept her in front of her office building. I've been waiting in the parking lot since five in the morning.

She walks fast, head down, dressed in a gray suit that's too serious and doesn't flatter her at all. She seems to have aged ten years in one day.

“Esme!” I whisper with fear.

She stops dead and tenses as if someone threatened to kill her.

“What part of 'leave me alone' didn't you understand?” she growls without turning around. “If you don't get away from me, I'm going to call the police, Sloane. Please, don't force me to do it.”

“I imagine you heard a conversation in Harper's office, but it wasn't about you, I swear.

We were talking about a hotel in Switzerland.

A business acquisition I've been recommending to Harper for months.

The owner was too proud to accept that the company was ruined, and her daughter helped us make everything seem like a coincidence so she wouldn't feel ashamed selling it.”

She turns slowly, but the hatred in her gaze hurts more than a physical blow.

“You should be a screenwriter, or a novelist,” she says with a bitter smile. “Do you really think I’m stupid enough to believe something like that?”

“You can ask anyone on the board of directors. You can review the meeting minutes. We’ve been working on that acquisition for a while.”

“How convenient. You have an answer for everything, right? Or did your older sister prepare that for you too?”

“Esme, please. Everything I told you was true. I want to build a life with you.”

“ENOUGH!”

The scream echoes like a gunshot, making several birds fly out of nearby trees and people stare at us.

“Enough lies! Enough manipulation! Enough playing with me like I’m a fucking rag doll!”

“I’m not playing with you, I...”

“Yeah, of course you’re not!” she interrupts me, moving closer until I can see the tears of rage in her eyes. “You do this possibly because everything is a game to you. Because you’re bored now that you can’t compete anymore. Because you need the adrenaline to feel alive.”

The words pierce me like knives.

“That’s not true.” I murmur.

“No? You have no idea what money or work is worth.

You don't know what it's like to wake up every morning worried about whether you'll make it to the end of the month.

You don't understand what it means to make decisions thinking about your children's future instead of your own needs.

Your whole life has been one whim after another.

Yes, you were very good at skiing, but you've had the best trainers since you were little. Fuck, you even had your own ski resorts.”

“Esme...”

“Leave me alone once and for all, Sloane. Forever. That's all I ask. Disappear from my life, forget I exist. I'll never forgive you for what you've done, but much less for manipulating my children by making them grow fond of you to convince me. You're the most despicable person I've ever met.”

“I'm willing to do whatever it takes to prove I love you.

I'll stay here with you, I'll look for work as a ski instructor at Echo Mountain or any other nearby resort. Let me help you with the kids, with the house, with whatever you need. Just give me a chance to prove that what I feel for you is real,” I plead, trying to get closer to her, though she puts a hand on my chest to stop me from advancing.

“Miss Torres, do you want me to call the police?” asks a gray-haired man, walking toward us.

“No need, Joe, she's leaving,” she replies, giving me one last look of hatred before

entering the building where her office is.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:13 am

Esme

The sound of my phone distracts me again in the conference room.

For the fifth time in an hour.

“Sorry, my daughter won't stop calling,” I murmur, declining Ana Sofia's call again, while the opposing lawyer continues with his argument.

The entire firm is focused on this trial. It's a client who could open many doors for us in the future, and nothing can go wrong. I can't afford distractions.

The phone rings again.

And again.

And again.

“Can you turn off that damn thing once and for all?” my boss growls in a threatening tone.

I apologize and turn it off without even looking at it. Ana Sofia will have to wait. Whatever it is, it can wait two hours until this meeting ends.

Ana Sofia

“Mom, please answer!” I scream into the phone, but it goes to voicemail again.

Theo is lying on the couch, screaming while writhing in pain. His face is gray, and he's sweating a lot.

“Jessica, please, do something,” I beg, but the sixteen-year-old babysitter Mom hired is crying in the kitchen, not knowing what to do.

This morning, Theo was already complaining about severe stomach pain. Mom had a very important meeting, so she gave him a pill and told him it would pass soon.

But now he's much worse.

Much, much worse.

“Jessica, should we call an ambulance?” I ask through sobs.

“I don't know,” she admits. “Your mother told me not to bother her unless it was very serious. Can you call again? Do you think it's serious?”

I shift my gaze toward my brother. He's very pale, trembling. He's not crying anymore, just moaning very softly, as if he doesn't have the strength to scream.

“Yes, I think it's very serious,” I sigh.

I search my phone for the number I have saved under a fake name. The number she told me to only use for an emergency and that my mother shouldn't see.

I dial it with fear before changing my mind.

“Sloane? This is Ana Sofia. I...”

“Ana? What's wrong? Are you okay?” she interrupts.

“Theo is very bad. His stomach hurts terribly. He's very pale and won't stop moaning. Mom is in a very important meeting and won't answer my calls.”

“Are you alone?” she asks, scared.

“No, Mom left us with a neighbor's daughter, but she's sixteen and doesn't know what to do.”

“Don't worry, we'll fix this. Is Theo vomiting?”

“Yes. And a while ago, he threw up something red.”

“Fuck. Ana, listen to me carefully. Where are you exactly? At home?”

“Yes, at home,” I sob.

“I'm on my way. Stay with Theo. Try to keep him distracted, talk to him, even if he doesn't answer, I'll be there in fifteen minutes,” she assures me.

“What if Mom gets angry because I called you?” I ask fearfully.

“I don't care. Your brother is sick, and you need me. That's all that matters.”

Sloane

“Harper, are you still on the Board of Directors of Watson Memorial Hospital?” I ask without even saying good morning.

“Yes, why?”

“They have a hospital in Denver, right?” I insist.

“It's much smaller than the one in New York, but yes, they have a very well-equipped one,” my older sister responds.

“Please, I need you to call your friend.

What's her name? Dr. Katya Thomas? Her father owns the hospital, right?

Tell her I need them to immediately treat an eight-year-old boy with severe abdominal pain and vomiting.

It's Theo, Esme's son. His mother isn't answering, and Ana Sofia is scared to death.

But do it now, Harper. I'm on my way to their house, I've already called an ambulance, and we'll take him directly to the hospital.

It's important they have everything ready so we don't lose time.”

I drive to Esme's apartment, violating every known traffic rule, practically praying the ambulance doesn't take long to arrive.

“Sloane!” Ana Sofia screams while throwing herself into my arms. “Theo is super bad!”

I hug her tightly while listening to her brother complaining in the living room. These aren't normal complaints from a stomachache. They're deep, guttural moans from someone who's truly suffering.

“Where's your babysitter?” I ask, following Ana Sofia inside.

“In the kitchen, crying. She doesn't know what to do and says it's all her fault,” the girl responds, leading me to where her brother is.

I find him lying on the couch like a broken doll. His face has lost all color and he's drenched in sweat. He hugs the right side of his abdomen with both hands, knees bent toward his chest in a fetal position. Every few seconds, he lets out a moan that pierces me like a dagger.

“Hey, champ,” I whisper, kneeling next to him.

He opens his eyes with effort. They're glassy, unfocused from pain.

“Sloane... it hurts so much,” he gasps. “So, so much.”

I put my hand on his forehead. He's burning with fever.

“I know, sweetheart. But we're going to take you to the hospital to get you better right now, okay? Now you need to stay as calm as possible. You're going to get better before you know it,” I assure him, brushing away a strand of hair stuck to his forehead from sweat.

“Ana Sofia, did you call Mom again?”

“Yes, but the phone is still off,” she sobs. “Why won't she answer? This is important.”

“She probably can't have her phone on,” I explain. “But it's okay. I'll take care of everything.”

The babysitter comes out of the kitchen crying, her body trembling from head to toe. At sixteen, she's overwhelmed by the situation.

“What's your name?”

“Jessica,” she responds through sobs.

“Okay, Jessica, look at me. Breathe. It's not your fault, okay? The ambulance will arrive any moment, and they'll take him to the hospital. I'll handle everything; go home.”

Outside we hear the sound of a siren.

Two emergency technicians enter with a stretcher. One of them, an older man with an enormous gray mustache, quickly evaluates Theo.

“Acute abdominal pain in the lower right quadrant, high fever, muscle guarding,” he tells his partner. “Probable appendicitis starting to complicate.”

“To General Hospital?” the woman asks.

“No,” I interrupt. “They're expecting him at Watson Memorial.”

“I hope they have good medical insurance, then,” she mutters under her breath while rolling her eyes.

“What if Mom comes and doesn't find us here?” Ana Sofia asks when we're about to leave the apartment to follow the ambulance.

“We're going to leave her a note,” I respond, quickly scribbling on paper. “But let's go now. Anyway, as soon as she gets out of the meeting, she'll see a bunch of missed calls and know something happened.”

“What if something goes wrong?” she asks as her eyes fill with tears.

“Nothing's going to go wrong,” I assure her, stroking her hair. “Your brother is going

to be perfect.”

We arrive at the hospital with our hearts in our throats and, while they're taking Theo down from the ambulance, a tall man with very black hair wearing a green coat approaches us.

“Miss Merriweather? I'm Dr. Harrison, pediatric surgeon. I received a call from Dr. Arya Kumari from New York. She briefed me on the situation and asked me to personally take charge of the case.”

I simply nod and thank him while he leads us to a room where they've taken Theo.

“102.5 fever, accelerated pulse, marked abdominal guarding in right iliac fossa,” he announces to his team while evaluating the boy's condition. “Positive Blumberg sign. Elevated white blood cells in rapid analysis.”

He turns to us with a very serious expression.

“It's acute peritonitis. The appendix has perforated and shows generalized infection in the abdominal cavity. We need to take him to surgery immediately,” he informs.

“Where's the mother?” a younger doctor asks.

“She's on her way,” I lie.

Dr. Harrison nods.

“Every minute we lose increases the risk of sepsis. We operate under the doctrine of implied consent. Prepare an operating room immediately,” he orders.

“Will you stay with me until Mom comes?” Ana Sofia asks, remaining unusually

quiet.

“Of course I will. I won't go anywhere,” I assure her with a wink.

They take Theo through double doors while they lead the girl and me to an enormous VIP room the hospital has prepared for his recovery.

I remain silent, occasionally shifting my gaze toward a wall clock, as if time could move faster every time I look at it. Ana Sofia snuggles against my side and plays distractedly with one of my bracelets.

“How much longer?” she asks for the tenth time.

“A little more, kiddo. Operations take time.”

“Are you sure he's going to be okay?”

“Absolutely sure.”

But inside I'm scared to death.

And we still have no news from Esme.

Esme

I leave the meeting at seven in the evening, exhausted but satisfied. Everything went better than expected, and the bosses are happy. We have good chances of winning this case or at least reaching an agreement, and that will mean a good bonus at the end of the year.

And when I turn on my phone, thirty-seven missed calls from my daughter pop up.

Suddenly, a wave of panic hits me.

“Ana? What happened? Why did you call me so many times?” I ask fearfully.

“MOM!” her scream pierces my eardrums. “WHERE WERE YOU?”

“In a very important meeting, I couldn't talk. Can you tell me what's so urgent?”

“They just operated on Theo! He's in the hospital! He almost died, and you weren't there!” she shrieks again, and the world collapses around me.

“How... how do you mean they operated on him?” I murmur with the phone about to fall from my hand.

“His stomach hurt terribly, and he had a high fever, and you wouldn't answer the phone, so I called Sloane, and she came and organized everything, and...”

“Sloane?” I sigh.

“She's here with me, at the hospital.”

Each word hurts as if it's piercing my heart.

“What hospital are you at?”

“Watson Memorial Hospital,” my daughter responds, and I immediately try to remember if it's one of the hospitals my medical insurance covers, but I swear it's not.

“I'm on my way.”

“Hurry, Mom, please. I was so scared.”

I enter the hospital like a hurricane of panic and guilt, but soon, I realize something doesn't add up.

I follow the directions they gave me at reception.

I go up in an elevator that's too empty and immediately realize.

Fifth floor. There are barely any doors, this doesn't look anything like hospitals I've been to before.

There's tranquility. Silence. A silence that smells like money.

I stop in front of room 514 and take a quick look through the half-open door, not sure if I'm in the right place. This is a five-star hotel room that happens to have medical equipment.

“Mom!” Ana Sofia's shriek pulls me out of my shock.

Theo is lying in a bed, pale but awake, connected to a monitor measuring his vital signs. Ana Sofia is sitting in a chair next to him with a bunch of empty soda cans, and Sloane...

Sloane is standing by the window, arms crossed, watching me with an expression I can't decipher.

"How are you?" I gasp, running to the bed to take Theo's hand in mine.

"Fine," my son responds with a very hoarse voice. "They had to operate on me, but I was asleep and didn't notice anything. Now it doesn't hurt anymore and they say I'll have a really cool scar."

"A scar?"

"Like Sloane's on her knee," he responds proudly.

"You should have seen him when they brought him back, Mom, he was talking like he was drunk," his sister jokes.

"It was from the anesthesia, idiot," Theo protests, seeming to have recovered some of his desire to argue with his twin.

I look at the room again and start feeling palpitations in my chest. The enormous fruit basket resting on the side table doesn't make me any calmer.

"Sloane," I whisper, approaching her. "Why is he here?"

"Watson Memorial Hospital has an excellent pediatric surgery department," is the only answer I get.

“Are all the rooms like this?” I ask cautiously.

“It's a VIP room,” she answers without more.

“My insurance doesn't cover VIP rooms, assuming it covers anything at this hospital, which I doubt very much.”

Sloane doesn't say anything, just looks at me with that irritating calm she has lately.

“Who's going to pay for all this? Can you explain that to me?” I insist, raising my voice more than would be appropriate in this situation. “Do you have any idea what a room like this might cost? And the operation? And all those doctors?”

“Esme...”

“NO!” I explode. “If you're going to tell me not to worry, don't. I don't have money for this. I don't have insurance that covers luxury private hospitals or VIP rooms. What have you done? You should have consulted me first. Now I...”

Sloane sighs, running a hand through her hair.

“Harper is on the Board of Directors of this hospital. She called to make sure Theo received the best possible care,” she explains, maintaining her calm.

“Harper called? Of course, the billionaire sister picked up the phone and organized everything without counting on the child's mother. All very normal,” I complain, getting more and more nervous.

“Esme, it was an emergency, and we couldn't reach you. They had to operate on Theo with implied consent given the severity. Don't make this harder than it is.”

The reminder that my son could have died and I wasn't by his side hits me like I just got run over by a freight train.

“Harder than it is? And who pays the bill, Sloane? Because I can't. I can't afford this, and I won't let your family...”

“Mom, stop it!” Ana Sofia shrieks, getting up from her chair and positioning herself between us with eyes full of tears.

“Ana, you don't understand. This is going to cost...”

“I DON'T CARE WHAT IT COSTS!” my daughter screams again.

“Theo could have died! I called you a bunch of times,” she continues, tears running down her cheeks.

“A bunch of times, Mom. And you didn't answer me.

Theo was screaming in pain, and you weren't there. Sloane came. She took care of everything and stayed with me when I was scared.”

Knowing that everything she says is true, far from calming me, makes me even more furious. Especially with myself.

“And now that Theo is okay, all you care about is money. You're not worried if he's still in pain, or the fear we went through. Just how much it costs,” she insists.

“Ana, that's not... When you're older, you'll understand,” I whisper, trying to put a hand on her shoulder, but my daughter pulls away.

“Sloane has been here from the beginning, Mom,” she interrupts me. “She's talked to

the doctors, signed papers, stayed with me during the operation. She's been doing everything you should have been doing.”

“That's not fair, I...” but I stop. I can't find the right words to continue while wiping tears with my palm.

“Kiddo, Mom was working because she wants the best for you,” Sloane explains, crouching down to be at the girl's height.

“Well, what I want is a mother who's by our side, not working all day.”

“I'm sorry,” I gasp. “I'm so sorry, honey. You're right, I...”

“Esme...” Sloane sighs, standing up and approaching me to gently stroke my back.

“I'm a horrible mother,” I sob, hiding my face in her neck and completely breaking down. “I let my work be more important than my children.”

“That's not true. You're an excellent mother. A mother who sacrifices every day to give them a better future. And you can't imagine how much I admire you for that,” she assures me.

“But you... you've taken care of Ana Sofia. You've found a hospital for Theo. You've done everything I should have done.”

“Esme, it's okay. Theo is okay. That's the only thing that really matters right now,” she assures me, kissing my forehead.

We separate, and I see Ana Sofia is watching us with a strange expression. Not sadness. But weird.

“Mom, do you know what I'd like?” she says suddenly.

“What, honey?”

“I'd like to be able to have both of you as mothers. You and Sloane,” she admits, shrugging and smiling.

Her words leave me stunned. I shift my gaze to Sloane, who's watching her with wide eyes.

“Ana Sofia, that can't...”

“Seriously,” my daughter continues. “You work a lot to take care of us, but sometimes you can't be there. And Sloane... Sloane when she came to our house the day we came back from Silver Peaks told you she wanted to help you. Like today. It's as if you were a team.”

I look at Sloane, who smiles. Then at my son Theo, who's watching us from the bed. Then back at the girl.

“A team,” I repeat slowly.

“Yes,” Ana Sofia nods, squeezing my hand. “A family.”

While the girl falls asleep in a chair, with her head resting on her brother's bed, I take the opportunity to talk to Sloane.

“It's been a tough day,” she sighs, nodding toward the children.

“For everyone,” I confess. “Can I ask you something?”

She simply nods slowly and smiles at me.

“Why are you still in Denver?” I ask. “After everything that happened between us... After everything I said to you. Why are you still here? It's been three months now.”

“Because I still have hope that you'll let me explain what happened with.

.. with that conversation you heard. And because these kids are becoming my family.

I shouldn't tell you this, but sometimes, I take them for ice cream when they get out of school. That way, that babysitter you hire can spend some time with her boyfriend.”

“Fuck,” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“Esme, maybe you don't want to know anything about me, maybe you don't even want to give me a chance to explain what happened, but those kids... I'm starting to love those kids as much as if they were mine.”

“Sloane...”

“Just let me explain. Then, if you want, I'll leave, but let me explain,” she interrupts me, raising a hand. “The conversation you heard that day was about a hotel in Switzerland. A business acquisition. Nothing to do with you.”

“Is that true?” I ask, confused.

“I came all the way to Denver to explain it to you, even so, you didn't even give me a chance to do it.”

We stay silent for a moment. Theo moves in the bed, whispers something about

adventures before going back to sleep.

“Have you been here for three months, just waiting to see if one day you could talk to me?”

“Yes. Well, I work at a sports store and give ski lessons on weekends,” she explains.

“You left Silver Peaks, and now you work like a normal person?”

“Yes, if you want to stay here, if you're happy in your job, I'm willing to stay with you. I don't need the Silver Peaks life, there are ski slopes here too. Even if there weren't, there's you and the kids, and that's what's important,” she assures me with a wink.

“Fuck, I think I've been an asshole,” I whisper.

“No more than I was eleven years ago. I let a unique woman slip away and I'm not going to do it again. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to prove I truly love you,” she sighs, leaning toward me to hug me.

“Do you think we could... try again?” I propose with some fear. “Start slowly. See little by little if it could work.”

“I'd love that,” she admits, moving closer to kiss my lips.

Just at that moment, Ana Sofia opens her eyes and looks at us with a smile.

“Is Sloane going to stay with us?” she asks with a yawn.

“Yes, honey,” I respond. “Sloane is staying.”

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Esme — A few Months Later.

There are places that wait for you, that stay silent while you find what you really need somewhere else. Later, they welcome you with open arms once you're ready to return.

And coming back to Silver Peaks is almost like reading the last chapter of a book you thought would end badly, only to discover it was just the beginning of something much better.

River looks beautiful in her wedding dress, though to be honest, that woman could dress in a flour sack and still be stunning. Anika hasn't stopped crying, and the wedding ceremony has been perfect: intimate, moving, with tears of happiness and lots of laughter.

“You know? When I left here six months ago, I was so angry I swore on my children that I'd never return to this place,” I confess, resting my head on Sloane's shoulder.

“Do you regret it?”

“Not at all. Some oaths can be broken if it's for a good cause,” I confess with a wink.

The last months have been a slow process of rebuilding. In every sense. After Theo's scare, something changed in me. I submitted my resignation. I needed to spend more time with my children.

And with Sloane.

I found work at a small firm in Denver with flexible hours and fewer hours.

Sloane moved into our house two weeks after Theo got out of the hospital. It wasn't a dramatic or premeditated decision. Simply, one night she was having dinner with us and Ana Sofia asked why she didn't stay to sleep. And after that night, none of us wanted her to leave.

"They look so happy," I sigh, nodding toward my children.

They're sitting with Lumi, who has become the older sister they never had. Especially for Ana Sofia, who adores her.

"What are you thinking about?" Sloane murmurs, following my gaze.

"How different everything is. How different I am," I confess, letting out a sigh while shifting my gaze to the mountains surrounding the hotel.

"You're still the same brave Esme I met. You just know now that you don't have to carry all the burden alone."

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" Harper interrupts, approaching with a strange smile.

"It's our sister's wedding," Sloane reminds her.

"Business doesn't rest," she defends herself, shrugging naturally. "I just wanted to remind you that the job offer is still on the table. The Utah project has been definitively approved, and we need a lawyer who knows what she's doing."

Sloane and I look at each other. We've talked about this many times in recent months. The possibility of returning to Silver Peaks, of building a life here, of the kids growing up surrounded by these mountains.

“And you, Sloane Merriweather,” she continues, now pointing at her sister with her index finger. “Technically, you're still the director of our ski school, and you've been absent from work for six months. Don't make me fire you.”

Then she winks at us and walks away to dance with Julie.

“What do you think the kids would say?” I ask, feeling my eyes fill with tears of joy.

“Something tells me they wouldn't hesitate to stay here,” I confess, taking her by the waist to kiss her lips.

River and Anika keep spinning on the dance floor as if they were the only people in the world. Harper dances with an older man, possibly some important investor. And we're here, watching in our little bubble of happiness.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Ivy cuts in, taking her twin sister aside by the arm for a moment.

I watch them from afar. Ivy gesticulates dramatically, she's had more champagne than would be appropriate. Sloane laughs, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

Five minutes later, Sloane returns to my side, laughing.

“What happened?”

“Ivy says we're disgusting with how in love we are,” she confesses through laughter.

“She said that?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“Yes, and the comment includes all the sisters, but she's had a bit too much to drink. I wish she'd start having better luck. She deserves it. Lately her relationships don't last at all.”

We kiss again, and Sloane takes me out to dance. Soon, Theo and Ana Sofia join us, and the four of us spin around the dance floor, bothering the other couples a little.

And in that moment, I understand that I'm completely happy.

Because in the end, after all the mistakes and misunderstandings, I've learned that happiness is something you build. Day by day, decision by decision, with a person who's willing to stay in the worst moments, in those when everything gets complicated.

And Sloane stayed. When I couldn't be there, when my children needed me, when the world became too complicated to handle alone. She stayed.

And as I watch my children laugh happily, as I feel Sloane's fingers intertwined with mine, I understand that some love stories aren't meant to be easy from the beginning.

Some must break first, must get lost among misunderstandings and fear to grow stronger.

They have to go through darkness to find light.

But when they finally do, they shine with an intensity that justifies every tear, every sleepless night, every moment of desperation.

Because in the end, the best relationships aren't the ones that never have problems, but the ones that face them.

And now I know that if the world shakes, Sloane won't let go of my hand.