



# Never Quite Gone

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Six years after losing his husband in a tragic accident, Dr. Eli Monroe has mastered the art of existing without living. His surgical hands never shake, his heart never wavers, and his carefully constructed walls never crack. Until the day Alexander Rothschild walks into his hospital and claims they've loved each other across lifetimes.

Alex has spent centuries searching for Eli's soul—through Renaissance Italy, Ancient Greece, and countless lives between. But this time is different. This time, Eli is still wearing his dead husband's ring. This time, the man determined to destroy their love in every lifetime is watching from the shadows. And this time, Eli remembers everything—except the tragedy that shattered their first life together.

As memories of past lives begin to surface, Eli must confront an impossible choice: cling to the safety of his grief or risk everything for a love that defies death itself. But some patterns are written in blood, some fates demand sacrifice, and some loves are worth dying for again and again and again.

In this lifetime, they have one last chance to break the cycle. If only Eli can believe that some loves are strong enough to survive both death and destiny.

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# Page 1

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There was a moment, right before everything changed, when life felt almost offensively perfect. Like the universe was setting me up for some cosmic punchline.

The candlelight at Le Bernardin did something unfair to Michael's face, softening the laugh lines around his eyes in a way that made my chest ache. He was wielding his dessert spoon like a conductor's baton, punctuating each word with a little flourish that threatened to send chocolate soufflé flying across our corner table.

“Admit it,” he said, leaning forward with that conspiratorial grin that had made me forget how to speak during our first date. “This beats your usual 'I'll just have an espresso' routine by approximately one million percent.”

“I maintain a dignified relationship with dessert,” I countered, but I was already reaching across the table with my own spoon. He gasped, clutching his chest like I'd committed high treason.

“Doctor Monroe, you wound me. After eight years of marriage, the betrayal still stings.”

Around us, Le Bernardin hummed with the white noise of New York's finest – muted conversations about hedge funds and Hampton houses, the gentle percussion of expensive silverware against French porcelain. Michael's wedding ring caught the light as he artfully defended his soufflé from my advance. The familiar gleam sent me tumbling back eight years to our first date, when he had ordered tiramisu AND crème brûlée because, as he had put it, “life's too short to pick just one dessert.”

I had already been half in love with him by the time he finished the tiramisu.

“You're doing that thing again,” Michael said, pulling me back to the present. His voice had that soft edge it got when he was reading my mind.

“What thing?”

“That thing where you get all misty-eyed and nostalgic while I'm trying to enjoy my chocolate sacrifice to the French gods.” He reached across the table, thumb brushing the corner of my mouth. “You had a little...” His touch lingered longer than necessary, and something warm unfurled in my chest. “Though I suppose eight years of marriage earns you some nostalgic privileges.”

“How generous of you.”

The waiter materialized with our coffee – an art form they'd perfected here, appearing exactly when you wanted them and vanishing when you didn't. Michael wrapped his hands around his cup and launched into a story about his latest architectural project. I'd heard bits and pieces over the past few weeks, but watching him tell it then, hands painting pictures in the air as he described the restoration of some historic brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, I was struck by how alive he became when he talked about bringing old things back to life.

“The original moldings were hidden under seventy years of really questionable paint choices,” he said, eyes bright with architectural indignation. “We're talking neon green in a Victorian parlor, Eli. It should be a criminal offense.”

“I'll alert the architecture police immediately.”

“This is why I married you. Your unwavering support in times of historical preservation crisis.”

I stole another bite of his soufflé while he was distracted by aesthetic trauma. “I

thought you married me for my steady hands and hospital benefits.”

“That too. The ability to suture my DIY renovation injuries was definitely a selling point.”

When the bill arrived, we fell into the comfortable choreography of a long-married couple planning their future. Michael absently played with my wedding ring as he reminded me about the nursery we'd promised to help Rachel paint next weekend. Eight years in, and he still had this habit of touching my ring when we talked about future plans, like he was checking to make sure this was all still real.

“I'm thinking we go with the space theme,” he said, already sketching nebulae and rocket ships on the back of our receipt. “Gender-neutral, educational, lots of glow-in-the-dark potential.”

“Rachel specifically said no glow-in-the-dark anything after the Christmas incident.”

“That was one time, and how was I supposed to know the paint would be that bright?”

“The box said 'nuclear grade.’”

“Details.” He tucked the receipt-turned-sketch into his wallet, right next to the villa brochures he'd been collecting. “Speaking of future plans, I've been doing some research for our tenth anniversary.”

“Two years away and you're already planning? Who are you and what have you done with my professionally procrastinating husband?”

“Hey, I'll have you know I'm very prompt about important things.” He pulled out his phone, scrolling to a saved photo of a sun-drenched villa. “I'm thinking Italy. There's

this place in Tuscany...”

Something flickered in the back of my mind – a half-remembered dream of ancient stones warm under my hands, the sharp smell of oil paint and turpentine, summer light filtering through a studio window. I blinked and it was gone, replaced by Michael's enthusiasm as he swiped through photos of terracotta roofs and cypress trees.

“Look at this view,” he said, turning the phone toward me. “Picture it – two weeks of nothing but wine, pasta, and absolutely zero emergency room drama.”

“You say that like I'm not going to spend the whole time worrying about my department burning down without me.”

“Sofia will keep everything running smoothly, and if not, at least it'll burn down efficiently under her watch.”

We spent the rest of the coffee planning out the next few years like we were writing a script – the house we wanted to buy next spring, the family we might start building soon, the life we were weaving together one shared dream at a time. Each plan felt like another promise, another thread binding us tighter into this tapestry we'd been creating since that first two-dessert date.

The *maître d'* appeared with our coats, and Michael tipped him generously because he was physically incapable of not charming every service worker he met. Outside, the spring rain was falling in that gentle way that made New York feel like a movie set. Michael pulled our shared umbrella from his coat pocket – the fancy collapsible one I'd bought him last Christmas after years of him “forgetting” umbrellas and showing up to client meetings looking like a drowned architect.

“My hero,” I said as he unfolded it, and he bumped his shoulder against mine.

“Someone has to keep you from melting, Doctor. I hear surgeons are basically the Wicked Witch of the West when it comes to water.”

We stepped out into the rain together, shoulders touching under our shared shelter, and I thought about how lucky I was to have found this – this person who got my horrible medical jokes and made me eat dessert and planned Italian villas two years in advance. Someone who understood all my sharp edges and loved me anyway.

The night felt perfect in that rare, crystalline way that usually only happened in memory. If I'd known it was the last time, I would have memorized every detail – the exact shade of gray in Michael's eyes when he smiled, the precise cadence of his laugh when I made a terrible pun about his molding crisis, the specific warmth of his shoulder pressed against mine under our shared umbrella.

But that's the thing about last times – you never know they're coming until they're already gone.

The taxi smelled like vanilla air freshener and wet leather, a combination that should have been unpleasant but somehow wasn't. Michael's hand rested on my knee, his thumb tracing absent circles that sent warmth spreading through my entire body. The ring on his finger caught the glow of passing streetlights, and I remembered the way he'd fumbled putting it on at our wedding, his hands shaking so badly that my sister had whispered, “Good thing he didn't become a surgeon.”

“Best anniversary yet,” Michael said, his voice carrying that content, sleepy quality it got after good wine and better dessert. In the darkness of the backseat, his profile was intermittently illuminated by the rhythm of passing cars, each flash revealing another detail I knew by heart – the slight crook in his nose from a childhood baseball incident, the stubborn curl that always escaped behind his right ear, the way his mouth curved up at the corner when he was truly happy.

“Every year gets better,” I replied, and for once, I didn't care if I sounded like a Hallmark card. Eight years of marriage had earned me the right to be occasionally, embarrassingly sincere.

The light ahead turned yellow.

Later, I would remember every detail of the next seventeen seconds with the kind of clarity that only comes with trauma. The neuroscience behind it is fascinating – the way adrenaline can crystallize a moment, turning it into something so sharp it cuts you every time you remember it. But in that moment, all I knew was that time suddenly felt wrong, like someone had adjusted the speed of the universe without warning anyone .

The truck came out of nowhere, a massive shape materializing through the rain like something from a nightmare. Its headlights carved through the darkness, turning everything into harsh shadows and blinding white. I saw the driver's face for a fraction of a second – young, eyes wide with horror, mouth forming a perfect 'O' of surprise. He was wearing a red baseball cap. These are the details that would haunt me later, the tiny fragments of normalcy that preceded the chaos.

Michael's hand tightened on mine instinctively. Our wedding rings clicked together, a small, metallic sound that somehow cut through everything else. I had just enough time to think about how warm his palm felt against mine, how familiar the weight of his fingers had become over eight years of holding hands.

“I love-” Michael started to say, and then the world exploded.

The impact felt like being hit by a planet. Physics became personal – every law I'd learned in high school suddenly applied directly to my body in ways I'd never wanted to experience. The car spun, and I watched the world revolve around us in terrible slow motion. Streetlights stretched into golden ribbons. Rain drops hung suspended

in the air like diamonds.

The airbags deployed with a sound like a gunshot, filling the car with acrid smoke and white powder that tasted like chemicals and fear. Glass shattered in a terrible symphony, each piece catching the light like malevolent stars before they fell. Metal screamed against metal, a sound that would echo in my nightmares for months to come.

My doctor's brain kicked in, even as the rest of me was frozen in terror. The analytical part of my mind – the part that could stay calm during twelve-hour surgeries and coding patients – began cataloging everything with clinical detachment:

Impact angle: driver's side, approximately 75 degrees.

Speed at collision: excessive.

Type of impact: T-bone, maximum force concentrated at Michael's door .

Probability of survival: don't think about that don't think about that don't think about that.

The car finally stopped spinning, settling into a grotesque new configuration of twisted metal and broken glass. Rain pattered through the shattered windows, mixing with something warm and wet that I refused to identify. The silence that followed was absolute, broken only by the gentle hiss of steam rising from the crushed engine and the distant wail of sirens that were already too late.

My seatbelt had locked, cutting into my chest with bruising force. I could feel glass in my hair, on my skin, scattered across the new suit I'd bought specifically for our anniversary dinner. Somewhere, a car alarm was screaming, its rhythm matching the pounding of my heart.



Training kicked in like autopilot. I ran through the standard trauma assessment, the one I'd performed thousands of times in the ER:

My own status: Conscious. Breathing. Pain in chest (seatbelt), right arm (impact with door), neck (whiplash). Possible concussion. No immediate life-threatening injuries.

But none of that mattered. Nothing mattered except-

“Michael?” My voice sounded wrong, like it was coming from very far away.

“Michael, baby, can you hear me?”

The darkness in the car was absolute now, all the streetlights somehow pointed the wrong way. I couldn't see him. Why couldn't I see him?

I fumbled with my seatbelt, hands shaking so badly it took three tries to hit the release. Glass crunched under my shoes as I shifted, trying to reach him. The inside of the car had become an alien landscape, all familiar shapes transformed into threatening shadows.

“Michael, please.” I was begging now, pride abandoned in favor of desperate prayer.

“Please answer me.”

The seatbelt release clicked with terrible finality. My body moved on autopilot, years of trauma training kicking in even as my heart threatened to explode. Pain shot through my ribs – probable fracture, part of my brain noted clinically – but I pushed it aside. Eight years of emergency medicine had taught me how to compartmentalize pain. What I hadn't learned was how to compartmentalize terror.

The driver of taxi was dead that was for sure. Michael was pinned against the metal that twisted into a grotesque cage around his chest. Blood ran in thin rivulets from a deep laceration at his temple, collecting in the hollow of his collarbone where I'd

kissed him just hours ago. His skin was already taking on that terrible pallor I'd seen too many times in my ER, the color that made my stomach drop every time.

“Michael.” My voice came out raw, like I'd been screaming. Maybe I had been. I couldn't remember. My fingers found his carotid artery, the motion so practiced I could have done it in my sleep. For a moment, there was nothing, and the world stopped breathing. Then – there. A flutter beneath my fingertips, weak but present. The surge of hope was immediate and crushing.

But I knew too much. That was the curse of medical training – you could read the ending of the story before it was finished. The blood loss, the likely internal injuries, the mechanism of trauma... my mind calculated survival rates without my permission, each percentage point a nail in my heart.

If we'd been in my ER, I knew exactly what I'd do. The steps played out in my head like a familiar dance: rapid sequence intubation, bilateral chest tubes, central line access, massive transfusion protocol. I'd done it a thousand times. My hands had saved countless lives caught in the same terrible mathematics of physics versus flesh.

But here, in this broken car that still smelled like Michael's cologne, my surgeon's hands were useless. All my knowledge, all my training, all my supposed skill – none of it meant anything without an OR, without a trauma team, without the tools that turned me from a terrified husband into someone who could actually help.

“Stay with me,” I whispered, cradling his face between my palms. Rain dripped through the shattered windshield, washing away the blood but not the truth. Not the knowledge that every second was precious, that time was flowing as surely as the blood staining my anniversary suit. “Please, baby. Stay with me.”

The sirens grew louder, their wail cutting through the night like a scalpel through flesh. I could time their approach by sound – still too far, too slow, too late. Part of

me wanted to laugh at the irony. How many times had I stood in my trauma bay, wondering why EMS was taking so long? Now I knew. Every second felt like an eternity when you were the one waiting.

They arrived in a chaos of lights and motion, their reflective gear turning them into ghostly figures in the rain. I recognized some of them – Jake from Station 12, Maria who always brought us coffee during night shifts. Now they moved around us with professional efficiency, their faces set in masks of concentration I knew too well.

“Sir, you need to let us work.” Hands pulled at my shoulders, trying to separate me from Michael. I resisted, my medical knowledge spilling out in a desperate stream.

“Thirty-seven-year-old male, direct lateral impact at high speed. No previous medical conditions, no medications, no allergies. Last tetanus two years ago. Type O positive. Wedding ring might need to be cut off for access-”

“Dr. Monroe.” It was Maria's voice, gentle but firm. “We need you to step back now.”

The cruelest part was understanding exactly what they were doing. Every move, every piece of equipment, every shouted vital sign – it was a language I spoke fluently. I watched them establish IV access, saw the way they exchanged looks at his blood pressure reading, recognized the urgency in their movements as they prepared him for transport.

My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails cutting crescents into my palms. The pain was grounding, real, something to focus on besides the mechanical whirl of the hydraulic stretcher being lowered.

“I'm riding with him.” It wasn't a request. They knew better than to argue with a doctor in shock, especially one with blood on his hands – Michael's blood, oh god,

Michael's blood was on my hands.

The ambulance interior was too bright, too sterile, too familiar. I'd been back here countless times doing ride-alongs, teaching new medics, running codes. Now I sat clutching Michael's hand, watching his wedding ring catch the fluorescent light. His fingers were already growing cold.

The monitor began to scream, its steady beeping dissolving into that terrible continuous tone every medical professional dreads. Maria started compressions immediately, her movements precise and powerful. I watched her hands on my husband's chest – hands I'd praised just last week for their skill – and felt something inside me shatter.

“Starting epinephrine,” Jake announced, his voice steady. “Dr. Monroe, you should look away-”

“No.” The word came out like broken glass. “Don't you dare tell me to look away.”

I counted compressions silently, measuring out the seconds of my husband's life in sets of thirty. One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. The statistics marched through my head with brutal clarity – survival rates dropping with each passing minute, neurological outcomes becoming more dire, the cold equations of death making themselves known.

The ambulance screamed to a stop at the emergency entrance of Presbyterian, the back doors flying open to reveal a trauma team already assembled. I recognized every face – these were my people, my team, the ones I led every day into battle against death.

Today, they looked at me like a stranger.

Sofia appeared as they wheeled Michael through the automatic doors, her dark eyes wide with horror as she took in the scene. She was still wearing the dress from her daughter's dance recital – she must have been called in from home. The sight of her in civilian clothes instead of scrubs made everything feel more surreal.

“Eli.” Her voice cracked as she grabbed my arms, trying to stop me from following the gurney. “Eli, you can't go in there.”

“Like hell I can't.” But even as I fought against her grip, I knew. I knew because I'd been on the other side of this scene too many times. I knew because I'd written the protocols myself about family members in trauma rooms. I knew because I could read the truth in Sofia's face, in the way she was already crying.

“Please,” she whispered, and her grip turned from restraining to supporting as my legs finally gave out. “You can't be in there for this. You know you can't.”

Through the trauma room windows, I watched my team work. Their movements were perfect, choreographed, exactly as I'd trained them. I saw them cut away Michael's shirt – the one he'd chosen specially for our anniversary, the one that brought out his eyes. I watched them place the defibrillator pads on his chest, covering the freckle I'd traced with my finger that morning. I observed it all with the detached precision of a surgeon, cataloging each intervention, each medication, each joule of electricity they sent through his heart.

My hands pressed against the glass, leaving smudged prints next to the ones left by countless other family members I'd kept out of this room. How many times had I told people to trust us, to let us work, to stay behind this very window? The irony would have been funny if it wasn't destroying me.

Inside, they worked with the urgency of people trying to save one of their own. Because Michael was one of their own – he'd brought them coffee during overnight

shifts, had redesigned the doctor's lounge last year, had charmed every nurse and orderly with his terrible medical puns. I watched the one of the female nurse take over compressions, her face set in fierce concentration.

Time stretched like taffy, simultaneously too fast and too slow. I could hear the team calling out medications, joules, minutes. I recognized the tone in their voices – the one that came when hope was fading but determination wasn't. We'd all been there, fighting against inevitability, pushing against the boundaries of what medicine could do.

When they finally stopped, when Sofia looked up with devastation written across her face, when the monitor showed that final, flat green line – I didn't move. My hands stayed pressed against the glass, leaving marks that would fade just like everything else.

Inside the trauma room, in the sudden terrible stillness, someone called time of death. The words echoed through the intercom, clinical and cold:

“Time of death, 23:47.”

My surgeon's hands, the ones that had saved so many lives but couldn't save the one that mattered most, finally fell to my sides. There was nothing left to hold onto.

The last thought I had before shock claimed me was that Michael's unfinished “I love you” would haunt me forever – a sentence without an ending, just like us.

I don't remember leaving the trauma bay. The next clear memory I have is sitting in the physician's lounge, mechanical movements carrying me through the motions of changing into clean scrubs. My bloodied suit – Michael's blood, my anniversary suit, the one he'd helped me pick out – sat in a biohazard bag by my feet. Someone had brought me coffee. It sat untouched, steam rising like the ghost of all our morning

conversations.

The paperwork appeared in front of me like a cruel magic trick. Death certificates were usually Bailey's job – my senior resident who handled the administrative side of dying so I didn't have to. But this time, my hands moved across the forms with surgical precision. Each box a small autopsy of our life together:

Name of Deceased: Michael James Davidson

Date of Death: April 15, 2019

Time of Death: 23:47

Cause of Death: Blunt Force Trauma

Manner of Death: Accident

The letters came out perfect, each stroke exact. The same handwriting that had signed countless prescriptions, surgical notes, birthday cards to Michael. Dr. Karen Chen, one of our new residents, hovered nearby like a concerned moth, continuously offering water and tissues I didn't want. Her whispered “I'm so sorry” bounced off me like rain on a window.

When the police arrived, I recited the facts with the same detachment I used during M&M conferences. “The light was yellow. The truck came from the left. Impact occurred at approximately 23:20. Yes, it was raining. No, I didn't see if the other driver was injured. The airbags deployed. We were wearing seatbelts. We were coming from Le Bernardin. It was our anniversary.”

Each detail was a knife, precise and sharp, carving the truth deeper into whatever was left of my heart. The officer's pencil scratched against his notepad, recording the

exact moment my world ended in objective, procedural language.

Sofia appeared at my elbow, her fingers warm against my cold skin. “Eli, let me handle this.” Her voice was gentle but firm, the same tone she used with difficult patients. “You don't have to do this now.”

I shook my head, my hand steady as I signed the final form. My signature looked exactly the same as it had this morning. Shouldn't it look different? Shouldn't everything look different?

The first crack in my composure came with the sound of Rachel's voice. My sister's cry echoed through the hallway, a sound of pure anguish that bypassed all my carefully constructed walls. She burst into the room like a storm, her face already wet with tears, and threw herself at me. For a moment, I stood frozen, unable to process the contact. Then my arms moved without my permission, wrapping around her as she sobbed into my scrub top.

David arrived moments later, still in his FDNY uniform, smelling of smoke and rain. He didn't say anything – my brother-in-law had always understood the value of silence – just placed his hand on my shoulder. The weight of it anchored me to reality, even as everything else seemed to be floating away.

The hospital chaplain made an appearance, their practiced speech faltering when they met my eyes. I'd worked with them countless times, had even admired their ability to comfort the bereaved. Now their words washed over me like static. I already knew every platitude, had delivered them myself to countless families. They felt like ashes in my mouth.

Dawn crept over Manhattan like a watercolor painting, the sky bleeding from black to gray to pale pink. Sofia insisted on driving me home, and I didn't have the energy to argue. I watched the city wake up through the passenger window, each sign of life a



personal affront. How dare the world continue? How dare the sun rise? How dare anything exist in a universe where Michael didn't?

The doorman at our building – Jim, who had just celebrated his twentieth anniversary here, who Michael always brought coffee on cold mornings – started to offer condolences, but his words died when he saw my face. The elevator ride to our floor felt endless, the mechanical hum filling the silence where Michael's voice should have been.

Our apartment was a museum of unfinished moments. Michael's coffee mug sat on the counter, a ring of dried coffee marking where he'd set it down yesterday morning. His architectural plans spread across the dining table, pencil marks and sticky notes describing a future he'd never see. A post-it note on the fridge reminded us to pick up wine for Rachel's birthday next week. His keys hung on their hook by the door, the little block architect keychain I'd given him as a joke still attached.

The scent of him lingered everywhere – his shampoo, his cologne, the essential Michael-ness that I'd breathed in every morning for eight years. I moved through the space like a ghost, afraid to disturb anything, terrified of erasing these last traces of him .

In our bedroom – no, my bedroom now, and the thought was a physical pain – his favorite sweater was draped over the chair where he'd left it yesterday morning. The gray cashmere one I'd given him last Christmas, the one he said felt like wearing a hug. My legs gave out and I sank to the floor, gathering the fabric in my hands. My surgeon's hands, always steady, now shook as I pressed the sweater to my face, breathing in deeply, searching for him in the familiar scent.

The sun climbed higher in the sky, painting rectangles of light across the floor where I sat. Time passed, maybe hours, maybe minutes. I couldn't tell anymore. Everything had become fluid, unreal. The only solid thing was the sweater in my hands and the

ring on my finger.

When Sofia let herself in hours later – using the spare key Michael had insisted we give her “in case of emergencies” – she found me still there, sitting in a patch of sunlight, tears falling silently onto gray cashmere. She didn't say anything, just sat down beside me on the floor and took my hand, her fingers interlacing with mine the way Michael's had just hours ago in a taxi that smelled like vanilla air freshener and rain.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:39 am*

### CHAPTER 1

#### Just Another Tuesday

The alarm's digital chirp sliced through the dark at 4:30 AM, and I smacked it silent with the muscle memory of someone who'd done this thousands of times before. My fingers knew exactly where to land, just like they knew how to find a vein in the dark or intubate without looking up.

Steam curled from the coffee maker, the bitter smell filling my too-quiet apartment. The machine hummed and sputtered, pushing out enough coffee for two mugs because I was too much of a coward to change the settings. Every morning, watching that second serving spiral down the drain, my chest tight with the stupid symbolism of it all.

The harsh fluorescent light of my bathroom made my face look like shit in the mirror, but at least the white coat was crisp. I straightened my tie - navy blue, because Michael had bought me a whole collection of them, insisting they made me look “distinguished.” Chief of Emergency Medicine Dr. Eli Monroe stared back at me, bags under his eyes that could be blamed on overnight traumas rather than nights spent staring at the ceiling.

Michael's side of the closet loomed like a shrine, all designer suits wrapped in plastic like fucking artifacts in a museum. I could still hear him .

“You're a department chief now, babe,” that crooked smile of his as he'd fix my collar. “Time to dress like one.”

The TV blared its morning propaganda while I clutched my coffee, avoiding the antique table we'd rescued from some overpriced Brooklyn shop. The wobbly leg still caught my hip sometimes when I passed, a physical reminder I couldn't bring myself to fix. Michael used to spend these mornings ranting at the news anchors, his coffee getting cold while he gestured at their "bullshit economic analysis."

I stabbed the power button at 4:45, silence flooding back in.

The 5 AM subway car reeked of night shift sweat and early morning desperation. I planted my feet in a wide stance, one hand white-knuckled on the pole while I swiped through patient files. The train lurched and swayed, but my body compensated without thinking.

Michael's voice ghosted through my head: "Your subway surfing skills are getting pretty impressive." He'd always hover nearby, pretending to catch me, making a whole dramatic production out of it. The memory sucker-punched me in the gut, but I buried it under Mrs. Chen's post-op notes like I buried everything else. Vitals stable. Margins clear. Move the fuck on.

Movement flickered in my peripheral - Dr. Yang, our new ortho resident, trying to disappear behind her phone. The fear rolling off her was practically visible, and I knew why. Last week's M&M conference had been brutal, watching me tear her attending a new one over a preventable death. I'd laid out every mistake with surgical precision while the other residents sat frozen, learning exactly what happened when you got sloppy.

"You're being harsh again," Michael would have said, with that soft look he'd get. But Michael was gone, and harsh kept people breathing. Harsh meant everyone stayed sharp. Harsh meant I didn't have to watch another family fall apart in my ER.

The brakes screamed as we hit 168th Street. By the time I stepped onto the platform,

I'd locked everything personal away behind the Chief of Emergency Medicine mask. Professional distance wrapped around me like armor.

Just another fucking Tuesday.

The cold slapped my face as I emerged from the subway, New York-Presbyterian's massive silhouette looming against the purple-black sky like some ancient fortress. Light blazed from every window, a middle finger to the darkness. Six years ago, those lights had meant hope. Now they just reminded me of all the people we couldn't put back together.

My badge beeped me through the staff entrance at 5:15, right on fucking schedule. Roberto barely glanced up from his crossword, our daily ritual as meaningless as my second cup of coffee.

“Quiet night?” “So far, Dr. Monroe.”

The elevator's fluorescent buzz filled forty-seven seconds while I scrolled through overnight reports, the words blurring together. MVAs, GSWs, cardiac events - all “routine,” which made my stomach clench. Any ER doc worth their salt knew “routine” was the universe's favorite joke.

The doors opened onto controlled chaos - monitors screaming their electronic panic, nurses speed-walking with that distinct “shit's about to go down” energy, the night shift passing their battles to the incoming day warriors like a game of medical hot potato.

“Board meeting at 2 PM.” Sofia materialized beside me, armed with actually-hot coffee unlike the lukewarm piss I'd been nursing. Three heartbeats of silence.

“Vale is pushing his neurology expansion agenda again,” she continued, her voice

dripping with that special contempt she reserved for hospital politics. “He's got half the board convinced we need a dedicated neurosurgical trauma unit. Which would mean?— ”

“Cutting into Emergency Department funding,” I finished, my fingers cramping around the tablet. The bitter irony twisted in my gut like a rusty knife - Vale pushing for the exact unit that could've saved Michael when they'd wasted precious minutes transferring him after the crash. The universe's sick sense of humor never got old.

Lock. It. Down.

Numbers swam across my screen - bed capacity, wait times, patient satisfaction scores. As if you could quantify death in fucking pie charts, measure grief in percentages.

Sofia's report came in precise surgical strikes: heart attack in catheterization, diabetic emergencies in medical, possible stroke in CT. Her voice rose just enough to scatter the vulture-circle of nurses hovering near my office.

Three seconds. Breathe.

The trauma alert shattered everything. “Multiple casualties incoming. Construction site collapse downtown. First ambulance, four minutes out.”

Time crystallized into diamond-sharp focus. My body moved on autopilot, Sofia half a step behind like my shadow.

“Page trauma surgery and orthopedics,” I barked, wrestling with the trauma gown.

The smell of latex gloves hit me like a punch to the throat - paramedic stripping off bloody gloves, shaking his head, Michael's blood still warm on my hands-

“Initial report indicates at least six critical patients,” Sofia's voice cut through the flashback like a scalpel. “Partial building collapse, approximately twenty total casualties. They're routing the most severe cases to us.”

The ER transformed around us, this beautiful terrible machine clicking into war mode. Nurses cleared trauma bays like bouncers at last call, techs prepped equipment with military precision, residents materializing from whatever corners they'd been hiding in.

The first ambulance screamed in at 10:47, the siren hitting that exact pitch that made my heart stutter. Sofia shifted closer - my human guardrail against the memories threatening to drag me under. The next forty minutes became a blur of blood and desperate decisions.

Each victim brought their own symphony of chaos: construction foreman with his chest caved in like a broken birdcage, office worker with rebar through her torso like some twisted modern art, young engineer whose legs looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to marble.

I conducted this orchestra of trauma like a possessed maestro, my voice carrying over the cacophony of death trying its best to win.

“Type and cross-match four units!”

“Get me trauma surgery, now!”

“Where the fuck is radiology with that chest film?”

The metallic stench of blood mixed with concrete dust and something else - gasoline? No. Not here. Not now. Focus, you stupid fuck.

“Multiple long bone fractures, suspected internal bleeding,” a paramedic called out. The gurney wheels shrieked against tile, morphing into the sound of metal kissing metal at 60 mph-

Three seconds. That was the rule. But rules meant jack shit to trauma-induced PTSD.

“Doctor Monroe?” Yang's voice yanked me back. Here. Now. Living patients.

“CBC, metabolic panel, portable chest,” I rattled off, my voice steady even as my pulse did the cha-cha. “Trauma panel and-”

The next victim came in wearing a crown of glass shards, blood painting abstract patterns on their skin. Suddenly I was kneeling on wet asphalt, pressing against Michael's chest while his life leaked between my fingers, begging him to stay, just fucking stay-

“Doctor Monroe!” Sofia's voice cracked like a whip. “Trauma One is coding!”

I moved before thought, fresh gloves snapping on. The foreman lay there, his chest a roadmap of broken bones beneath frantic hands. The monitor wailed its death song - v-tach, no pulse. Just like-

Different patient. Different day. Different ending.

“Beginning CPR,” I announced, hands finding their home on shattered sternum. Each compression precise, measured. Don't think about counting on another chest, don't think about the way ribs feel when they're already broken...

“Push one of epi. Charge to 200.”

The defibrillator's whine merged with phantom sirens, radio static, that goddamn



paramedic's voice saying "Time of death..."

"Clear!" The foreman danced his electric jig. Still v-tach. Fuck.

"300 joules." Another shock. Nothing. Just like- No.

"Again." Voice steady as a surgeon's hands, even as sweat traced ice-cold fingers down my spine. Different patient. Different day. "Another epi. Where's my fucking chest tube?"

The team moved like a single organism, each piece knowing its dance. Time stretched like taffy, measured in heartbeats and breathing tubes and jolts of electricity. We fought death with science and stubbornness and sheer fucking spite.

"Converting to sinus rhythm," someone called out. "BP coming up, 90/60."

I stripped off the gloves, movements mechanical. My hands didn't shake anymore. I'd built walls thick enough to contain earthquakes, buried everything deep enough that nothing could surface.

That's when I felt it - that prickle at the base of your neck when someone's got their crosshairs on you. I looked up through the observation window, and reality did a sideways shuffle.

He stood there like a statue among the chaos, some fucking Renaissance painting dropped into a war zone. Charcoal suit that somehow repelled the blood and grime in the air, dark hair going silver at the temples like he'd planned it. But those eyes - Christ, those eyes. Deep blue and ancient as sin, filled with something that felt like recognition. Like he knew every secret I'd buried under six years of carefully constructed control.

Three seconds for memories. That was the rule.

But this wasn't memory - this was something else. Something cracked in my fortress walls. A spark of... something. Dangerous. Electric. Familiar in a way that made my brain itch, like a word stuck on the tip of your tongue. For a moment, the ghosts that haunted me seemed to fade, replaced by others I couldn't quite grasp-

The monitor chirped its warning, yanking me back to the bleeding, broken present. When I looked up again, he was gone. The space where he'd stood felt wrong somehow, like someone had cut a hole in reality.

“Doctor Monroe?” Sofia's voice carried that note of concern I couldn't afford to acknowledge. “Another critical incoming. And Vale's breathing down my neck about bed capacity.”

I shoved the strange moment into the box with all the other things I couldn't look at too closely. The smell of blood and betadine anchored me to now. This was real. This was where I could still make a difference.

“Tell Vale he'll get his update when I'm done keeping people alive.” The words came out sharp enough to cut, but Sofia just nodded.

“Two minutes to arrival,” the speaker announced. “Multiple trauma, suspected closed head injury with midline shift...”

I moved toward the ambulance bay, already focused on the next crisis. But something had shifted, like a key turning in a lock I hadn't known existed. The feeling lingered, an echo of those blue eyes that had seen straight through my carefully maintained bullshit.

The ER settled into that weird post-battle quiet, like a war zone after the bombs stop

falling. Three patients patched up enough for ICU, two walking wounded sent home with prescriptions and prayers, and one... one joining the ghosts that already haunted these halls.

I ripped off my trauma gown, cramming it into the biohazard bin with enough force to make the lid rattle. Exhaustion crept in like a bad hangover while I typed up my notes, each clinical phrase a wall between me and the memories scratching at the back of my skull.

But it wasn't the trauma cases playing on repeat in my head. It was him - Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Impossible from the window. His face stuck there like gum on a shoe, refusing to be filed away in my neat little boxes of repression.

Sofia materialized with her usual lifeline - protein bar and coffee that actually resembled coffee. She'd stopped asking if I was okay after Michael died. We both knew that was a bullshit question.

"You good?" she asked instead, keeping it light while her eyes did their PhD-level analysis of my mental state.

We pretended she meant the trauma cases, the dead kid. Not the way my hands had betrayed me for a split second when that victim came in wearing glass like diamonds in his skin...

Three seconds. Lock it down.

"Board meeting in thirty," Sofia cut in, watching me with that look that said she saw too damn much. "Better change before Vale starts his fashion critique. Again."

I grabbed my tablet, grateful for the escape route. The protein bar went into my pocket like always - another prop in this play I was performing. But I took the coffee.

Some habits were worth keeping.

My office closet held the backup suit like some kind of security blanket. Michael's idea - "You never know when you'll need to look the part," he'd say, fixing my tie with that crooked smile that always made me feel like-

Three seconds. Fucking stop.

I changed like a soldier prepping for battle, each movement measured and controlled. The charcoal grey suit was another one of Michael's picks, armor made of designer labels. Today it felt about as protective as tissue paper.

The construction proposal glared at me from my desk. I forced myself to focus on the Rothschild Development plans, searching for anything that might screw with ambulance access - exactly the kind of ammo Vale would love to use in his neurosurgery crusade.

The boardroom buzzed like a hornet's nest when I walked in, Vale holding court like some discount Zeus among his followers. His silver hair caught the fluorescent light while he worked his charm, board members clustering around him like moths to a flame. The bastard had a gift for making everyone feel like they were in on some brilliant scheme.

I took my usual spot, laying out my weapons - data, statistics, cold hard facts. Six years of these meetings had taught me the choreography: Vale would push his agenda, I'd counter with logic, and the board would waffle like professional politicians. Same shit, different Tuesday.

Then the air changed.

It hit like the pressure drop before a storm, making my skin prickle. My head snapped

up before I could stop myself, pulled by something I didn't want to analyze too closely.

He stood in the doorway like he owned the fucking universe, not just the building. That suit - charcoal grey like mine but somehow more real - seemed to eat light rather than reflect it. His presence filled the room like smoke, making everything else fade to background noise.

Our eyes met.

Three seconds. That was the rule.

But time went sideways, reality bending around that blue-steel gaze. The same electric shock from the ER hit me again, making my heart forget its rhythm .

“Mister Rothschild, welcome to Presbyterian.” Bennett's voice shattered the moment like glass. “We're honored to have you join us today.”

Alexander Rothschild.

The name hit like a punch to the gut, familiar in a way that made zero sense, impossible in a way I couldn't ignore. My carefully constructed reality trembled like a house of cards in a hurricane.

He moved through the room like a predator playing at being human. Everything about him screamed old money and older power, from his perfectly styled hair with its artistic touch of grey to shoes that probably cost more than my car. And yet...

There was something else. Something in the way he carried himself, like a warrior wearing Armani instead of armor. Something in those ancient eyes that saw right through my professional bullshit, straight through six years of carefully built walls.

“Doctor Monroe.” His voice reached across the table and grabbed me by the spine. “I’ve heard impressive things about your work here.”

“Mister Rothschild.” My voice stayed steady through sheer fucking willpower. “I wasn’t aware you had taken an interest in our hospital.”

“Please,” he smiled, and something deep in my chest ached like a badly healed wound, “call me Alex.”

The meeting lurched forward with fake normalcy. Vale worked his silver-tongued magic about the neurosurgery unit, smooth as expensive scotch. I fired back with my arsenal of data and survival rates. Our usual dance, but today the music was all wrong.

Alex commanded the room like he’d been born to it. His voice carried something ancient and electric as he laid out the Rothschild Development Project like a general planning a campaign. Modern medical buildings, better roads, special ambulance routes. His eyes locked onto mine at that last bit, sending another impossible jolt through my system .

“Of course,” he continued, voice hitting notes that made my spine tingle, “we want to make sure our plans help rather than hurt hospital operations. Which is why I’d like a complete tour of the Emergency Department.” Those blue eyes pinned me like butterflies in a display case. “From you, Doctor Monroe, if you’re willing.”

The room went dead quiet. Even Vale’s plastic smile cracked around the edges.

I met Alex’s gaze across the boardroom battlefield, knowing with bone-deep certainty that my carefully constructed world was about to go up in flames.

“Of course,” I heard myself say, words dropping into that charged silence like stones

in a still pond. “It would be my pleasure.”

Sofia was going to rip me a new one.

The meeting dissolved into a blur of paperwork and fake smiles. I gathered my shit with robot precision, my skin crawling with awareness of Alex across the room. He worked the crowd like a pro, but his attention felt like a laser sight between my shoulder blades.

“Eli.” Vale's honey-poisoned voice caught me at the door. “A moment?”

I turned, professionalism holding on by its fingernails. “Doctor Vale?”

“I trust you'll give Mister Rothschild a... thorough understanding of our space constraints.” His grey eyes glittered like a snake's before it strikes. “We wouldn't want him to underestimate our need for expansion.”

“I always aim for thoroughness,” I kept my voice flat as Kansas. “If you'll excuse me, I have patients waiting.”

I escaped into the hallway, but not before catching Alex's slight smile. The bastard hadn't missed a word.

Walking back to my office felt like crossing a minefield in tap shoes. Each step brought me closer to whatever impossible thing had started when those blue eyes found mine through the observation window.

Three seconds. That was my rule for memories and mayhem.

But somehow I knew this wasn't about the past anymore. This was something else. Something new. Something that felt dangerously like hope.

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### CHAPTER 2

#### The Man Who Knew

Manhattan sprawled out like a half-finished painting, its razor edges cutting into the bruised dawn sky. My hand pressed against the cold glass of my office window, trying to anchor myself in the present while my mind kept rewinding to yesterday's moment of impossible recognition.

Sleep had given me the middle finger - how could I rest when his voice kept echoing in my head?

“Of course, Mr. Rothschild. It would be my pleasure.”

The words had been pure corporate bullshit, but I'd seen it - that crack in his perfect doctor facade when our eyes met, that flash of something he couldn't quite bury. Even wrapped in grief and professional distance like armor, he was unmistakable. That pull between us, familiar as my own fucking heartbeat, confirmed what I'd known since tracking him to Presbyterian.

I'd finally found him.

My reflection looked like hammered shit, but different somehow. Hope had carved new lines around my eyes, softened the perpetual clench of my jaw.

Marcus droned on about permits and timelines somewhere behind me, but his words blurred into white noise. The memories hit like a tidal wave - not just yesterday's, but



echoes from lives I shouldn't remember but did.

Renaissance Italy bloomed behind my eyes like fresh paint: Eli's laugh bouncing off studio walls while he fixed my terrible attempt at painting, those steady hands guiding the brush. The same hands that now moved with identical precision, trading art for emergency medicine.

Paris in the '20s swelled like contraband jazz: Eli at the piano, fingers dancing across ivory like he'd been born making music. That same grace now orchestrating trauma teams instead of preludes.

Ancient Greece rose like fever dream: Battle dust and bronze, Eli's hands steady with needle and thread. He'd been a healer even then, patching up warriors while others made corpses. Now he commanded an ER with that same quiet strength, that same stubborn dedication to keeping death at bay.

“Your coffee's getting cold.”

Marcus's voice yanked me back. He stood in the doorway looking exactly like what he wasn't - just another corporate suit. But few would notice the way he held himself like a weapon barely sheathed, the ancient grace in his movements. We'd both learned to hide in plain sight, wearing wealth and power like designer camouflage.

I ignored the coffee cooling on my desk, letting myself sink into one pure moment of truth.

“He felt it too,” I murmured, remembering how Eli's carefully constructed walls had cracked when our eyes locked. “Even if he doesn't understand it yet.”

Marcus's silence spoke novels. He'd walked this road with me through centuries, bound by an oath older than most civilizations. “The board meeting went as planned,”

he finally said, voice carefully blank. “But Vale's presence complicates things.”

“Show me his file again.”

Marcus sighed but pulled up the hospital docs on the big screen. Dr. Eli Monroe's life reduced to bullet points: Chief of Emergency Medicine, youngest department head in Presbyterian's history, enough publications to wallpaper my office. The photo was fresh PR bullshit, Eli staring back with that perfect professional mask, but I could read the shadows behind his eyes like a book I'd memorized lifetimes ago.

I knew every inch of his face through centuries: that crooked smile that never quite evened out, the skeptical arch of his left eyebrow, that tiny scar near his hairline that somehow made it through every reincarnation. But this version hit different. Grief had hollowed out his cheeks, added weight to his gaze. His late husband. The words burned like acid in my throat, even though I'd known this lifetime would be a clusterfuck of complications.

“The development project's perfect cover,” I said, addressing Marcus's unspoken what-the-fuck-are-you-doing face. “But did you catch Vale during the meeting? He might not remember consciously, but something in him recognizes Eli.”

“Which should scare the shit out of you,” Marcus replied, setting his tablet down like he was placing a sword on a table. In that moment, I saw the nobleman he'd been, the warrior who'd sworn his blade to our protection. “Eli... he's not ready for any of this.”

“He's still grieving,” I forced out the words like broken glass. “I know. But you saw him in that trauma bay, Marcus. Even through his grief, even without his memories, he's still exactly who he's always been. A healer. A protector. A soul that pulls mine across fucking centuries like gravity.”

“And if forcing these memories on him now breaks him?” Marcus's voice carried the

weight of centuries watching this play out. “If the weight of past lives shatters him when he's already held together with duct tape and willpower?”

“Then we move slow,” I said finally, turning back to the window. Morning sun painted the city in shades of maybe, of possibility. “The ER tour gives us legitimate contact. Everything else...” I traced the path to Presbyterian, imagining Eli already there, saving lives with those surgeon's hands that had once painted masterpieces, played piano, stitched battlefield wounds. “Everything else happens how it happens.”

Marcus nodded once, gathering his shit with ancient grace. He paused at the door, his reflection overlapping with memories of other times, other warnings.

He left without another word. The ER tour loomed tomorrow - hours until I could see him again, start the delicate dance of making him remember without completely destroying the life he'd built from grief and determination.

Every version of Eli burned in my soul like a brand - the battlefield doctor with hands steady as death, the artist who saw beauty in broken things, the musician whose songs still haunted my dreams after centuries of silence.

I adjusted my tie, choosing navy blue that matched those Mediterranean waters where we'd once swam together, lifetimes ago. My fingers brushed the ancient watch at my wrist, its worn face marking time like a faithful witness to this endless fucking dance of remembering and forgetting.

Marcus watched me with those too-knowing eyes as I stepped back into the office. “The board will question your motives for focusing so heavily on this site,” he warned, though we both knew the real shit storm brewing had nothing to do with real estate.

“They'll get their answers,” I said, smiling. Let them obsess over profit margins and

market analysis. The truth was written in star paths and blood trails and the cosmic joke of endless rebirth.

The executive floor buzzed like an overpriced beehive - assistants racing around with tablets and coffee orders, department heads circle-jerking over PowerPoints, all the usual corporate theater. I took my spot at the head of the table, pretending to give a shit about the morning agenda.

The air shifted suddenly, molecules rearranging themselves around a presence that set off every ancient alarm bell in my system. Will's entrance commanded attention like the corporate prince he pretended to be, but there was something else - something in his predator's grace that made the warrior in my bones want to reach for a sword that wasn't there.

“Father's concerned about this sudden interest in hospital-adjacent property.” Will's voice dripped careful neutrality as he claimed his throne to my right. His suit probably cost more than most people's cars, his smile calculated down to the millimeter. We played at being Fortune 500 royalty now, but older patterns hummed beneath our designer armor.

I kept writing, pen skating across paper like nothing mattered. “Diversification,” I said, sliding him a market analysis thick enough to choke on. “Healthcare's a growing sector.” The documents were perfect - Marcus had made damn sure every decimal point could withstand nuclear scrutiny.

Will's presence made something ancient in my gut coil tight. Every lifetime, he showed up like a bad penny, never remembering why. Our rivalry now played out in stock options and boardroom coups instead of swords and shields, but it carried the same bloody echo.

“Interesting timing,” Will mused, pulling out a leather folder I hadn't seen before.

“Did some digging in the family archives. Found something you might want to see.”  
He dropped several yellowed pages onto the table like bombs.

My heart tried to crawl up my throat as I recognized the elegant handwriting. A medical journal from the 1890s, describing a doctor who might as well have been Eli's fucking twin. Of course Will would find this - he'd always had a talent for digging up exactly the secrets I needed buried.

“Hell of a resemblance, isn't it?” Will leaned back, watching me with eyes that held shadows of older knowledge. “Almost like history's on repeat. Though that would be crazy, right?”

I kept my poker face while examining the pages. The journal detailed a brilliant young surgeon at the old New York Hospital, saving lives with techniques decades ahead of his time. Same soul, same calling, different century. “Historical coincidences are fascinating,” I said smooth as silk, though my fingers trembled over words written in another lifetime.

“You've always had a weird knack for finding things,” Will pressed, his tone dancing between curiosity and threat. “But this feels personal. The way you pushed for Presbyterian, the timing... it's like you knew exactly what you'd find there.”

The journal pages seemed to pulse in my hands like a second heartbeat. More than just historical records - they were breadcrumbs dropped by whatever cosmic force kept throwing us together across centuries. Every lifetime, the signs appeared: a painting with familiar eyes, a melody that sparked recognition, or now, these yellowed pages tracking a healer's work.

“Strange is relative,” I said, flashing a smile loaded with centuries of secrets. “And timing, dear brother, is everything.”

Will's eyes narrowed like a snake sizing up prey. In another life, he'd understood too well. That understanding had led to betrayal that still echoed through time like a gunshot in an empty church. But here, now, he was just my younger brother playing corporate chess with pieces he couldn't quite recognize.

“Father expects a full presentation on Presbyterian,” he said, rising with that liquid grace that always made my combat instincts twitch. “Make sure the numbers justify your... personal interest.”

I watched him leave, noting how the other suits shifted around him like planets around a sun. Will had always been magnetic as gravity, pulling people into his orbit. Back in the day, that charisma had made him a natural leader, until ambition turned his loyalty toxic. Now he wielded corporate power instead of military might, but the pattern stayed the same as fucking always.

The journal pages burned against my fingers like evidence at a crime scene, another piece of proof that some souls were cosmic magnets, destined to find each other across time's wasteland. Eli's precise medical notes from the 1890s carried the same dedication I'd seen yesterday in the ER. Different lifetime, same essential truth about who he was at his core.

Marcus materialized like a ghost at my shoulder, his presence screaming about all the corporate bullshit waiting to be handled. “Construction permits need your signature,” he murmured. “Board's expecting detailed projections on the medical office complex.”

I nodded, tucking the journal pages into my inner pocket, close to my heart where they belonged. The corporate dance would go on - presentations, numbers, strategies, all that surface-level shit. But beneath it ran currents older than stock options or profit margins.

Somewhere across the city, Eli was probably already knuckle-deep in saving lives. Soon I'd see him again. The journal pages were just another sign, another thread in fate's tapestry.

Will finding them wasn't coincidence - nothing in our twisted destiny ever was. But this time, armed with centuries of knowledge and the bone-deep determination that had carried me through countless lives, I wouldn't let ancient patterns repeat. This time, I'd protect what we'd lost too many times before.

Even if it meant burning everything else to the ground.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Boardroom Ghosts

The fluorescent lights cast their usual sickly glow across empty hallways, night shift's exhaustion bleeding into that dead zone before dawn. Usually these quiet hours felt like home, but today everything seemed off-kilter, like a heart beating with an extra thump where it shouldn't be.

I stared at my tablet, trying to lose myself in overnight reports. Mrs. Chen's vitals holding steady. Yesterday's construction victims scattered across various states of almost-dead: Jenkins finally stabilizing in ICU, his chest tube not trying to drown him anymore. Rodriguez hanging on after that brutal thoracotomy. Thompson's brain deciding not to herniate after all. Patterson's infection numbers crawling down. Data. Facts. The kind of certainty I could trust when everything else felt like quicksand.

But my eyes kept drifting to those fucking architectural renderings saved in another folder. The courtyard design caught me again - light and shadow playing across glass and stone in patterns that made my head hurt with their familiarity. Michael would've been all over this shit. "Light's its own kind of medicine," he used to say, going on about transforming spaces from sterile to healing.

Three seconds for that memory. Except... it felt wrong somehow. Layered. Like Michael's voice carried echoes of other voices, other times, saying the same damn things about light and healing and-

No. Focus on what's real.



Room 204. Mrs. Rodriguez post emergency lap chole. Pain scores climbing higher than I liked. I adjusted her meds with mechanical precision, bumping up the scheduled Tylenol and adding some dilaudid for breakthrough pain. The familiar dance of numbers and dosages should've felt like solid ground.

Instead, Alex's face ambushed me again. Those blue eyes cutting through my bullshit across the boardroom table like they knew every secret I'd ever tried to bury. My hand clenched around the stylus until it creaked in protest.

Three seconds. That was the fucking rule. But how do you time-box something you can't even name? This... recognition that made zero sense. The dreams that had chased me all night, full of stone hallways and oil paint smell and-

“Dr. Monroe?” An intern's voice yanked me back. Katie Chen, one of our promising first-years, clutching her tablet like a security blanket. “Got a post-op in 216 showing DVT signs.”

Work. Thank fuck. This I could handle.

“Show me the ultrasound,” I ordered, voice steady as a surgeon's hands.

I lost myself in morning rounds, drowning in the rhythm of patient checks and treatment tweaks. Each note detailed to death, every order triple-checked like OCD was my religion. The sun had crawled its way up by the time I hit the doctor's lounge, hiding behind a mountain of charts that needed reviewing.

Coffee materialized at my elbow, expensive shit that Sofia insisted on. She claimed her chair with that careful casualness I knew too well - same way she'd approached me those first weeks after Michael died, when grief had hollowed me out like a corpse.

“You're not gonna talk about it, are you?” Her voice mixed exasperation with worry .

I kept staring at my chart like the words weren't dancing. “Talk about what?”

“Rothschild.” His name sent electricity down my spine. “Yesterday. I saw how he looked at you. Like he-“ She paused, fishing for words. “Like he knew you from somewhere.”

My pen dug into paper like it had a grudge, leaving an angry blot. “He's just another developer with a pitch,” I said, voice flat as Kansas. “Nothing more.”

The silence stretched between us, heavy with twenty years of friendship and all the shit we'd seen together. Sofia had been there through it all - residency hell, my wedding, the funeral. She could read my tension like a CT scan.

Finally, I looked up. Her face played at neutral, but I knew that look. Same one she wore when she found me in the ER that night, still wearing Michael's blood, refusing to leave until-

Three seconds. Lock it down.

“Vale's circling like a shark,” she said quietly, eyes sharp with warning. “Don't give that bastard ammunition.”

“The project could fuck with response times,” I deflected. “My job to make sure that doesn't happen.”

“Sure it is.” Sofia's voice went gentle but firm. “Just like reviewing those cardiac unit proposals last month. But you didn't look at those developers like they were ghosts walking around in suits.”

Ghosts in suits. Too fucking close to the truth I was trying not to see - how Alex's presence felt foreign and familiar at once, like a song you forgot you knew until it started playing.

“Got patients waiting.” I gathered my charts like armor, needing to escape before Sofia's x-ray vision saw through to bones I wasn't ready to expose.

“Eli.” Her hand caught my wrist, anchoring me to now. “Just... watch your ass. Whatever this thing is, whatever's got you spooked-“ She chose her words like surgical instruments. “Vale's been gunning for you since you destroyed his boy at M&M. Don't give him an opening. ”

I managed a stiff nod, words stuck in my throat.

Sirens split the morning like a headache, ambulances screaming to a halt outside. Multiple vehicle pileup on the FDR, dispatch warning of four critical incoming. My pager started its dance as I was already moving, wrestling with a fresh trauma gown.

“Major crush injuries, chest and abdomen,” the first medic barked, wheeling in their human wreck. “BP in the toilet, bleeding somewhere inside.”

The ER erupted into beautiful chaos - my kind of chaos. Orders flew from my mouth on autopilot: “Type and cross four units!” “Get me a chest tube tray!” “Where the fuck is my surgical consult?”

Blood made my gloves slick as I worked, hands finding rhythms learned from thousands of similar dances with death. But between each critical move, each life-or-death call, something else flickered at the edges:

Hands stained with paint instead of blood.

Pine air and rushing water.

Music that felt older than time.

I shoved the weird shit aside, focusing on the body under my hands. Ultrasound showed free fluid in the belly - internal bleeding, just like I'd called it. "OR Two's ready," a nurse shouted. "Surgery's incoming."

My hands stayed steady placing lines and tubes, but those foreign sensations kept ambushing me. Oil paint smell mixing with antiseptic. Monitor beeps morphing into music I couldn't possibly know.

"BP's coming up," someone called. "OR's waiting."

I stripped off the bloody gloves, my wedding ring catching fluorescent light like an accusation. Just stress, I told myself. Stress and fucked-up dreams.

Because the alternative - that Alexander fucking Rothschild had woken something impossible in me - threatened to tear down every wall I'd built since Michael died .

"Good catch, Dr. Monroe." Yang handed me fresh labs, hungry for approval like all the new residents.

Numbers don't lie: hemoglobin tanking at 8.2, lactate screaming at 4.1. Clear signs of shock that didn't need any mystical interpretation.

"Follow them to the OR," I told Yang. "I want every bloody detail from that surgery."

Heading to check another post-op, I tried processing the weird shit from the trauma bay. Those flashes felt more like memories than imagination - but that was fucking

impossible. I was a surgeon, a scientist. I dealt in facts you could measure, not some metaphysical past-life bullshit.

“Dr. Monroe.”

Vale's voice hit like ice water. He slid out of a side corridor smooth as a snake, smile all teeth and no warmth. I'd been waiting for this - Vale never missed a chance to go for the throat.

“Got a minute?” He nodded toward an empty consult room, making it clear it wasn't really a question.

I followed him in, keeping my distance like he was contagious. “What can I do for you?”

“Been reading your department's emergency protocols.” He leaned against the desk, casual as a loaded gun. “Fascinating stuff, given recent... developments.”

“We update quarterly,” I kept it neutral. “As you know.”

“Indeed.” His smile tightened like a garrote. “Couldn't help but notice you're awfully invested in this Rothschild project. Interesting, given your... history with construction oversight.”

My chest seized at the deliberate hit. Before the crash, Michael had run Presbyterian's historical preservation, making sure construction didn't fuck with the hospital's heritage. Vale knew exactly what nerve he was stabbing.

“You got a point hiding in there somewhere?” My voice stayed professional, barely.

“Just making observations.” Vale straightened, adjusting his perfect fucking sleeve.

“We all want what's best for the hospital. No... distractions.”

Something in that last word made my gut twist. It carried weight beyond normal hospital politics, though I couldn't say why. As he slithered toward the door, every instinct screamed I was missing something bigger - something deeper than Vale's usual power plays.

“The board takes ER access seriously,” I said to his back, pretending this was just about hospital bullshit.

He paused, turning just enough to flash that predator's smile. “Almost as seriously as they take their Chief of Emergency Medicine's... stability.”

The threat was clear as a gut wound, but something darker lurked under it. Vale's stare felt older than our rivalry, deeper than hospital politics. Like Alex's penetrating gaze, it echoed with something I couldn't - or wouldn't - understand.

My pager buzzed again. Another trauma incoming.

Saved by the fucking bell.

Midday sun sliced through my office windows while Sofia spread development plans across the table like she was plotting a military campaign. Martinez from Legal arranged her shit with that OCD precision lawyers love, while Chen from Traffic pulled up his fancy simulation models.

“Initial impact studies look promising,” Sofia started, keeping it neutral. “Emergency response times could actually improve with the proposed routes.”

My hands moved over the blueprints like they had a mind of their own, sketching modifications in the margins with a certainty that scared the shit out of me.

“If we tweak the ambulance bay here,” I pointed at the plans, “we can cut the congestion during rush hour.”

Sofia gave me that look - the one she'd perfected during residency when she knew I was hiding something. “You've already thought this through.”

“Just good planning,” I bullshitted, the lie tasting like ash. These designs, these perfect little adjustments - they came from somewhere I couldn't explain and didn't want to think about.

“Rothschild Group's got an impressive track record,” Rachel noted, scrolling through her tablet. “But this sudden hard-on for healthcare infrastructure is... weird.”

“The proposal's solid,” I said. “Hospital needs the expansion.”

“And the fact that Alexander Rothschild specifically asked for you to run medical coordination?”

“I'm Chief of Emergency. Makes sense.”

After the meeting wrapped its boring-ass discussions of zoning and timelines, I found myself drawn to the hospital chapel like a moth to flame, needing its quiet.

I sank into the back row, letting the chapel's silence wash over me. Colored light played through the windows like nature's screensaver, reminding me of those courtyard renderings, the way sunlight would dance through that proposed glass ceiling.

I closed my eyes, trying to get my head straight, but instead...

A studio in Florence materialized - paint-stained hands creating worlds while his

voice guided every stroke.

Marble floors in Athens appeared - cool stone under my feet as I rushed to the wounded, his eyes finding mine across the chaos.

A smoky jazz club in Paris emerged - music wrapping around us while he watched from the bar like a predator sizing up prey.

My pager's buzz yanked me back to reality. Non-urgent consult needed at the ER desk. I straightened my tie like armor and headed down.

Instead of another bloody trauma, I found Rothschild waiting by the entrance, looking like a GQ cover shot dropped into a war zone. His perfect suit somehow repelled the ER chaos around him. Just seeing him sent another jolt through my system like a defibrillator set too high.

“Dr. Monroe.” His smile bypassed all my professional defenses like they were made of tissue paper. “Was in the neighborhood. Thought we might nail down that tour schedule.”

Bullshit excuse - nobody just “happens by” Presbyterian's ER unless they're bleeding or dying. Every instinct honed through years of keeping people at arm's length screamed to keep this brief and boring.

But that pull was back. That fucking recognition that made everything else feel like a dream I was about to wake up from.

“Mr. Rothschild.” My voice stayed steady through sheer willpower. “This isn't really the time for?—“

“Alex,” he cut in, soft but firm. “Please.”



A dimly lit tent flashed through my mind, his voice saying my name while I stitched his wounds.

“The ER isn't exactly the place for this,” I managed, fighting against memories that couldn't possibly be mine but felt realer than yesterday.

“Then maybe somewhere more appropriate?” His suggestion sounded professional enough, but the undertone made my pulse race like a rookie in their first trauma.

Three seconds to remember Michael's laugh over shitty hospital coffee. Three seconds to feel my wedding ring's weight. Three seconds to list every logical reason to tell him to fuck off.

“Ten minutes,” I heard myself say instead, like an idiot. “Got rounds after.”

His smile deepened like he'd known I'd cave. Like he'd always known me better than I knew myself.

“Perfect.” He gestured for me to lead. “We can discuss the site inspection timeline.”

The nurses' heads swiveled as we passed, hungry for fresh gossip. Even in the controlled chaos of the ER, Alex commanded attention without trying. His movements carried a grace that should've looked out of place between crash carts and IV poles, but somehow felt right.

“Patient flow during construction is our big concern,” I said, clinging to safe topics like a lifeline. “Especially during peak trauma hours.”

“Of course.” His understanding felt deeper than just professional courtesy. “We'll adjust the schedule to minimize impact.”

Our shoulders brushed rounding a corner, shooting electricity through my system. My body reacted to him in ways my brain refused to process.

“Your emergency protocols are impressive,” he continued smooth as silk, ignoring my stumble. “I’ve studied similar systems nationwide, but yours stands out.”

More stares followed us down the admin wing. Chen nearly ate shit dropping her charts. Rodriguez whispered to her work wife like teenagers at lunch. Couldn't blame them - Alex moved through our sterile halls like a Renaissance painting come to life, his bespoke suit and commanding presence making everything else look cheap and temporary.

My office door offered a moment's sanctuary. Alex studied the space like he was memorizing every detail: Michael's photo on my desk, the framed map of Oakwood Grove where we'd planned our dream house, medical texts arranged by specialty because I'm that kind of anal.

“You've built something remarkable here,” he said, words heavy with meaning I didn't want to decode.

Our eyes met in the window's reflection, and reality did that sideways slide again. Late afternoon sun painted everything amber, turning my sterile office into something almost holy. More memories hit like punches:

Candlelight dancing on marble while we studied ancient texts. His laugh echoing through high-ceilinged studios as I fucked up another color mix. Jazz wrapping around us like smoke, his eyes locked on mine from across the room.

“Mr. Rothschild,” I managed, voice shaky as a first-year resident.

“Alex,” he insisted, gentle but firm. “Please.”

The way he said it - like a prayer, like he'd been saying it for centuries - made my chest ache with recognition I couldn't explain. His name hung between us like a loaded gun.

“The construction timeline,” I started, desperate for solid ground. But Alex had moved closer, his presence making it hard to think about anything except how familiar he felt.

“Can wait,” he murmured. “Some things matter more than timelines.”

His voice saying those exact words in a torch-lit room, centuries ago.

“I don't—“ I choked on whatever bullshit denial I was about to try.

Vale's voice cut through the moment like a scalpel. “Dr. Monroe? About those protocol revisions?”

Reality crashed back like a bucket of ice water. I stepped away from Alex - when the fuck had we gotten so close? - trying to wrap myself in professional distance like a shield. My office door had been wide open the whole time, and Vale's snake eyes had seen plenty. The space I'd put between us felt like a confession.

“Of course,” I called to Vale, grateful for the interruption even as something deep inside screamed against it. “Just a minute.”

“I should go,” Alex said, perfect composure intact despite the electric tension in the air. “We'll discuss inspection details another time.”

He moved toward the door with that impossible grace, but paused at the threshold. “Thank you for your time, Dr. Monroe.” His eyes met mine one last time, loaded with centuries of meaning I couldn't process. “Until tomorrow.”

Vale slithered in as Alex left, his calculating gaze dissecting my slightly disheveled state like a tumor sample. I busied myself with papers that didn't need sorting, trying to get my pulse back to something approaching normal.

“Interesting company you're keeping,” Vale's voice dripped poison honey. “Trust you remember our chat about... distractions. ”

I met his stare head-on, even though everything inside felt like it was coming apart. “Something specific you needed, Dr. Vale?”

But even as I fell back into our usual passive-aggressive bullshit, my carefully built world was cracking like cheap drywall. The impossible memories lingered like smoke. That pull toward Alex stayed strong as gravity. The feeling that everything I thought I knew about myself might be built on quicksand grew with every heartbeat.

“The protocols,” Vale droned on, his voice distant under the blood rushing in my ears. “About the new trauma response system...”

I nodded in the right places, made notes I'd never read, played my part in this familiar dance of hospital politics. But everything had shifted sideways. The foundation I'd rebuilt after Michael died was crumbling beneath my feet, and I couldn't tell if what waited underneath was solid ground or a bottomless fucking pit.

### CHAPTER 4

#### Walking Through Dreams

My fists slammed into the punching bag, each hit echoing through my private gym like gunshots. The rhythm helped cut through the fog of centuries clouding my head, forcing my brain to focus on the present's complicated chess game.

Every punch carried a flash of yesterday: Eli's face during that meeting, that spark of recognition when our eyes locked, his fingers curling against his desk like he was fighting against a riptide of memories.

Marcus perched in his usual spot by the window, breakfast laid out like a military operation next to his iPad. My old friend's ancient eyes tracked each punch, measuring my focus like he'd done through more lifetimes than I could count.

"Vale's been sniffing around," he said, voice careful as a surgeon. "Digging into Eli's department. Infrastructure committee's gotten three separate requests for emergency protocol reviews this week alone."

My fist froze mid-strike, the bag swaying like a drunk before I steadied it. Sweat ran down my back while I processed that little bomb.

"Vale's not just being a nosy bastard," I muttered, grabbing a towel. "Something's different about him this round. Pattern's got a new wrinkle."

"He's systematically trying to fuck you over," Marcus continued, scrolling through

his tablet. “My people say he's been working the board members in private. Fancy dinners, golf games. Always steering the conversation back to your development project.”

My jaw clenched while I unwrapped my hands. Vale's obsession with Eli felt primal, visceral - like a memory clawing its way out of a grave. After centuries of this reincarnation dance, I knew the signs of souls starting to remember. Vale wasn't just playing hospital politics anymore.

“Let him dig,” I growled, voice heavy with centuries of determination. “If he's getting fragments back, I'll make him face the whole ugly truth. Better than letting him run wild with half-memories.”

Marcus's silence said more than words. He'd seen too many versions of this shit show play out. “And if forcing those memories breaks something we can't fix?”

“Like the damage he's already trying to do to Eli?” I shot back, heading for the shower. “No. Vale showing up isn't some cosmic coincidence. Nothing in our fucked-up history ever is.”

An hour later, I stood in my penthouse closet like a general prepping for war. The deep blue suit was chosen like a weapon - same color as that fresco I'd commissioned in Florence centuries ago, the one still hanging in the Uffizi with everyone forgetting what it really meant. Antique sapphire cufflinks caught the light like captured stars.

“Hospital board meets at eleven,” Marcus reported from the door. “Vale's asking for time to push his neurosurgery expansion bullshit.”

“Of course he is.” I adjusted my tie, studying my reflection with tactical precision. Every detail calculated to trigger memories Eli didn't know he had. “What else?”

“Construction permits are ready for final sign-off. Architects need your okay on the courtyard tweaks.” He paused like he was defusing a bomb. “There's more - Vale's connection to Presbyterian goes deeper than we thought. His old man wasn't just throwing money around. That Vale Wing of Neurosurgery wasn't named just for cash.”

I moved to my desk where the blueprints spread out like battle plans. The designs weren't just about function - each element wove my world into Eli's like an intricate tapestry. That courtyard especially, with its light and shadow dance mirroring a temple lost to dust and time.

“Vale's not just getting pieces back,” I said, fingers tracing the courtyard's outline. “He's acting on them, even if he doesn't know why. If we don't figure out his role in this clusterfuck, he'll destroy more than just the development project.”

Marcus set his tablet down with the grace of someone who'd had centuries to perfect the move. “You think he remembers the original binding?”

“I think he remembers enough to be dangerous as hell.” I straightened, decision locked in. “Move up the site inspection. Today if you can swing it. The sooner Eli and I walk those grounds together, the better.”

“He's still grieving,” Marcus reminded me softly. “His husband?—“

“I know.” The words came out sharp as broken glass. Michael's death stood between Eli and me like bulletproof glass - I could see through it but couldn't break it. Not yet. “But Vale won't wait for grief to run its course. Neither can we.”

I checked my watch - same antique piece I'd worn through decades, marking time while hiding secrets. “Car in twenty. Want to walk the grounds before this board circus starts.”

“And Vale?”

“Sometimes the only way to beat old enemies is to make them remember why they became enemies in the first place.”

Marcus nodded once, ancient warrior's understanding in his eyes. We'd played this game through centuries, he and I. Guardian and guided, protector and protected. But this time felt different. The pieces were aligning in ways they never had before.

Eli's recognition yesterday hit harder than previous lives. Vale's moves felt calculated rather than instinctive. Even William's unconscious digging carried new weight.

The office door banged open without warning - Will's signature dick move since we were kids. My brother carried a leather satchel that looked wrong against his modern power suit, its aged leather screaming of dust and secrets.

He emptied his historical landmines onto my desk - letters gone yellow with age, faded ink telling stories of family tragedy centered on Presbyterian Hospital.

The confirmation of another connection made my pulse jump, but I kept my face blank as marble. Through centuries of practice, I'd learned to hide everything behind perfect composure.

This time, I wouldn't back down. Not from Vale, not from Will, not from anyone. I'd lost Eli too many times across too many lives.

Time to end this eternal dance once and for all.

Through the ER's glass doors, I watched Eli moving through chaos like a conductor through his orchestra. His hands stayed steady as he directed his team through whatever shit show was going down, a calm eye in the middle of the storm.



Marcus materialized like a ghost at my shoulder, tablet ready. “Board meeting's moved to three. Vale's call.”

“Of course it is.” I fidgeted with my cufflinks - the ones I'd picked like weapons this morning. “Bastard's trying to limit my time with Eli.”

Sofia watched me from the nurses' station, her dark eyes carrying more than just suspicion. Some souls just knew truth without knowing why they knew it. Sofia's need to protect Eli went deeper than friendship, even if she didn't understand why .

Movement caught my eye as Eli emerged from trauma, still in blood-stained scrubs. His laser focus softened for a split second when he saw me. Our eyes locked across the lobby, and time did that weird bending thing again. I caught the tremor in his hands before he locked it down, watched him touch his wedding ring like he was apologizing to a ghost.

Through Presbyterian's maze of corridors, walking next to Eli felt like tiptoeing through a minefield of memories. I matched his professional bullshit with centuries of practice, talking traffic patterns and construction logistics like I wasn't hyperaware of his every breath. Each time our shoulders accidentally brushed, electricity crackled through the air like a live wire. Eli would step away, retreating behind those walls he'd built, but I caught the slight shake in his hands before he could hide it.

The late afternoon sun turned his office into something almost holy, all amber and gold. I watched how he avoided looking at the chair across from his desk - the one that still held Michael's ghost. His movements screamed control, but I could read the cost in his shoulders, tight as piano wire.

The Manhattan skyline caught fire in the dying sun, shadows stretching across hospital grounds like reaching fingers. Eli's wedding ring caught the light as he reached for another file, but his movements had lost their surgical precision.

“It's more than that, isn't it?” I kept my voice soft as approaching a spooked animal, taking one careful step closer. “You know this place, these designs. They're hitting something deeper than professional interest, even if you can't explain why.”

Eli's grip on his desk turned his knuckles white. The tremor had spread from his hands to his shoulders, barely visible but screaming to eyes that had known him for centuries. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he whispered, but his eyes betrayed him - wide with recognition he couldn't stuff back in its box.

“Don't you?” I pressed gently. “The courtyard feels familiar because you've walked through places like it before. Different times, different places.” I gestured at the blueprints between us. “Your hands know these patterns because they've drawn them before, in lives you can't remember but your soul can't forget.”

“Stop.” The word came out raw, almost begging. “Whatever game you're playing?—“

“This isn't a game, Eli.” I let centuries of love and longing color my voice. “It never has been. Deep down, you know that. You feel it every time our eyes meet, every time something triggers a memory you think you couldn't possibly have.”

He shook his head, but it looked more like desperation than denial. I watched cracks spreading through his carefully built reality - scientist, surgeon, widower. Each role a shield against deeper truths his soul was starting to remember whether he wanted it or not.

“Code Blue, Emergency Department!” Sofia's voice sliced through the moment. She appeared in the doorway already moving like a soldier to battle. “Multi-car pileup, five minutes out.”

Eli snapped back to Dr. Monroe mode like a mask clicking into place, though his

hands still shook as he grabbed his white coat. When he brushed past me, his body betrayed him - automatically turning toward mine before he forced himself away. Even now, even without conscious memory, his soul knew its other half.

I caught Sofia's arm as she turned to follow. "This isn't just about him," I murmured, watching her reaction. "You feel it too, don't you?"

She went still as stone, her dark eyes showing confusion at her own certainty.

Through the ER doors, I watched Eli directing his trauma team like a general commanding troops. Even without his memories, he was exactly who he'd always been - healer, protector, the soul that had called to mine across fucking centuries. But now those carefully built walls were starting to crack, and I couldn't tell if the truth would save him or shatter him completely .

"Quite the dramatic scene." Vale's voice oozed from the shadows like poison. "One might almost believe you actually care about our Dr. Monroe."

I turned slowly, centuries of practice keeping my face blank despite the fury building in my chest. "Careful, Vale. You're pulling at threads you don't understand."

"Don't I?" His smile never touched his snake eyes. "Perhaps I understand more than you think, Mr. Rothschild. Perhaps we all do."

The threat hung clear as a noose, but something darker lurked under it - something older than hospital politics, deeper than professional rivalry. Vale might not fully remember his role in our ancient tragedy, but his soul did. And that made him dangerous as a loaded gun.

I watched him slither away, his footsteps echoing with memories of other times, other confrontations. The letters in my briefcase burned like evidence at a crime scene,

each yellowed page a key to unlocking memories better left buried.

But it was too late to play it safe. The past was unraveling whether we were ready or not. All I could do was try to guide the awakening, try to shield Eli from the full force of remembering while making sure he remembered enough to survive what was coming.

It had always been about him. Every choice, every sacrifice, every lifetime of searching. And this time, I wouldn't let the past destroy our future.

Even if that meant facing the darkest parts of our shared history. Even if that meant making Vale remember why he'd tried so hard to forget. Even if that meant risking everything all over again.

For Eli, it was worth any price. It always had been.

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### CHAPTER 5

#### Impossible Things

The fluorescent lights buzzed like angry wasps in the on-call room while I picked apart my reflection like a case study. Dark circles that looked like bruises under my eyes. Right hand doing its best impression of a fault line. Heart hammering like I'd just run a code.

All perfectly logical shit for a trauma surgeon running on fumes and caffeine. Nothing to do with blue eyes that seemed to know every secret I'd ever tried to bury.

I splashed cold water on my face, letting the shock kick my brain back into doctor mode. The rational part of me - the part that had dragged me through med school, through losing Michael, through every fucking curveball life had thrown - started its familiar diagnostic dance:

Sleep: 4 hours in 36, basically running on spite and coffee.

Stress: Through the roof thanks to Vale's vulture act.

Trauma: Standard grief with a side of professional paranoia.

The door creaked like a B-horror movie as Sofia stepped in, armed with actual coffee instead of the burned battery acid the hospital called caffeine. Steam curled up from the cups like question marks.

Behind her serious expression, I caught something else - worry mixed with determination. She'd worn that same look when she found me in the ER after Michael's accident, still wearing his blood on my scrubs, refusing to believe what the monitors were telling me.

The coffee's warmth couldn't touch the ice forming in my chest whenever Alex's face flashed through my mind. Those eyes that seemed to see straight through six years of carefully constructed walls, straight to something I couldn't - wouldn't - name.

My wedding ring caught the shitty fluorescent light as I lifted the cup, the metal cool and solid against my skin. An anchor to reality. To what I knew was real. To what made sense.

Even if nothing made sense anymore.

Both our pagers screamed like banshees:

TRAUMA ALERT - MULTIPLE CASUALTIES - ETA 5 MIN.

Thank god. Work was safe. Work made sense. Work didn't come with impossible blue eyes and memories that couldn't exist.

“Incoming!” A nurse's voice cut through my spiral. “Two critical, three walking wounded. Construction site collapse.”

The words 'construction site' hit like a sucker punch, flashing me back to Michael's accident for half a second before I shoved it down. Not now. Not here.

“BP's in the basement!” Someone shouted. “70 over palp!”

Focus. Here. Now. Blood and bones and things I could fix. This was real. This was

solid. This was?—

Sunlight streamed through the ER windows, throwing patterns across the trauma bay that looked exactly like Alex's fucking courtyard designs. For a moment, the shadows seemed to dance, showing me places I'd never been but knew like my own hands?—

“Doctor Monroe?” My resident's voice yanked me back, waiting for orders like a lifeline.

“Type and cross four units,” I barked, forcing myself into the present. “Trauma panel and get me another large-bore IV. ”

The familiar dance of emergency medicine took over - blood pressure readings, trauma assessments, the steady beep of monitors keeping time. But somewhere in the back of my head, Alex's voice echoed with impossible certainty.

“Some things are written in the stars, beloved.”

I'd never heard him say those words.

Had I?

My hands moved on autopilot, placing lines and calling orders, but my mind kept sliding sideways into spaces that shouldn't exist. A candlelit room where those same hands mixed paints instead of medications. A battlefield tent where they stitched wounds by torchlight. A smoky club where they danced across piano keys while blue eyes watched from the shadows.

“Doctor Monroe!” Sofia's sharp tone snapped me back. “OR Two's ready.”

Right. Here. Now. Blood and gauze and science. Not memories that couldn't be

memories. Not eyes that seemed to know me better than I knew myself.

But as we rushed the patient toward surgery, the shadows kept dancing on the walls, showing me glimpses of other times, other places, other lives where those same blue eyes had found mine across centuries of forgetting.

Maybe I was finally losing it. Maybe grief and exhaustion had finally cracked something vital in my carefully ordered world.

The thought terrified me more than any trauma case ever had.

My vision blurred as I stared at the tablet screen, the patient notes swimming together like watercolors in rain. Thirty-six hours of fluorescent lights and trauma calls had turned my brain to static, each blink lasting a fraction too long. The headache drilling behind my eyes matched the rhythm of the distant monitors beeping their endless digital lullaby.

“You're coming with me. ”

Sofia's voice cut through the fog like a scalpel. She stood in my doorway, transformed from her usual scrubs into dark jeans and an oversized sweater that somehow made her look both softer and more determined. Her curls, finally freed from their tight bun, framed her face like a storm cloud ready to break.

I raised an eyebrow, trying to summon some resistance. “And where exactly are we going?”

“Out. Somewhere that doesn't reek of bleach and broken promises. Somewhere with actual fucking music instead of those goddamn monitors that've been haunting my dreams.” Her eyes softened slightly. “Somewhere you can stop being Doctor Monroe, Chief of Emergency Medicine, and just be... Eli.”



“Sofia, I don't think?—“

“No excuses.” She crossed her arms, channeling every resident who'd ever faced down an attending's bullshit. The look in her eyes told me she was seeing past my careful walls, past the pressed white coat and perfect posture, straight to the cracks I pretended weren't there.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself in a bar that straddled the line between hipster haven and comfortable decay. Exposed brick walls held decades of stories, while Edison bulbs cast shadows that danced like memories across worn wooden tables. The music – some indie rock band I was probably too old to recognize – throbbed just loud enough to drown out the echoes of flatlines and grieving families that usually followed me home.

Sofia slid a whiskey across the table. The amber liquid caught the light, transforming it into something ancient and familiar, like sunlight through stained glass windows I'd never actually seen. My chest tightened as fragments of impossible memories tried to surface.

“To surviving another day,” Sofia said, her glass hovering in the space between us like an offering.

“To surviving,” I echoed, the words tasting like ash and old regrets.

The bar's ambient noise washed over us – glasses clinking, scattered laughter, the percussion of life continuing despite everything. But my traitor mind kept slipping sideways into other sounds: paintbrushes whispering across canvas, feet pounding against stone that had crumbled centuries ago, music that existed only in dreams that felt more real than my waking hours.

“You didn't deny it,” Sofia said finally, her dark eyes reflecting the warm light like

she could see straight through to my soul.

“Deny what?”

“That there's something about Rothschild.”

The whiskey burned going down, but it couldn't touch the cold that spread through my chest at Alex's name. “It's nothing,” I lied, each word leaving frost on my tongue.

“Bullshit.” She leaned forward, voice pitched low enough that only I could hear the steel beneath her concern. “You've been walking around like a ghost since the tour. And I saw your face when Vale started questioning your judgment today.”

Frustration bubbled up like blood from a wound I couldn't close. “Sofia, I don't even know how to explain it. It's like...” My fingers traced patterns in the condensation on my glass, drawing symbols I shouldn't recognize. “It's like he sees parts of me I don't even recognize.”

“Maybe he does.” Sofia's expression shifted to something ancient and knowing that made my skin prickle. “Eli, maybe it's time to stop running from the things you can't explain. Not everything fits into your neat little boxes of diagnosis and treatment.”

“I'm not running,” I said, but my hand betrayed me, going to the wedding ring that felt simultaneously too heavy and too much a part of me to remove. “I'm being practical. Professional.”

“You're hiding,” she corrected, the truth in her words sharper than any surgical blade. “Behind your grief, behind those ridiculous hours you work, behind all those walls you built after Michael died. And now something—someone—is threatening those walls, and it scares the shit out of you.”

The truth hit harder than the whiskey burning in my gut. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Simple?” A laugh like broken glass. “Nothing about you has ever been simple, Eli Monroe. Not in all the years I've known you.”

Vale slid into our booth like a shadow made flesh, his suit still perfect despite the late hour. His smile carried the same predatory edge it had in the hospital corridors, but here, away from the fluorescent lights and professional pretense, it looked almost inhuman.

“Doctor Monroe. Doctor Martinez. What a... pleasant surprise.”

The temperature seemed to drop several degrees, and old instincts I didn't understand screamed danger. Sofia's spine straightened like a sword being drawn, her protective energy almost visible in the dim light.

“Doctor Vale. This is unexpected.”

“Is it?” His grey eyes was fixed on me. “I often find the most interesting conversations happen outside hospital walls. Away from professional constraints.”

Something about his presence felt wrong, like a shadow falling across sacred ground. The bar's warm light seemed to dim around him, and memories that couldn't possibly be mine tried to surface.

“If you'll excuse us,” Sofia's voice cut through the fog of unreality, “we were in the middle of a private conversation.”

“Of course.” Vale's smile never wavered, but his eyes held centuries of secrets. “I simply wanted to ensure our Chief of Emergency Medicine was taking proper care of

himself. Stress can do such strange things to the mind, can't it? Make us see things that aren't there. Remember things that never happened.”

“I think you should leave.” Sofia said

Vale raised his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes never left mine. “Just looking out for a colleague's wellbeing. After all, we wouldn't want anything to cloud your judgment regarding the development project, would we?”

Vale slithered from the booth with the liquid grace of a cobra, but paused, venom still dripping from his smile. “Oh, and Doctor Monroe? Do be careful with your new associations. Some connections are better left unexplored.”

The crowd seemed to part around him like oil on water as he disappeared into the bar's shadows. My skin crawled where his gaze had lingered. Sofia's hand found mine across the sticky table surface, her warmth cutting through the chill he'd left behind.

“Eli...”

“Don't.” I yanked away, fumbling for my coat like armor. “Just... don't.”

“Mind if I join you?”

That voice. That fucking voice . It hit me like a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart, and suddenly I couldn't remember how to breathe. Alex stood before our booth, the dim bar lights catching his perfectly tailored suit like he was the star of some impossibly expensive film. He didn't just occupy the space – he owned it, claimed it, made it seem like the whole damn bar had been built around him.

My pulse hammered against my ribs as our eyes met, that same electric current of knowing crackling between us like summer lightning. “What are you doing here?” I

forced the words past the desert in my throat, grateful for the solid glass under my trembling fingers.

“I was in the neighborhood.” His casual tone was a thin veneer over something deeper, darker, hungrier. “Thought I’d stop by and say hello.”

Sofia's gaze darted between us like she was watching some ancient play unfold. Something shifted in her expression – recognition or resignation, I couldn't tell which. “I’ll leave you two to... catch up,” she said, sliding from the booth with deliberate grace. When I shot her my best 'don't you dare leave me' glare, she just smiled like she knew secrets the universe hadn't learned yet. “Don't stay out too late, Eli. We both have early rounds.”

The air grew thick as Alex claimed her abandoned seat, moving with that fluid grace that belonged in Renaissance paintings or ancient temples. He settled into the cracked vinyl like it was a throne, and somehow made it look like one. The same presence that had dominated my hospital office now filled the small booth until it was hard to breathe.

“You've been avoiding me,” he said, voice dancing on the edge between playful and accusing.

“I've been busy.” The words came out sharp enough to cut.

“Busy running,” he countered, his gentleness more devastating than any attack.

My fingers strangled my glass, knuckles bleaching white. “What do you want from me, Rothschild?”

“Alex,” he corrected, the same way he had in my office, like he was trying to strip away layers of professional distance. “And what I want...” Something cracked in his

perfect facade, letting raw need shine through. “I want to help you understand. You deserve answers, Eli. And whether you realize it or not, you've been searching for them your whole life.”

The memories hit like fever dreams – paint-stained hands guiding mine across canvas, ancient stone warm beneath our feet as we ran, music wrapping around us like silk in a smoky club.

“You don't know anything about me.” The protest sounded weak even to my own ears.

“Don't I? I know you dream of places you've never been. I know you remember skills you've never learned. I know you feel something when we're together that defies your precious scientific understanding.”

Each word landed like a physical blow because they were true. All of it was true. The dreams that had haunted me since his arrival, the way my hands had known exactly how to modify his architectural plans, the magnetic pull I felt toward him that defied every rational explanation.

“Stop.” My voice shattered on the word. “Whatever game this is?—“

“It's not a game.” He leaned in close enough that his cologne wrapped around me – sandalwood and something older, something that pulled at the threads of memories that couldn't possibly be mine. “You know that. Deep down, your soul knows exactly what this is.”

“My soul?” The laugh that escaped sounded like breaking glass. “Is that what this is about? Some mystical connection you think we have?”

“Think? No, Eli. I don't think. I know . Just as you know, even if you're not ready to

admit it.”

“You're insane.” But the words tasted like lies on my tongue, because something deep in my bones recognized the truth he offered.

“When you're ready to stop running,” he said quietly, rising from the booth with that impossible grace, “you know where to find me.”

He paused, one last truth hanging between us. “Some things are written in the stars, beloved. Some connections transcend time itself.”

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with my half-empty whiskey and the terrifying possibility that Alexander Rothschild might be the key to everything I'd been trying so desperately to deny.

The bar's ambient noise faded to white static, drowned out by the thunder of my pulse. His words echoed like bells in an empty cathedral, mixing with fragments of dreams and memories that couldn't possibly belong to me:.

His voice carrying across a torch-lit chamber. Our hands entwined beneath a Renaissance sky. His eyes finding mine through centuries of searching.

Michael. I should be thinking about Michael, about our life together, about the future that death had stolen. Not about impossible connections and past lives and a man who looked at me like he'd spent centuries memorizing my face.

The fresh whiskey arrived without my asking, amber depths promising answers it couldn't possibly deliver. Because Alex was right about one thing – I had been running. From the dreams, from the memories, from the magnetic pull I felt toward him that defied every rational explanation I'd built my life around.

But some things couldn't be outrun forever. Some truths burned through every defense, every careful wall, every rational explanation until all that remained was raw, terrifying possibility.

The night pressed against the bar's windows like a living thing, full of shadows and secrets I couldn't begin to understand. But for the first time since Michael's death, since I'd buried my heart alongside his body, I felt something crack open in my chest – something wild and ancient and alive. And that terrified me more than all of Vale's threats combined.

Because feeling alive meant I could be hurt again. Feeling alive meant facing the impossible truth that Alex represented. Feeling alive meant admitting that maybe, just maybe, science couldn't explain everything that lived in the spaces between heartbeats.

The whiskey burned going down, but it couldn't touch the fire that Alex's words had ignited. Something was coming – something bigger than hospital politics or development projects or carefully maintained grief. The only question was: would I be strong enough to face it when it did?



### CHAPTER 6

#### The Weight of Memory

My phone's blue light cut through the pre-dawn darkness of my office, the message thread with Eli's name mocking me from between stacks of research papers. Three fucking AM, and I'd finally cracked, sending a text I already regretted. The recognition I'd seen in his eyes at the bar haunted me, that flash of knowing before his doctor's rationality had slammed the walls back up.

Marcus's expensive leather shoes whispered across the Persian rug, bringing the blessed scent of fresh coffee. He paused in the doorway, taking in what must have been a pretty pathetic sight – still in last night's rumpled Armani, tie abandoned somewhere between midnight and madness, sleeves rolled up in surrender to another sleepless night.

“You called him.” A statement, not a question, delivered with the dry patience of someone who'd watched me make worse decisions.

Instead of answering, I grabbed one of the yellowed letters spread across my desk, dated 1893. The paper felt fragile as moth wings between my fingers. “Look at this – a Dr. Monroe at Presbyterian, treating a Rothschild heir. But the patient records from that period are just... gone. Like they never existed.”

My hand raked through my hair, a nervous tell I couldn't shake. The office lights flickered, casting shadows that seemed to move with intent across the wine-dark walls.

“What's your angle here?” Marcus leaned over the desk, his eyes sharp as he studied the letter.

“It's not an angle.” Frustration burned in my throat, hot as whiskey. The letter blurred under my grip as I fought the maddening sense of something crucial hovering just beyond reach. “Vale was there last night. At the bar. Like he was waiting. But something about it feels wrong – like a warning I can't quite remember.”

Marcus claimed the leather chair across from my desk with his usual calculated grace. Steam curled from his coffee cup as he studied me, his silence heavy with unasked questions. “Vale's called an emergency board meeting,” he said finally, each word carefully measured. “He's questioning Eli's fitness to serve as department chief.”

The letter crumpled in my fist, ancient paper protesting. Manhattan's lights pressed against the floor-to-ceiling windows, a constellation of artificial stars fighting against the approaching dawn.

“Vale's running on pure instinct,” I muttered, watching my reflection fracture across the glass. “Following a scent he can't explain.”

Marcus slid a thick file across my desk's polished surface. “He's digging into the hospital's history. His research – it's not just academic anymore. Look at these papers.”

The dossier painted a disturbing picture. Vale's recent publications revealed an obsession poorly disguised as scientific inquiry: studies on memory persistence after clinical death, theories about consciousness existing outside linear time, investigations into trauma and recovered memories.

“Fuck. He's not just digging for dirt on Eli.”

“The board meeting isn't just about leadership,” Marcus confirmed, his tone carrying a warning. “Vale's pushing for access to historical records. Claims it's for the hospital's centennial, but he's fixated on that missing period – the same gap Will found.”

I turned from the window, the city's artificial light casting strange shadows across the scattered papers. “The way Vale watches Eli, those calculated little jabs – it's not just professional rivalry. There's something personal there, something raw.”

“And William?” Marcus's question hung in the air like smoke.

“Will's research wasn't random.” I shuffled through the letters until I found the passage that had kept me up half the night. “Of all the hospital's history to study, he zeroed in on exactly the period that's keeping me awake. That's not coincidence.”

“The timing is concerning,” Marcus acknowledged, setting his empty cup aside. “Vale's sudden interest, Will's discoveries, Eli's... situation. Something's shifting.”

“He could destroy everything.” The words tasted like ash.

Marcus stood, adjusting his cuffs with mechanical precision. “The board meeting is in four hours. Vale will use it to force a competency review.”

“Let him try.” Steel crept into my voice, cold as the approaching dawn. “I didn't come this far to let Vale's games ruin everything.”

“And if pushing too hard makes things worse?” Marcus's question carried the weight of genuine concern. “If some doors are better left closed?”

I looked down at the scattered letters, each one a puzzle piece that refused to fit. The sky outside was shifting from black to steel, promise and threat wrapped in the same

gray light. “Some truths refuse to stay buried, old friend. Even the ones that hurt.”

The office door flew open with enough force to rattle the whiskey glasses on my credenza. Will burst in like a hedge fund manager who'd just spotted a market crash coming, his Hermès tie crooked and his usually perfect hair showing signs of stress-induced fingers running through it.

“Dad's called an emergency family meeting,” he announced, already pacing the Persian rug with manic energy. The morning light caught the edge of his expensive watch, sending fractured reflections dancing across the wall.

“Jesus, not this shit again.” The words came out sharper than intended. I watched my younger brother prowl the office like a caged animal, something raw and uncomfortable stirring in my chest at his obvious distress.

Will's restless circuit brought him to my desk. His eyes caught on the scattered papers, ancient letterhead peeking out between modern financial reports. Something flickered across his face – confusion bleeding into recognition, like someone trying to read a half-remembered language. “This is about him, isn't it?” The question came out soft, uncertain.

The leather of my chair creaked as I leaned back, studying the man who'd somehow become my strongest ally in all this mess. “Remember those weird stories Gran used to tell?” I kept my voice casual, watching his reaction. “About the doctor who saved her grandfather? The one that ended badly?”

Will's hand went to his temple, a gesture I'd seen a thousand times when he was wrestling with complex merger negotiations. “Something about all this feels...” He trailed off, frustration evident in the tight line of his jaw.

An hour later, we stood in the Rothschild family boardroom – all mahogany panels

and old money pretension, portraits of dead patriarchs staring down with painted disapproval. Dad occupied his usual spot at the head of the table, radiating the particular brand of concern unique to billionaire fathers watching their heir apparent go off-script.

“This personal tour with Dr. Monroe,” Dad cut through my careful presentation about urban development and healthcare infrastructure. “Was it really necessary?”

I met his gaze, recognizing the worry behind the corporate facade. The man had built an empire from his father's already considerable fortune – he knew how to spot potential threats to the family legacy. “Dr. Monroe's insights are crucial to the project's success,” I replied, keeping my voice steady despite the headache building behind my eyes.

“This isn't about property development.” Dad's words carried the weight of sleepless nights spent wondering where he'd gone wrong. “This is about your... unusual fixations.”

Will shifted in his Italian leather chair, a slight wince crossing his features like he'd caught the edge of a migraine. The morning sun through the floor-to-ceiling windows cast strange shadows across the polished table, turning the whole scene slightly surreal.

“Everything I do is for this family,” I said, the words tasting like copper on my tongue.

Dad's silence filled the room like smoke, eventually dissipating into resigned acceptance.

Will stayed, his fingers tapping an anxious rhythm against the table. “Alex,” he shifted into his CFO stance, “the board's not just worried about standard development

risks. Vale's been working the back channels, getting investors questioning our sudden hard-on for healthcare infrastructure.”

My teeth clenched at Vale's name. “What's that snake telling them?”

“He's spinning it as poor resource allocation, hinting at inadequate oversight.” Will pulled out his tablet, its blue light harsh in the dimming boardroom. “But here's the thing – the investors aren't actually worried about the project's numbers. They're side-eyeing your personal involvement, especially how much time you're spending with the Emergency Department. With Monroe.”

“His department's ground zero for the construction impact. Of course he's involved in planning.”

“I know that,” Will's fingers went to his tie, straightening it with mechanical precision. “And I've got your back with the board. But we need to play this smart. Vale's got the hospital board eating out of his hand, and if he convinces them there's something shady going on...”

“He won't.” The words came out like steel. “The plans are solid, the financials are bulletproof, and Monroe's involvement is completely above board.”

The boardroom's usual symphony of quarterly projections and market analyses faded into white noise as my phone lit up with increasingly urgent texts from Marcus. Vale was making his moves with the precision of a chess master, gathering support for his emergency board meeting. His official concern was Eli's stability – the grieving widower, the questionable judgment calls, the odd behavior around the development project.

Will's tablet slid across the polished mahogany, interrupting my dark thoughts. “Check this out,” he muttered, voice tight with worry.

The article outlined Vale's proposed neurology expansion. Ice spread through my veins as I read the details – the wing he wanted demolished was the same one with those conveniently missing records, the same space that felt wrong every time I walked past it.

“The renovation plans,” Will said, rubbing his temples like he was fighting off a monster headache, “they're practically identical to some old blueprints I found buried in the archives. But that's impossible, right? Vale couldn't have seen those. They're sealed.”

“What else did you find down there?”

“Nothing concrete.” Will's voice strained with frustration. “But I keep getting this weird feeling in my gut, like we've seen this movie before. Like it ended in a fucking tragedy.”

The executive boardroom hummed with the white noise of power – the rustle of custom suits, the soft tap of pens on leather portfolios, the quiet murmur of billion-dollar decisions being made over coffee gone cold. My phone buzzed against the polished mahogany for the tenth time in an hour, Marcus's name flashing with increasing urgency. Vale had been busy, scheduling private meetings with hospital board members like a spider weaving its web .

“I've been reviewing his research proposals,” Will muttered, rubbing his temples like he was fighting off the mother of all migraines. His perfect Windsor knot had come slightly loose, a tell I'd learned meant he was wrestling with something bigger than quarterly projections. “His work on near-death experiences, consciousness persisting beyond clinical death – it's not just theoretical anymore.”

Dad's voice cut through the corporate chess match, calling for final budget approvals. His steel-gray eyes missed nothing, decades of boardroom battles evident in the way

he tracked every shifting alliance and power play. Just another Tuesday morning empire-building for him, while something darker churned beneath the surface.

The meeting wrapped with the usual exchange of fake smiles and firm handshakes. Will hung back, his Italian leather shoes leaving scuff marks on the carpet as he paced. The morning sun caught the edge of his cufflinks, sending sharp reflections across the wood panels like warning signals.

“There's something else,” he said once we were alone, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. “About Dr. Monroe. When I see him in those hospital corridors...” He trailed off, looking lost in the filtered sunlight.

“Will—“

“I know it sounds crazy as fuck,” he cut me off, running both hands through his perfectly styled hair. “Trust me, I know .” His tie got another adjustment, the gesture almost compulsive now. “But Vale's obsession with the hospital's history isn't just some academic circle-jerk. He's hunting for something specific.”

“And finding more than he bargained for.” My phone lit up again – Vale had just requested access to the hospital's oldest archives. The timestamp on his email made my stomach clench: 3:33 AM, the kind of hour when bad decisions and buried truths tend to surface.

“We should delay the renovation plans,” Will suggested, his CFO instincts warring with something deeper in his eyes. “Buy some breathing room until we figure out Vale's endgame.”

The leather of my chair creaked as I stood, gathering reports that suddenly felt meaningless. “We can't delay. Every day gives Vale another chance to poison the board against Eli, to push his agenda through while everyone's looking the wrong



way.”

Will's hand shot out, catching my sleeve with surprising force. The morning light caught his face at an odd angle, throwing shadows that didn't quite match reality. “Alex... these dreams I've been having. About the hospital, about Dr. Monroe...” His voice cracked slightly. “About betrayal. They're not just stress and too much scotch, are they?”

I met my brother's gaze across the polished mahogany that separated us like a moat. The air felt heavy with possibilities and dangers neither of us fully understood. “Focus on the business angle,” I said finally, keeping my voice steady despite the storm building behind my ribs. “The rest... the rest will make sense when it needs to.”

The setting sun painted my office in shades of blood and gold, turning the scattered blueprints into abstract art across the conference table. Marcus and I had been at this for hours, surrounded by the weapons of modern warfare – development plans, financial projections, environmental impact studies. Each document another piece of armor against whatever Vale had planned.

“The financials are solid,” Marcus said, his eyes scanning spreadsheets with the kind of focus that came from decades of high-stakes corporate games. The blue light from his tablet cast strange shadows across his face, making him look older than his expensive suit suggested.

He set the tablet down with deliberate care, like someone about to deliver bad news. “Sofia Martinez called.” The words hung in the air like smoke. “She's worried about Eli. Says he's been zoning out during procedures. Having these moments where he just... disappears inside his head.”

My jaw clenched hard enough to make my teeth ache. The half-empty whiskey glass on my desk looked too tempting by half. “If Vale pushes too hard at this board

meeting...” The words died in my throat, replaced by images of careers destroyed by corporate warfare, lives ruined by the kind of power plays that made Wall Street look tame.

“The hospital board will need actual evidence to question Dr. Monroe's competency,” Marcus reminded me, ever the voice of reason in the chaos. “Vale can't just pull accusations out of his ass without proof.”

“He doesn't need proof.” The words tasted bitter as old coffee. “Just enough doubt to halt the project. To get his hands on those sealed records.”

The hospital blueprints spread across the table like a crime scene. My fingers traced the wing Vale wanted demolished, the paper crackling under my touch. The whole thing stank of obsession – the kind that made men destroy themselves and everyone around them.

The city stretched out beyond my windows, a maze of glass and steel catching the last rays of sunlight. Somewhere out there, Vale was making his moves, playing a game where Eli's career was just collateral damage in something bigger and darker than hospital politics.

“The construction permits are ready,” Marcus said, grounding me back in the practical world of corporate strategy and legal maneuvers. “Once they're filed, Vale's options for fucking with the physical development become limited.”

Night crept over Manhattan like spilled ink, office lights flickering on in a domino effect across the skyline. I stayed at the window, watching the city transform from concrete jungle to constellation of artificial stars. Each light could be Vale, working late to destroy everything. Each shadow could hide another piece of the puzzle I couldn't quite solve .

The whiskey burned going down, but it couldn't touch the cold certainty in my gut. Tomorrow's board meeting wasn't just about hospital politics or development deals. It was about Eli. About Vale. About the strange connection between a brilliant ER doctor and a piece of hospital architecture that shouldn't matter but somehow meant everything.

But standing here, watching the city lights mirror the hidden stars above the pollution and power lines, I let myself believe in something different. Something better. The game wasn't over. The pieces weren't set. And tomorrow, at that board meeting, I'd make damn sure Vale learned the difference between corporate chess and mutually assured destruction.

### CHAPTER 7

#### What Once Was

Ancient Greece – 432 BCE

The sacred spring bubbled beneath my hands as I prepared the morning's medicines, its waters blessed by Asclepius himself. Dawn painted the temple in hues of rose and gold, transforming ordinary marble into something divine. The Aegean's breath carried the essence of my healing gardens—crushed thyme, wild lavender, and the sharp sweetness of feverfew.

My fingers moved with the surety granted by years of service, grinding herbs with practiced reverence. The position of chief healer was both blessing and burden, granted by the gods themselves. In these troubled times, with war darkening our horizons, the weight pressed heavier still.

“The warriors return today,” Sofia murmured, her priestess's robes rustling like owl wings in the morning stillness. Her words, though gentle, pierced me like Apollo's arrows. How could I forget? The campaign against Sparta had raged through countless moons, and soon our temple would overflow with the battle-worn and dying.

But it was not only duty that quickened my pulse. One warrior's face haunted my dreams like a visitation from the gods—Alexandros, whose eyes held the storm-tossed might of Poseidon's realm. Our meetings before the campaign had been brief as summer lightning, yet they had branded themselves upon my soul.

“The gods test us in strange ways, Elias,” Sofia observed, her dark eyes carrying wisdom beyond her years. “Even the greatest healing can begin with a wound.”

“Speak plainly, Priestess,” I replied, though we both knew her meaning. “These remedies require focus.”

“As you wish.” A smile touched her lips. “Though perhaps it is not my words that trouble your focus.”

Before I could respond, the first cries reached us—wounded being carried up the temple steps on makeshift litters. The day of reckoning had arrived.

The temple filled quickly with the aftermath of war. Blood stained the sacred marble as soldiers groaned prayers to gods who seemed to have abandoned them. I moved among them as Asclepius had taught me, my hands steady as I cut through ruined flesh, cleaned festering wounds, and stitched skin with threads blessed in the sacred spring.

They called me blessed, these broken warriors. They whispered that my touch could call men back from Hades' shadowed realm. But such whispers were dangerous—the gods were jealous of their powers, and I was merely their instrument.

“Chief Healer!” The cry came from the temple steps. “We have another!”

My heart seized in my chest as they carried him in. Alexandros lay still as death upon his shield, his golden armor dulled by blood and grime. The wound in his side wept darkness—poison's cruel kiss marking flesh I had dreamed of touching under far different circumstances.

“He has fought the fever for three days,” said the soldier who bore him, voice heavy with the weight of too many losses. “We feared to move him, but...”

“You did right to bring him here,” I said, my voice steady though my soul trembled. “Quickly now—bring fresh water and clean linens.”

Piece by piece, I removed his armor, each layer revealing more of the man beneath the warrior. My fingers traced the poison's path through his flesh, marking where darkness had taken root. Though I had treated countless such wounds, none had ever felt so vital to my own survival.

His eyes fluttered open as I worked, green as the sea after a storm. Even clouded by fever, they held me like a prophecy fulfilled. “I knew,” he whispered, the words carrying on barely a breath. “I knew I would find you here.”

The words shouldn't have shaken me—fever often brought strange utterances. But something in his voice resonated with truths older than memory, deeper than reason.

“Be still,” I commanded softly, though my own heart raced like Apollo's chariot across the sky. “Save your strength.”

“I've strength enough for truth,” he murmured, his fevered gaze holding mine with fierce certainty. “I saw you... before. In dreams sent by the gods themselves.”

Sofia appeared at my side with fresh bandages, her presence both comfort and witness. “The Fates weave as they will,” she said softly, her words carrying weight beyond their meaning. “Some threads are dyed in blood.”

I didn't respond, but my hands lingered on Alexandros's wound longer than healing required. Every touch felt charged with divine purpose, every breath a prayer to gods I didn't dare name.

“The poison runs deep,” Sofia observed, helping me clean the blackened flesh. “It will take more than ordinary healing to draw it out.”

“Then we shall use extraordinary means,” I replied, reaching for herbs I rarely dared to mix. The combination was dangerous—as likely to kill as cure. But something deeper than medical knowledge guided my hands as I worked, something that whispered of destiny and divine will .

“You risk much,” Sofia warned, though she did not move to stop me. “The gods ?  
—”

“The gods led him here,” I said firmly, crushing the sacred herbs with practiced motions. “To my hands, to my healing. I must believe there is purpose in that.”

Alexandros's fever-bright eyes found mine again as I worked. “There is always purpose,” he whispered, words meant for my ears alone. “In every life, in every meeting. The gods know... even if we forget.”

His words sent shivers down my spine, but I forced my hands to remain steady as I applied the poultice to his wound. “Rest now,” I instructed, trying to sound like the healer I was rather than the man I struggled to be. “Let the medicines do their work.”

As unconsciousness claimed him once more, I found myself offering prayers to gods I hadn't known I believed in—not just for healing, but for understanding. For somewhere in the depths of my healer's soul, I knew Alexandros spoke truth I didn't yet comprehend.

Sofia's hand touched my shoulder lightly. “Some healings transform both healer and patient,” she said softly. “The gods do not grant such gifts without purpose.”

I watched Alexandros's chest rise and fall with each precious breath, knowing my life had shifted like the temple's shadows at midday. Whatever the gods had planned, whatever destiny they had woven, it had begun here—with poisoned wounds and fevered truths, with hands that healed and hearts that recognized what they couldn't

possibly know.

Night fell over the temple like a goddess's veil, transforming marble columns into silver shadows. The chaos of battle-wounds and dying men gave way to cricket-song and soft groans. My hands remained steady as I worked, though exhaustion pulled at my limbs like lead weights.

Alexandros lay before me, his fever still raging despite my best efforts. The poison's dark lines had begun to recede, but victory remained uncertain as Athena's favor. I dampened a cloth in spring water blessed by morning prayers, my touch gentle as I pressed it to his burning brow.

His eyes opened slowly, green as the sea at dawn. For a heartbeat that felt eternal, we simply looked at each other. The temple seemed to shrink until nothing existed beyond the space between us, as though Chronos himself had paused time's endless march.

“You saved me,” Alexandros whispered, his voice rough as sand yet carrying the weight of prophecy. His hand moved with deliberate weakness to cover mine where it rested against his forehead. “I dreamed of this—of you. Of your hands bringing me back from darkness.”

My breath caught in my chest like a trapped bird. Every instinct honed by years of healing told me to dismiss his words as fever-dreams. But something deeper—something that felt old as the stones beneath us—recognized truth in his delirious certainty.

Sofia's earlier words echoed in my mind: The gods weave strange threads. Perhaps this was one such thread, pulling taut between us with divine purpose.

“I'm just a healer,” I said softly, though the words rang hollow as an empty amphora.



Even as I spoke them, I knew they carried only surface truth.

“No,” Alexandros murmured, his fingers tightening weakly around mine. “You’re more. I’ve known you... before this life began.”

The moon climbed higher, painting the temple in shades of silver and shadow. Other healers offered to take my place, to watch over the fevered warrior while I rested. I refused them all, claiming my hands knew this work best. But the truth burned in my chest like sacred fire—I couldn’t bear to leave him.

Alexandros’s sleep grew restless as night deepened, his dreams pulling strange words from his lips. “Elias,” he called out suddenly. “I’ve seen you before. Across battlefields. In dreams where time flows like water.”

My heart stumbled against my ribs as I dipped another cloth in cool water. “You’re feverish,” I whispered, pressing it to his forehead even as my own skin burned with something that had nothing to do with illness. “The poison speaks through you.”

“No.” His eyes opened again, fever-bright but holding clarity that defied his condition. “The poison stripped away the veil. Now I remember... I remember everything.”

“Be still,” I instructed, trying to sound like the healer I was supposed to be. “Save your strength for healing.”

But his hand found mine again, his touch sending sparks through my flesh like Zeus’s lightning. “Some truths are worth spending strength to speak,” he said, each word careful and deliberate despite his weakness. “I knew you would be here. The gods themselves showed me your face in dreams.”

I wanted to argue, to explain away his certainty with rational words about fever and

delirium. But deep in my healer's soul, where intuition guided my hands through the most difficult cases, I recognized something I didn't dare name.

“The threads of fate are not for mortals to unravel,” I said finally, echoing priestess-wisdom though my voice shook.

“Yet here we are,” Alexandros replied, his smile carrying shadow of some deeper knowing. “Weaving our own pattern despite the gods' designs.”

The night stretched around us like a sacred offering, broken only by the soft sounds of sleeping patients and the eternal song of crickets. I continued my ministrations—checking his wound, applying fresh poultices, monitoring his breathing—but each touch felt charged with meaning beyond mere healing.

“Tell me you don't feel it too,” he whispered as I changed his bandages. “This connection between us. Like something written in the stars themselves.”

My hands stilled against his skin. Truth hovered between us, demanding acknowledgment. “I feel...” I began, then stopped, uncertain how to voice something that defied mortal explanation.

“Everything,” he finished for me, his fever-bright eyes holding mine. “You feel everything.”

The moon's light streamed through the temple's columns, turning the space around us into something sacred and strange. In that silvered moment, I allowed myself to admit what I'd known since they first carried him in—this was more than healing. More than duty. More than anything the mortal realm could explain.

“Rest,” I commanded softly, though my hand remained caught in his. “Dawn approaches, and healing requires strength.”

“I’ve strength enough for truth,” he murmured, echoing his earlier words. “And the truth is, I’ve been searching for you across lifetimes. Even if I didn’t know it until now.”

I sat beside Alexandros, my body heavy with exhaustion but my heart lighter than it had been since they brought him in. His fever had broken in the night, and now clarity shone in those sea-green eyes.

“You stayed,” he said, his voice hoarse but steady. The surprise in his tone spoke of a man unused to others keeping vigil.

“Of course I stayed.” I began gathering my medicines, trying to maintain professional distance. But before I could rise, his hand caught my wrist, his touch sending sparks through my flesh like divine fire.

“I dreamed of you,” he said, his words low but intense. “Before we ever met. I saw your hands healing warriors, saw your eyes across battlefields. The gods themselves showed me visions.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. “How do you know all of this?”

“I... I don’t know,” he admitted, frustration coloring his tone. “In my dreams, I saw visions. They told me to seek you here, that I would find safety in your hands.”

I froze, my own dreams rushing back like a tide—dreams of a warrior with eyes like the storm-tossed sea, dreams that had haunted my sleep for years before he appeared in my temple. Sofia’s words whispered through my mind: Some souls are too big for one lifetime.

The moment stretched between us, heavy with unspoken recognition. But before either of us could speak further, a familiar voice echoed from the temple entrance.

Valerius, my mentor and friend, approached with his usual measured grace.

“The gods have blessed your healing, Elias,” he said warmly, his experienced eyes assessing Alexandros's improved condition. “Though I never doubted they would. Your gift grows stronger with each passing season.”

“I learned from the best,” I replied, grateful for his steady presence. Valerius had guided me since I first came to the temple, teaching me not just the art of healing, but the sacred responsibility it carried.

“Your warrior's recovery is remarkable,” Valerius observed, genuine pleasure in his smile. “Perhaps when he's stronger, you might share your treatment methods with my own healers? Such knowledge should be preserved.”

“Of course,” I agreed. Valerius had always encouraged the sharing of healing wisdom between temples. It was one of many reasons I trusted him so deeply.

“I owe my life to Elias's skill,” Alexandros said, his voice carrying both gratitude and something deeper. His eyes met mine, and that now-familiar spark of recognition passed between us.

Valerius's gaze moved between us thoughtfully. “The gods work in mysterious ways,” he said softly. “Sometimes they bring souls together for purposes beyond our mortal understanding.”

After he left to attend his own duties, Alexandros and I fell into easy conversation. He told me of battles and campaigns, of strategies and sieges. I shared knowledge of healing herbs and sacred springs, of the delicate balance between science and divine inspiration.

Our discussions ranged from philosophy to poetry, from the nature of destiny to the

proper brewing of healing teas. There was an ease between us that defied explanation—as though we'd known each other for lifetimes, though this was our first meeting.

Sofia watched our growing connection from a distance, her dark eyes heavy with knowledge she wouldn't share. “Be careful, Elias,” she warned one morning. “Some flames burn too bright for mortal hearts to bear.”

But as I met Alexandros's gaze across the healing space, watched him grow stronger day by day beneath my care, I knew it was too late for caution. Whatever sparked between us—this recognition that felt older than time itself—had already taken root.

“Tell me about your dreams,” he asked one quiet afternoon, his voice carrying only to my ears. “Do you see them too? These visions that feel like memories we shouldn't have?”

I hesitated, but truth demanded voice. “I dream of battlefields I've never seen,” I admitted. “Of a warrior with eyes like yours, fighting beneath strange stars. But that's impossible—we've only just met.”

His smile carried mystery like an oracle's prophecy. “Perhaps the impossible is simply truth we're not yet ready to understand.”

That evening, Sofia found me in the temple gardens, her presence as steady as the stars above. “You care for him,” she said simply, no judgment in her voice. “More than a healer should.”

I focused on gathering herbs, avoiding her knowing gaze. “He's my patient.”

“He's more than that,” she replied. “I see how you look at each other. Like you've known each other forever.”

Before I could respond, footsteps approached - Alexandros, moving with growing strength through my herb garden. The moonlight painted him in silver, transforming him from warrior to something divine.

The sacred grove welcomed us like old friends, its ancient olive trees whispering secrets in the evening breeze. Alexandros's hands found my face, his touch gentle as a prayer. "I've waited lifetimes for you," he whispered, the words carrying truth I couldn't explain but felt in my very bones.

I pulled him closer, our connection electric as Zeus's lightning. His lips met mine with the inevitability of tide meeting shore, and the world fell away. There was only this: the press of his body against mine, the taste of destiny on his tongue, a love powerful enough to span centuries.

For now, there was only us, only this moment, only a love that felt older than time itself ? —

I jerked awake in my bed, sweat cooling on my skin as reality crashed back. My heart thundered against my ribs as I tried to orient myself. Manhattan's pre-dawn skyline glittered through floor-to-ceiling windows, the city spread out forty stories below my penthouse. 5:27 AM. Almost time for work.

But the dream clung to me like incense, so vivid I could still feel Alexandros's hands on my face. Still taste his lips on mine.

Moonlight silvered the modern furnishings of my bedroom, transforming sleek surfaces into something ancient and strange. For a moment, the shadows played tricks, turning my minimalist space into marble columns and sacred groves.

My head throbbed as I tried to make sense of the dream. It had felt so real. But that was impossible. I'd never been to Greece. I'd never known anyone named

Alexandros. And yet...

I pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to sort fantasy from reality. The dream was already fading, but something lingered - a sense of connection I couldn't explain. My hands shook slightly as I reached for my phone.

5:45 AM. Time to get ready for work.

Work. Yes. That was real. Concrete. The ER would be waiting, with its predictable chaos and measurable outcomes. Not like these strange dreams that left me feeling off-balance, yearning for something I couldn't name.

I deliberately didn't think about how Alex's eyes had seemed so familiar in that board meeting. Didn't think about why my hands had trembled when he'd looked at me. Some things were better left unexamined.

But as I turned away from the window, the lingering scent of herbs and olive trees followed me like a ghost I couldn't quite believe in.

### CHAPTER 8

#### Empire

S arah's heels clicked a precise rhythm across the marble floor as she approached with my morning coffee. Six years of working together had refined her movements into a choreographed dance of efficiency – the cup positioned exactly two inches from my right hand, the tablet precisely aligned with my desk's edge.

“Your nine o'clock is waiting in the conference room,” she reported, her tone carrying that perfect balance of professional distance and earned familiarity.

I nodded, wrapping my fingers around the coffee cup like an anchor. The bitter warmth helped ground me in the present moment.

The Miami waterfront project rose in miniature splendor – all gleaming curves and environmental innovation. Chicago's eco-hub sprawled across its platform, green spaces woven through ultra-modern structures like nature reclaiming concrete.

The conference room hummed with the particular energy of people trying to look busy without being obvious about it. Department heads straightened in their ergonomic chairs as I entered, tablets held like shields. Their eyes tracked me with the careful attention of people whose bonuses depended on reading my mood.

“The Miami project is ahead of schedule,” Susan Croft's voice carried that note of carefully crafted confidence that came with being Head of Sustainability. Her presentation showed towers rising from reclaimed shoreline like crystal growing from



salt water.

The coffee warmed my hands as I absorbed details, each number and projection fitting into larger patterns of strategy and control. Marcus's voice cut through my analysis with surgical precision.

“The hospital development project may face some resistance from the board. Dr. Vale has raised concerns about construction impact on emergency services.”

My grip tightened on the cup, porcelain straining under my fingers. “The impact studies are comprehensive. Dr. Monroe's department has been fully consulted.”

“Speaking of Dr. Monroe,” Marcus's words carried a warning edge that made my neck tense, “he's requested additional review time for the emergency department modifications.”

The meeting rolled on with mechanical precision. Project timelines. Budget approvals. Strategic acquisitions. Each element a piece in a game of corporate chess where the stakes felt higher than mere profits.

Sarah materialized at my elbow as the room cleared. “The historical society called again about accessing the archives.”

“Declined,” the word came out sharp as broken glass.

Ten o'clock brought the acquisitions team, their presentations polished to a mirror shine. They lined up like well-dressed soldiers, armed with spreadsheets and market analyses. The morning sun caught the edge of every architectural model in my office, turning glass and plastic into something almost mythical.

“The Q3 numbers exceeded projections,” Jessica Chen began, but my attention

snagged on a single detail buried in her report – a failing development firm with one crucial property next to Presbyterian. The kind of leverage that could make Vale choke on his own schemes.

“Tell me more about Metropolitan Development Group,” I interrupted, watching them scramble to adjust to my sudden interest. “Specifically their holdings near the hospital district.”

Jessica recovered with admirable speed, data flowing across her screen. “Three properties, all underperforming. The most notable is a pre-war building directly bordering Presbyterian's emergency department access route.”

My pen tapped against the desk as possibilities unfolded. Vale had been playing games with construction access, weaponizing concerns about emergency vehicles. This property could flip his whole strategy on its head.

“Make it happen,” I signed the authorization with practiced efficiency that made my pen nearly blur. “Full acquisition offer, expedited timeline.”

The team exchanged glances loaded with unspoken questions. They weren't used to seeing me move this fast on relatively small properties. But they couldn't see the larger game unfolding, the careful positioning of pieces that would determine everything.

Will's appearance in the doorway sent them scurrying with relieved efficiency.

“Quite the power move,” he claimed his usual chair like it had his name engraved on it. “That property's been rotting on the market for months. Why the sudden interest?”

“Strategic positioning,” I kept my voice smooth as aged whiskey. “The location has potential.”

“Mm.” His smile could have cut glass. “Nothing to do with tomorrow's hospital board meeting? Or Dr. Monroe's department access requirements?”

The acquisition papers crackled under my suddenly still hands.

“The project needs proper access routes,” I measured each word carefully .

“You've been awfully fixated on this one,” his tone walked the line between casual and surgical.

Sarah's perfectly timed appearance with construction reports felt like a life preserver thrown to a drowning man. She'd developed an almost supernatural ability to read the undercurrents in my meetings, especially the loaded ones with family.

The leather seats of my town car whispered against my suit as Marcus navigated Manhattan's maze of steel and concrete. My tablet glowed with an endless stream of corporate warfare ammunition – property assessments, impact studies, zoning regulations – each document another brick in the wall of my carefully built empire. But my eyes kept drifting to the Presbyterian Hospital blueprints, something about their precise geometry making my chest tight with recognition.

“The board meeting's been moved to two,” Marcus announced, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror with a warning look. “Vale requested the change.”

The bastard's timing was as calculated as his smile. My phone buzzed – a text from my contact in historical archives. The image hit me like a punch to the solar plexus: a sepia photograph from 1893, showing a doctor with Eli's eyes staring back through time. My fingers shook slightly as I saved it to a private folder, buried deep where corporate spies wouldn't think to look.

Traffic crawled past Presbyterian's main entrance, and my body tensed like a tuning

fork being struck. Through the glass doors, harsh fluorescent lights somehow transformed the chaos of the ER into something almost sacred. Eli moved through it all with surgical precision, directing his team through what looked like a trauma case with the kind of focus that made the rest of the world fade away.

“The Wall Street Journal reporter is waiting in the conference room,” Marcus's voice pulled me back to reality as we slid into my reserved space. “She's particularly interested in the hospital development.”

I adjusted my tie in the elevator's reflection, armor going up piece by piece. Sandra Li had a reputation for gutting CEOs who tried to feed her PR bullshit. Perfect for maintaining my image as a brilliant but ruthless developer. Less perfect for keeping certain questions from being asked.

The conference room's windows framed Manhattan like a living painting, but Sandra's laser focus never wavered from my face. She launched her questions like perfectly aimed arrows, each one probing for weakness.

“The healthcare sector is new territory for Rothschild Development,” her pen hovered over her notebook like a scalpel. “Why the sudden interest in hospital infrastructure?”

The smile I gave her had charmed billions out of investors' pockets. “Demographics don't lie, Ms. Chen. An aging population means increased demand for medical services. Smart development means anticipating market trends.”

She leaned forward, shark sensing blood in the water. “Yet your focus on Presbyterian seems... personal. The proposed designs go far beyond typical medical office space.”

“Every project deserves full commitment. Presbyterian's history of excellence aligns perfectly with our development philosophy.” The words came smooth as aged scotch,

practiced until perfect.

“Your reputation for historical preservation is well-known,” she pressed, “but these designs seem almost... reverential. The attention to original architectural elements, the focus on natural light and healing spaces – it's more like restoring a temple than modernizing a hospital.”

My hands froze on the blueprints between us, her observation hitting closer to home than she could know. “The best development work honors what came before while creating something new. Presbyterian's original architects understood the connection between environment and healing. We're simply building on that foundation.”

The dance continued – every question a potential landmine, every answer carefully balanced between corporate truth and deeper motivations. I spoke market analysis and community impact like a second language, maintaining the mask of the brilliant businessman with an artistic streak.

“One final question.” Her eyes could have cut diamonds. “You could have chosen any number of hospitals for this development. Why Presbyterian specifically?”

The graphs and market analyses spread between us like a shield. My CEO persona slipped on as comfortable as an expensive suit. The answer came polished and perfect – demographics, infrastructure opportunities, community investment. Everything a Wall Street Journal profile needed, while revealing nothing of the fire burning beneath my carefully constructed surface.

“Fascinating.” Her final note scratched across the page like a prophecy. “You've built quite an empire, Mr. Rothschild. One might almost think you were working toward something beyond mere profit.”

If she noticed how my smile felt like cracking glass, she was professional enough not

to mention it. “Business success requires a longer view,” I said, each word weighted with meanings she couldn't grasp. “Sometimes the most valuable investments are the ones that take lifetimes to mature.”

### CHAPTER 9

#### Spaces Between

S unlight painted abstract art across my ceiling, the shadows doing some weird dance that made my head hurt. My hand lay in the empty space beside me, and it took several seconds to realize why that felt wrong. For the first time in six years, I hadn't automatically reached for Michael's side of the bed.

The realization hit like a sucker punch to the gut. My throat closed up as I stared at my traitorous hand. Was this what moving on felt like? The thought sent panic racing through my chest, my heart monitor app cheerfully logging the spike in BPM. That morning reach had become part of my identity – like if I just kept doing it, maybe some echo of our life together would stay real.

The shadows shifted again, turning into something that made my brain itch – patterns that felt familiar in a way that scared the shit out of me. I squeezed my eyes shut, but that only made it worse. Ever since Alex had walked into my ER, these almost-memories kept bleeding through the edges of reality like watercolors running wild.

Running. Fuck yes . Running was safe. Quantifiable. Heart rate, distance, pace – pure data with no room for whatever the hell was happening to my brain. I changed with military precision, navigating the minefield of our bedroom – his Nike's still perfectly aligned by the door, that ratty Columbia hoodie he'd refused to throw out, the marathon photo that felt like it was taken in another lifetime.

Central Park exploded with autumn colors that made my fingers twitch for

paintbrushes I'd never owned. My usual route stretched ahead – the one Michael and I had worn into muscle memory, the one I'd kept running solo like some kind of mobile shrine to what we'd lost.

A couple shot past me, matching stride for stride, sharing those private runner jokes that only made sense at mile four. The familiar knife twist in my chest surprised me with its dullness. We'd been them once – so fucking sure we had it all figured out, that we were somehow immune to life's curveballs.

The Met loomed ahead, all imposing columns and stone authority. Something pulled at me to climb those steps, to lose myself in the classical galleries where the air felt heavy with... something . Instead, I pushed harder, letting my lungs burn and my quads scream until the only reality was the rhythm of feet hitting pavement.

My phone buzzed for the third time – Rachel's contact photo grinning up at me like a guilt trip in pixels. I let it go to voicemail, already knowing she'd try again. My sister had turned checking up on me into an art form since Michael died, masking her worry behind casual calls and “just in the neighborhood” visits that somehow always coincided with the rough days.

Eight miles instead of six, because apparently I was trying to outrun my own head. By the time I made it home, my shirt was a sweat-soaked disaster and my legs felt like overcooked pasta.

The apartment was a museum of us – his architectural drawings on every wall, matching coffee mugs we'd bought as a joke, the stupid “his and his” towels from Rachel that I couldn't bring myself to replace. But now new details kept catching my eye, making me dizzy with déjà vu. My hands moved wrong, reaching for things that shouldn't be there, trying to perform actions I'd never learned .

The shower's steam wrapped around me like a hot fog, but it couldn't wash away the



weird double-vision that had become my new normal. Everything felt slightly off, like someone had shifted all my furniture two inches to the left in the middle of the night.

“Get it together,” I muttered to the tiles, my voice barely cutting through the water's drum. “You're Dr. Eli Monroe. Chief of Emergency Medicine. This is real. This is now. This is?—“

My reflection in the fogged mirror looked wrong somehow, like someone else was staring back through my eyes. Someone who knew things I couldn't possibly know, who remembered things that couldn't possibly have happened.

Rachel's fourth call hit just as I was toweling off. Her voice cut through the morning haze like a life preserver thrown to a drowning man.

“Finally!” Relief and exasperation played tag in her tone. “I was about to send David over to check on you.”

“I was running. Lost track of time.”

“Mm-hmm.” Pure big sister skepticism. “So you're still good for today? The nursery won't paint itself, and I'm pretty sure my child won't wait forever to make their appearance.”

My chest tightened as autumn light streamed through the windows. Michael had always geeked out about fall painting – some architectural bullshit about the angle of the sun making colors pop that had made me fall in love with him all over again.

Rachel's voice went soft around the edges, that special tone she'd perfected since becoming a therapist. The one that made me want to simultaneously spill my guts and hang up the phone.

“Eli?”

“No,” I cut her off before she could deploy her full arsenal of concerned sister tactics.

“No, today is fine. I promised, didn't I?”

“You did.” The pause stretched like taffy, and I could practically see her sitting in her home office, one hand curved protectively over her growing belly as she chose her next words. “Sofia called me. She's worried about you.”

Fucking hell . Of course Sofia had called her. My best friend and my sister had formed their own little surveillance squad since Michael died, tracking my mental state like amateur CIA agents. Lately though, Sofia's watchful eyes carried something else – like she was seeing through me to something I couldn't quite grasp.

“I'm fine,” The words came out automatic as breathing, empty as my apartment. “Just busy with the department. The development project?—“

“The one with Alexander Rothschild?” Her tone sharpened like a scalpel. “Sofia mentioned him too.”

The cool bathroom tile pressed against my forehead as I leaned there, trying to find solid ground. How the fuck could I explain what was happening when I didn't understand it myself? The way Alex's presence made reality feel tissue-paper thin, like I could punch through to something else if I just pushed hard enough.

“It's complicated,” I managed, the words almost making me laugh with their inadequacy.

“Isn't it always?” Six years of shared grief weighted her voice, along with something else – worry maybe, or warning.

“Nothing's going on,” The lie burned like cheap whiskey. “Look, I should go. I'll see you in a little while.”

I stood in the middle of my bedroom after hanging up, feeling like an archaeologist in my own life. Every surface held evidence of what Michael and I had built – that pretentious antique dresser we'd hauled home from Brooklyn, vacation photos grinning at me from silver frames, his unread Architectural Digest subscription still arriving like clockwork every month.

The morning light caught dust motes dancing through the air, turning them into tiny stars that seemed to pulse with possibilities I wasn't ready to face.

The door flew open before my knuckles could hit it twice, Rachel's pregnant form filling the doorway like an accusation .

“You're late. By exactly twelve minutes, which is somehow worse than being really late.”

“Good day to you too,” I replied, accepting the coffee. “And I'm not late. I'm operating on doctor time.”

“Is that like teacher time?” She arched an eyebrow. “Where 'just five more minutes' means the bell rang twenty minutes ago?”

“More like firefighter time,” David called from inside. “Where 'be there in five' means I'm still in bed!”

“I heard that!” Rachel shouted back, but she was grinning. “Get in here, Doctor Punctuality. These walls aren't going to paint themselves.”

The house radiated weekend warmth – coffee brewing, something sweet in the oven,

and the particular chaos of a home improvement project in progress. Rachel had turned nesting into an Olympic sport since getting pregnant, and apparently I was her designated training dummy.

“Please tell me those are the good cinnamon rolls,” I said, following my nose to the kitchen. “The ones from that place on 82nd?”

“Nope.” Rachel popped the 'p' with satisfaction. “Better. David made them.”

The kitchen looked like a Pinterest board had exploded, with my brother-in-law standing in the middle of the blast zone. David's 'Hot Stuff Coming Through' apron clashed magnificently with his FDNY shirt, flour dusting his dark hair like premature gray.

“You're just showing off now,” I told him, snagging a roll still warm enough to burn.

“Someone in this family had to learn to cook after you chose scalpels over spatulas.” David grinned, flour dusting his dark hair. “Though I guess you technically still cut things for a living.”

“Different kind of knife skills,” I agreed through a mouthful of cinnamon heaven. “Holy shit, these are good. When did you get so domestic?”

“Probably around the time Rachel started crying at commercials about baby products.” He dodged the dish towel my sister threw at his head. “What? You cried at the diaper ad yesterday!”

“It was a very moving diaper ad,” Rachel insisted, settling onto a kitchen stool with the particular care of someone carrying precious cargo. “The baby looked just like you!”

“All babies look the same,” I pointed out, reaching for another roll. “Wrinkly potatoes with attitudes.”

“Just for that, you get to tape all the baseboards.” Rachel pointed imperiously toward the stairs. “Every single one of them. With your fancy surgeon hands.”

“Abuse of medical training,” I protested, but I was already heading up, coffee in one hand and cinnamon roll in the other.

The nursery waited like a blank canvas, morning light streaming through windows that desperately needed Windex. David had arranged the painting supplies with the same precision he probably used for his fire gear – everything lined up and ready for action like some kind of home improvement tactical unit.

“Your Type A is showing,” I told him as he appeared with more supplies.

“Says the man who color-codes his surgical instruments.”

“That's different. That's professional.”

“Uh-huh.” David surveyed the room with tactical assessment. “Okay, game plan. I'll handle the rolling since I've got the reach. Eli, you've got edges and corners with those steady hands. Rach?—“

“Supervisory position,” Rachel interrupted, lowering herself onto the rocking chair we'd assembled last weekend. “The baby book says to avoid paint fumes.”

“Convenient,” I muttered, but I was smiling as I started measuring and taping.

“So,” Rachel said after a while, her tone way too casual. “Sofia tells me the hospital's getting exciting.”

I focused on my taping like it required neurosurgical precision. “If by exciting you mean the usual chaos, then yes.”

“Mm-hmm. Nothing to do with tall, dark, and developer?”

The tape tore unevenly under my suddenly tense fingers. “Alexander Rothschild is a client.”

“A very attractive client,” Rachel sing-songed. “With, and I quote Sofia here, ‘eyes that could melt steel beams.’”

“Please stop,” I groaned while David snickered. “Both of you. It's not like that.”

“No?” Rachel's voice softened slightly. “It could be, you know. It's been six years, Eli. Michael would want?—“

“Paint fumes!” I interrupted loudly. “Aren't you supposed to be avoiding those? Maybe from the other room? Different floor entirely?”

“Real mature,” she shot back, but her eyes were kind. “Fine, subject dropped. For now. David, honey, tell Eli about the call you had yesterday.”

Time dissolved into a rhythm of tape measures and paint rollers, David's country playlist losing the music war to Rachel's pop hits. The pale yellow transformed the walls like sunrise, warming the sterile builder's white into something that felt like hope.

“You missed a spot,” Rachel called helpfully as I stretched to reach a high corner.

“You know,” I grunted, balancing precariously on the stepladder, “most people would help instead of criticizing.”

“Most people aren't growing an entire human being.” She rubbed her belly smugly. “I'm multitasking enough as it is.”

“The baby's doing all the work,” David pointed out, earning himself another thrown dish towel. “What? It's true!”

“Just for that, you're making more cinnamon rolls tomorrow.” Rachel's attempt at a stern expression was ruined by her barely suppressed smile. “And Eli's getting them all.”

“Harsh but fair,” I agreed, climbing down to survey our work. The color caught at something in my memory, warm and familiar. “Hey Rach? Didn't Mom paint your room this color when you were little?”

“You remember that?” She sounded pleased. “I was thinking the same thing. Though Mom's edges weren't nearly as neat as yours.”

“Surgeon,” David and I said in unison, then laughed at Rachel's exaggerated eye roll.

“Yes, yes, you're very skilled.” She leveraged herself out of the rocking chair with the determination of the heavily pregnant. “Skills that would be better appreciated if they came with lunch. I'm eating for two, remember?”

“You've been eating for two for eight months,” I pointed out, but I was already reaching for my phone. “Same pizza place as last time?”

“Ooh, with the garlic knots?” Rachel's eyes lit up. “And maybe that pasta thing? And the salad?”

“The eating for two excuse only works for one extra meal,” I told her, but I was already dialing.

Later, we sprawled across Rachel's living room like survivors of a home improvement war. Empty pizza boxes created a cardboard landscape on the coffee table, garlic knot crumbs marking our surrender to carb-loaded bliss. David snored softly in his recliner, paint streaks on his shirt like badges of honor.

“Thank you,” Rachel said softly, careful not to wake her husband. “For today. For everything.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo. “Pretty sure I should be thanking you. Those cinnamon rolls alone...”

She poked my ribs. “I'm being serious for once. Let me have my moment.”

“Fine,” I sighed dramatically. “Continue with the emotional vulnerability. But make it quick – I have a reputation to maintain.”

“Jerk.” She settled closer, her head on my shoulder. “I just... I know things have been weird lately. At the hospital, with everything. But you know David and I are here, right? No matter what?”

The late afternoon sun turned everything golden, casting the kind of light that made even pizza boxes look artistic. For a moment, the world narrowed to just this – my sister's warmth, David's gentle snores, and the particular peace of a job well done. No hospital politics. No mysterious developers with eyes that saw too much. No memories that couldn't possibly be mine pressing against the edges of reality. Just family, paint fumes, and the promise of new beginnings wrapped in yellow walls.



### CHAPTER 10

#### Measured Words

M orning light sliced through the Met's skylights, turning dust motes into floating galaxies above the Greek and Roman galleries. At this hour, the marble halls belonged to the determined few – art students with their sketchpads and the occasional tourist who'd actually read their guidebook. The quiet felt almost sacred, like being in on a secret the rest of New York hadn't discovered yet.

The Asclepius statue stood sentinel nearby, his stone eyes holding whatever wisdom ancient gods kept to themselves. I'd chosen this spot with tactical precision – visible enough from the entrance to seem coincidental, far enough from the tour routes to allow real conversation.

My watch ticked away minutes like heartbeats. Trading my usual Armani for casual weekend wear felt like stepping out of character, but today wasn't about the billion-dollar developer meeting the star surgeon. Today was about something else entirely.

Footsteps echoed off marble, and my pulse jumped like some goddamn teenager. Eli appeared around the corner, armed with coffee and wearing a grey sweater that made him look softer somehow, more real than the starched and pristine ER chief I usually saw.

“Mr. Rothschild,” he said, his hand going to straighten a nonexistent tie.

“Alex,” I corrected gently. “We're not at the hospital now.”

His eyes darted between me and the exits, but curiosity won over caution. “Do you often spend Saturday mornings with ancient medical gods?”

“Only the interesting ones.” I gestured to the bench beside me. “He's got good stories, if you know how to listen.”

A small smile tugged at his lips despite his obvious attempt to maintain distance. “I suppose you're an expert on ancient Greek mythology too?”

“Hardly. Just someone who appreciates good craftsmanship.” I shifted slightly, making room. “The bench has a great view, if you're interested. No shop talk required.”

He hesitated, then sat with careful precision, maintaining proper space between us. His coffee cup trembled slightly as he set it down, those surgeon's hands less steady outside the operating room.

“I used to come here with Michael,” he said suddenly, as if the words surprised him. “He loved the architecture. Said these spaces felt like they held secrets.”

“He wasn't wrong.” I kept my voice soft, letting the morning quiet wrap around us.

“I dream about places like this sometimes,” he admitted. “The light feels... familiar.”

“It's good light for healing,” I said simply.

A tourist group clattered past like a herd of well-meaning elephants, their excited whispers bouncing between centuries-old sculptures. We waited in surprisingly comfortable silence until they moved on, our shoulders almost but not quite touching on the marble bench.

“How do you do that?” he asked finally.

“Do what? ”

“Say things that sound perfectly normal but feel like they mean something else entirely.” He turned to look at me properly for the first time. “Why do I feel like I know you?”

Sunlight caught his profile as he spoke, turning him into another masterpiece among the statues. My heart ached with possibility, but I kept my voice light. “Maybe we just have compatible appreciation for ancient art and good coffee.” I nodded at his cup. “That's from Giovanni's, right? Best brew in the city.”

His surprise showed plainly. “How did you?—“

“I have an excellent nose for quality coffee.” I grinned, letting some of my usual corporate polish fall away. “And I may have noticed you getting your morning fix there once or twice.”

“You mean you've been watching me.” But his tone held more amusement than accusation.

“I prefer to call it professional interest in my project partners' caffeine habits.”

That earned me a real laugh, the sound echoing off ancient marble like music. “Is that what we are? Project partners?”

“Among other things,” I said softly. The morning light painted shadows across his face that made my chest tight. “Maybe friends, if you're interested.”

He studied me for a long moment, something shifting behind his eyes. “Friends,” he

repeated, testing the word. "I'm not sure that's wise, given our professional relationship."

"Probably not," I agreed easily. "But wisdom's overrated sometimes."

Another smile tugged at his lips. "Says the man having a casual chat with Asclepius on a Saturday morning."

"He's a very good listener." I gestured to the statue's serene expression. "Never interrupts, always looks interested. Perfect conversation partner."

This time his laugh was fuller, more natural. "You're nothing like I expected, you know that?"

"I'll take that as a compliment." I let myself enjoy the moment, just us here in this pocket of quiet among the ancient stones. "For what it's worth, you're exactly what I expected. In all the best ways."

A faint blush colored his cheeks. "I should probably go," he said, but he made no move to stand. "I have... things."

"Of course." I kept my tone light. "Busy doctor things, I'm sure. But if you ever want company for your Saturday museum visits..." I let the offer hang between us, unfinished but clear.

He stood slowly, gathering his coffee cup. "I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask." I watched him take a few steps toward the exit before adding, "Oh, and Eli?"

He turned back, eyebrows raised in question.

“Giovanni makes excellent peppermint tea too. Just in case the coffee's keeping you up at night.”

Understanding flickered across his face – he hadn't told anyone about his recent insomnia. But instead of pulling away, he just shook his head with a small smile. “Good to know,” he said softly, and then he was gone.

Movement caught my eye – Eli hadn't left after all. He stood before an ancient Greek vase, pretending to study its intricate patterns while his gaze kept drifting back to our bench. The struggle played across his face clear as gallery lights on marble, logic wrestling with something deeper and less easily explained.

“The dreams started recently, didn't they?” I kept my voice soft as museum shadows. “The ones that don't quite feel like dreams.”

His slight flinch rippled through the quiet air between us. Around us, carved heroes and gods watched our dance with ancient eyes, morning light turning every surface to liquid gold.

“Everyone has strange dreams,” he said, but uncertainty threaded through his voice like cracks in marble .

“Not like these,” I said. “Not dreams that feel more real than waking. Not memories that live in your bones.”

His fingers found his wedding ring, twisting it like an anchor to reality. Each movement precise, controlled, fighting against something he couldn't quite name. “You sound very sure about my dreams.”

“I recognize the signs.” I shifted over without making it obvious, creating space without demand. “The way you look at certain things like you're seeing double –

what's there now, and what used to be. The way your hands remember movements you've never learned.”

His fingers went still on the ring. “You're very observant, Mr. Roths...Alex.”

“And observation is only part of it. Recognition is something else entirely.”

A wave of chatter crashed through the adjacent gallery, voices bouncing off ancient stone. We let the silence stretch between us until the noise faded. Eli had settled onto the bench again, maintaining a careful few inches of space that felt electric with possibility.

“Who are you?” His question hit the marble walls and multiplied, echoing off centuries of art. “Really?”

The morning light caught his profile, turning him into another masterpiece among the collection. “Someone who knows you. Someone who's known you before.”

He stood abruptly, but not with the panic I'd feared. “That's impossible.”

“Impossible is an interesting word.” I kept my voice gentle as the sunlight filtering through high windows. “Especially for a doctor. How many 'impossible' things have you seen in your ER? How many times has science had to expand to explain what seemed unexplainable?”

His pacing carried the grace of someone who had walked these halls before, even if he didn't know it. “You're talking in riddles. ”

“Would you believe straight answers?” The dust motes danced between us like stars. “If I told you why you're drawn to this place, why certain things feel familiar when they shouldn't?”

“Try me.” His voice carried equal parts challenge and fear.

“Your hands shake sometimes. Not during surgery – never then. But afterward, when you're alone. When the dreams are strongest.” The truth of it showed in his slight tremor. “You recognize places you've never visited, remember skills you've never learned. And sometimes, in the spaces between sleeping and waking, you hear voices speaking languages you shouldn't understand.”

The color drained from his face. “That's— How do you know these things?”

“Because I know you.” I let my careful control slip just enough. “Not just the Chief of Emergency Medicine, not just the brilliant surgeon. I know the healer who's lived many lives, who's carried that calling through centuries.”

He took a step back, his doctor's rationality visibly warring with deeper knowledge. “You're talking about reincarnation. Past lives. That's?—“

“Impossible?” The word hung between us like incense smoke. “Like the way you knew exactly how to modify those architectural plans without training? Like how you can read ancient Greek without studying it?”

His eyes widened. “I never told anyone about?—“

“You don't have to tell me.” The morning light painted shadows that made my chest ache. “I recognize the signs. The way you move through these galleries like you're remembering rather than discovering. The way certain pieces catch your eye – always the healing implements, always the temple artifacts.”

He pulled back like a man trying not to drown. “I have to go. This is?—“

“A lot to take in. I know. Take whatever time you need.”

Sunlight shifted through the skylights, transforming the space into something older, something that made reality feel tissue- paper thin. His voice came barely above a whisper. “The temple dreams. The ones with the marble columns and healing springs. Are they?—“

“Real?” I kept my voice soft as memory. “As real as this moment. As real as the way this gallery feels like coming home.”

His sharp breath echoed off the marble. “I really do have to go.”

“Of course.” I remained still as the statues watching us. “But Eli? When you're ready to talk about it – about any of it – I'll be here. Same time next week, if you're interested.”

Something shifted in his expression, like ice starting to crack in spring. “I'll think about it.”

“That's all I ask.”

His footsteps faded into the museum's quiet, measured but not running. Each click against marble felt like possibility, like the first notes of a familiar song starting to play again after too long a silence.

The weekend crowd drifted through the gallery like water around stones, their phones raised to capture artifacts they'd forget by dinner. My own phone buzzed like an angry hornet in my pocket – Marcus's security updates, Will's board concerns, the endless demands of a billion-dollar empire. I ignored them all, studying the weathered face of Asclepius instead.

Clouds shifted outside, throwing shadows across marble that made my head spin. The air in the gallery felt heavy with possibility and threat, like the moment before a



storm breaks.

Movement caught my eye through the massive windows. Eli crossed Fifth Avenue, looking smaller somehow in his weekend clothes than in his usual surgeon's armor. Each step carried the precise control of someone trying not to run. At the crosswalk, his hand went to his temples – fighting off what I knew would be the first of many headaches as memories tried to surface.

A black Bentley slid up to the curb like a shark scenting blood. My jaw clenched as Vale emerged, his Savile Row suit and practiced smile a perfect costume for a predator. The fact that he'd broken his usual patterns to follow Eli here sent ice down my spine.

My vintage watch dug into my palm as my fingers tightened. Some hunters never lost their taste for certain prey, even if they didn't remember why.

“He's escalating faster than expected.”

Marcus materialized beside me like a particularly well-dressed ghost, his voice pitched low enough to blend with the gallery's natural acoustics.

“Vale's been increasing his research into reincarnation,” he reported, each word measured with careful precision. “Past-life regression, historical hospital records, particularly focusing on cases where patients remembered dying in previous lives. His latest grant proposal to the board requests funding for a study on near-death experiences and memory transfer.”

“He doesn't understand what he's remembering,” I watched Vale hand Eli what looked like a business card, the gesture smooth as silk and twice as deadly. “But his soul knows enough to be dangerous.”

Eli tucked the card away like it might bite, his glance back toward the museum quick but telling. Vale caught the look, his gaze rising to meet mine through layers of glass with the kind of recognition that made my blood run cold.

“The patterns are accelerating,” Marcus said, his tablet appearing in his hands like a modern shield. “All the players aligning faster than before. Vale, William, even Sofia – they're all starting to remember, whether they understand it or not.”

“We need to move faster.” The words tasted like ash, but Vale's presence changed everything. “Have you found anything in the historical society's archives?”

“Some promising leads.” His fingers danced across the screen, pulling up documents that smelled of dust and secrets even in digital form. “Hospital records from the 1890s mention a Dr. Monroe treating a Rothschild heir. The details are fragmentary, but there are references to unusual healing methods, to knowledge that seemed beyond normal medical training.”

“And Vale's connection to that lifetime?”

“Still unclear. But his father's influence at Presbyterian goes back generations. The Vale Wing wasn't just named for donations – there's something deeper there, something deliberately obscured in the records.”

I pushed up from the bench, muscles protesting hours of stillness. The corporate world beckoned, all boardrooms and billion-dollar decisions. My hand reached out almost without thought, brushing Asclepius's base in a gesture that made my fingertips tingle.

“The car's waiting,” Marcus said. “I have the latest updates from the hospital board meeting, and William's asked to see you before dinner.”

The museum's marble halls felt colder somehow as we walked out, like Eli had taken some vital warmth with him. Our driver held the car door with perfect timing, the leather interior offering its own kind of sanctuary. Marcus's tablet glowed with updates I couldn't ignore – Vale's proposals, William's discoveries, the hospital board's shifting alliances.

“You did well today,” Marcus's voice carried gentle approval. “Not pushing too hard, letting him find his way naturally. Even in the temple days, you knew when to let healing happen in its own time.”

The streets of New York blurred past the windows, but my mind kept going back to how Eli had looked at the end – questioning everything he thought he knew, but not running away. Maybe this time really would be different. Maybe this time we could break the pattern before Vale remembered enough to repeat ancient mistakes.

### CHAPTER 11

#### War Dreams

435 BCE - Outside Athens

Copper and dust filled my mouth as I knelt in blood-soaked sand, my hands moving with certainty born of sacred training. The soldier beneath my care groaned – a spear wound to the shoulder, deep but not fatal if I worked quickly enough. Around us, bronze clashed against bronze, the sounds of battle mixing with prayers and death-cries in the hot Greek air.

“Hold still,” I murmured, reaching for the herbs in my healer's bag. The soldier bit down on leather as I cleaned the wound with wine. Not ideal, but better than the impure water from army skins. “The medicine will help with the pain.”

The herbs filled my senses as I worked – sharp thyme to cleanse, sweet lavender to calm, bitter yarrow to slow bleeding. Each one had been blessed in temple springs at dawn, their power enhanced by sacred ritual and practical knowledge passed down through generations. Between my fingers, they became something more than simple plants – a bridge between divine healing and mortal medicine.

A shadow fell across my work, and my heart recognized its shape before I looked up. Alexandros stood like a statue of Ares come to life, his armor catching Greek sunlight like captured fire. Blood and dirt streaked his face, but his eyes – those impossible blue eyes – held the same warmth they always did when looking at me.

“The eastern flank is falling,” he said, his voice carrying the weight of command that sat so naturally on his shoulders. “We need you there, Elias. Their healer was taken by enemy arrows.”

I tied off the bandage with practiced efficiency, helping the soldier to his feet. One of his companions supported him toward the rear lines where my apprentices waited. Only then did I meet Alexandros's gaze properly, letting myself feel the full force of our connection.

“More wounded?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. There were always more wounded in this endless war.

“Too many.” His hand found my shoulder, the touch electric even through layers of armor and cloth. “Valerius is watching from the temple. He'll send more supplies if we need them.”

I glanced up toward the sacred hill where our healing temple stood watch over the carnage. Sure enough, my mentor's familiar figure stood at the highest point, his priest's robes catching the wind. Something in his posture spoke of concern rather than just observation.

“He should be resting,” I said, worry coloring my voice. “He was up all night with the fever cases.”

“You know Valerius,” Alexandros smiled. “He won't rest while his healers are in the field.” His expression shifted to tactical focus. “But there's no time – the eastern line needs us now.”

We ran together through the chaos of battle, his warrior's grace matching my healer's speed. How many times had we done this? How many battlefields had we crossed side by side, his sword guarding my work, my hands mending his warriors? The

familiarity felt deeper than the two years we'd known each other, like something written in our souls rather than just our memories.

A cry for help pulled me toward a fallen archer. The man's leg was badly mangled, blood pulsing in a way that spoke of severed vessels. I pulled sacred herbs from my bag, began the chants that would focus their power while my fingers worked.

“Hold them back!” Alexandros shouted to his men, forming a defensive ring around my work. “Give him time!”

My hands never shook as I packed the wound with blessed herbs, as I stitched torn flesh with thread soaked in sacred oils. This gift had always been steady, had marked me for temple service from childhood. Each motion was both practical and divine – medicine and magic intertwined as they had been since Asclepius first taught healing to mortals.

“Breathe,” I told the archer as I worked. “Focus on the temple. On Apollo's light.”

Through the chaos of battle, I heard Valerius's voice carried on the wind, chanting the ancient prayers that strengthened our healing work. His presence was a comfort – he had taught me everything I knew about bridging the mortal and divine, about using herbs and faith together to fight death's gathering dark.

“Elias!” Alexandros's warning shout yanked my attention back to immediate danger. Enemy forces had breached our defensive line, bronze spears gleaming as they charged our position. My hands, stained with herbs and blood, reached instinctively for the short sword at my belt. The weapon felt familiar in my grip, though healers were not meant to be warriors.

The air grew thick with smoke from nearby fires, screams and battle cries mixing into a terrible chorus. Through the chaos, I saw Valerius descending from the temple hill,

his medicine bag bouncing against his hip as he ran to join us. My mentor's face showed the same determination I felt – death would not claim more lives than necessary today.

“The surgical tools you asked for,” he called, tossing me a wrapped bundle. “Blessed at dawn. Use them well!”

Alexandros moved to cover Valerius's approach, his sword flashing in the Greek sun as he cut down an enemy soldier. “The line's breaking,” he shouted. “We need to fall back to the temple! ”

Time seemed to slow as I gathered my wounded archer, as Alexandros's men formed a protective ring around us. Valerius reached our position, his healer's hands already moving to help support the injured man. Together, we began the fighting retreat toward sacred ground.

The battle swirled around us like a storm, bronze and blood and screaming. But in our small pocket of relative calm, three souls moved as one – the warrior, the healer, and the priest, each playing our parts in this eternal dance. Alexandros's sword cleared our path, my hands worked their healing, and Valerius's prayers wrapped around us like divine armor.

We reached the temple steps as the sun touched noon-height, its light turning marble columns into spears of gold. The wounded were laid in shaded porticos where apprentice healers waited. Alexandros's men formed a defensive line at the base of the sacred hill, buying us time to work.

“You've done well,” Valerius said quietly as he helped me organize supplies for the next wave of injured. His eyes held pride and something else – a weight of knowledge I didn't yet understand. “Both of you. The gods are pleased.”

Alexandros simply nodded, his warrior's focus still on the battle raging below. But his free hand found mine for just a moment, a brief touch that carried volumes of unspoken meaning. Valerius pretended not to notice, but his small smile spoke of understanding.

The day stretched ahead, full of more wounded, more battles, more tests of skill and faith. But here, in this moment, we were exactly where we needed to be – three souls bound by fate and choice, fighting death with all the tools we'd been given.

None of us could know how it would end. None of us could see the threads of destiny already beginning to weave their tragic pattern. For now, there was only this: hands steady with sacred purpose, hearts beating in ancient rhythm, and a bond between souls that felt older than time itself.

The battle horns sounded again, calling us back to our eternal work. Alexandros raised his sword, sunlight blazing along its length like divine fire. Valerius gathered his medicines, his prayers already beginning. And I... I stood between them, herbs staining my fingers, feeling the weight of both martial and divine power flowing through our united purpose.

Together, we descended the temple steps to meet whatever fate awaited. Together, we would face the day's battles, heal its wounds, honor its sacrifices. Together, we were more than just warrior, healer, and priest – we were something ancient and powerful, something that even death itself would struggle to break.

My hands shook as I fumbled for the bedside lamp, each breath too loud in the quiet darkness. The clock's LED display read 3:17 AM, its red numbers harsh against the softer glow of city lights through my window.

I needed water. Needed to wash away the lingering taste of copper and dust that felt too real to be just a dream. My feet carried me toward the kitchen on autopilot while



my mind remained half-caught in ancient Greece.

Which is why it took several heartbeats to register that the kitchen light was already on. That someone sat at my counter like they belonged there, like this was any normal night instead of an impossible moment that threatened everything I thought I knew about reality.

Alex looked perfectly at ease in my kitchen at 3 AM, two steaming cups of tea placed precisely on the granite counter before him. His suit was as impeccable as always, though the jacket draped over one of my chairs spoke of a casualness that felt strangely intimate. The scene should have been alarming – a man in my apartment in the middle of the night – but instead it felt... familiar. Like something we'd done a thousand times before.

“You remember the battle now,” he said quietly, pushing one of the cups toward the empty seat beside him. Not a question. Not even really a statement. Just simple acknowledgment of truth we both knew .

My hands gripped the doorframe as reality seemed to tilt sideways. I should call security. Should demand explanations. Should feel threatened by this invasion of my space. Instead, I found myself noticing how the kitchen light caught his eyes, turning them the exact shade of the Aegean in my dream. No, not dream. Memory.

“How did you get in?” The words came automatically, but we both knew that wasn't the real question. Not even close.

Alex's smile held warmth and ancient knowing as he replied, “The same way I always have.”

The words should have sounded like nonsense. Like the ravings of a madman. Like something that would send me running for my phone to call the police. Instead, they

resonated with the truth of that battlefield still fresh in my mind – of other nights, other conversations, other times when he had simply... appeared when needed.

My feet carried me forward without conscious decision. Muscle memory from a thousand other midnight conversations led me to the seat beside him, my body remembering what my mind was only beginning to understand. The tea was perfect – honey and lemon, exactly how I took it. Exactly how I'd taken it in the temple after long nights of healing.

“Tell me,” I said finally, my hands wrapping around the warm cup that anchored me to now while my mind reached for then. “Tell me why I remember things that couldn't possibly have happened. Tell me why you're here. Tell me... everything.”

“Everything is a lot to cover at 3 AM,” he said gently. The familiar cadence of his voice sent echoes through my soul – of battlefield commands, of whispered endearments, of promises that spanned centuries. “But I can tell you what you're ready to hear.”

I studied him over the rim of my cup, letting myself really look for the first time. The distinguished grey at his temples that had been there in every life. The way he held himself – casual but alert, like a warrior who never fully relaxed. The ancient knowing in eyes that had watched me die and find him again through countless lifetimes.

“The battle,” I started, then stopped. Swallowed. Tried again. “It wasn't just a dream, was it?”

“No.” He sipped his own tea – chamomile with honey, the same blend he'd favored in Greece. “It was memory. One of many starting to surface.”

“But that's impossible.” The protest sounded weak even to my own ears. “People

don't just remember past lives. They don't dream about ancient battles and wake up knowing how to use medicines that haven't existed for centuries.”

“Don't they?” His smile held gentle challenge. “Tell me, what herbs would you use for a wound that's showing signs of infection? Not modern antibiotics – the old ways. The temple medicines.”

“Thyme and garlic to cleanse,” I answered without hesitation. “Yarrow to slow bleeding. Honey as a base to hold it all together. But I shouldn't know that. I've never studied ancient medicine. I've never?—”

“You've never needed to study it,” he finished softly. “Because you already know. Your hands remember, even if your mind doesn't. Just like they remembered how to modify those architectural plans without training. Just like they shake sometimes for no reason you can explain.”

I stared at my hands wrapped around the teacup, seeing them stained with ancient herbs instead of modern surgical soap. “The temple,” I whispered. “It was real? All of it?”

“All of it.” His hand moved as if to cover mine, then stopped just short. Always giving me choice. Always letting me set the pace. “The healing, the battles, the sacred springs. Valerius teaching you the old ways. The soldiers you saved. The nights we...”

He trailed off as I tensed slightly. Not ready for that part yet. Not ready to acknowledge the way my heart recognized his voice, the way my soul knew his touch even across centuries .

“Why now?” I asked instead. “Why are these memories surfacing after all this time?”

“Because it's time,” he said simply. “Because some patterns need to be broken, some cycles need to end. Because Vale is remembering too, though he doesn't understand what he's remembering yet.”

The name sent a chill down my spine. “Vale? What does he have to do with any of this?”

Alex's expression darkened slightly. “Everything. And nothing. He's as bound to this cycle as we are, though his role has changed through lifetimes. In Greece, he was your mentor. Your friend. Until...”

“Until what?”

But he shook his head. “Some memories need to surface on their own. Pushing too hard too fast can do more harm than good.”

I wanted to argue, to demand answers to questions I was only beginning to form. But exhaustion pulled at me – physical and emotional, modern and ancient. My tea had gone cold while we talked, the kitchen clock ticking steadily toward dawn.

“This is insane,” I said finally, rubbing my temples. “You realize that, right? That this whole thing sounds completely insane.”

Alex's smile held gentle amusement. “More or less insane than the fact that you just remembered exact details about ancient Greek battlefield medicine that you've never studied?”

“That could be explained by... I don't know. Subconscious absorption of information. Maybe I read something somewhere and forgot about it.” Even to my own ears, the explanation sounded weak. “Or maybe this is all an elaborate prank. Maybe you've been researching me, finding ways to...”

“To what?” He leaned forward slightly, his eyes holding mine. “To break into your apartment at 3 AM to make you tea exactly the way you like it? To somehow implant memories of battles and temples and healing techniques that aren't in any modern medical text?”

Put that way, it did sound ridiculous. But wasn't it more ridiculous to believe in past lives? In reincarnation? In the idea that Alex and I had known each other across centuries?

“You have to admit,” I said, studying my hands wrapped around the teacup, “this is a lot to take in. Past lives? Ancient memories? It's not exactly standard medical curriculum.”

“No,” he agreed easily. “But then again, neither is knowing exactly how to modify architectural plans without any training. Or recognizing Greek artifacts you've never seen before. Or feeling at home in temple galleries you've never visited.”

Each point hit uncomfortably close to truth. I'd been rationalizing away those strange moments of knowledge, those inexplicable feelings of familiarity. But now, with the battlefield memory still fresh in my mind...

“How do you know all this?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer. “How do you know me?”

The question hung between us in the pre-dawn quiet. Outside, Manhattan slept while two men drank cooling tea and navigated impossible truths. The distance between us felt both infinite and nonexistent – Alex close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from him, but separated by death and time and Michael's ring heavy on my finger.

“You know how,” he said gently. “The same way you know about the herbs, about

the temple, about everything else you're trying so hard not to remember.”

“No.” I pushed back from the counter, needing physical distance from the certainty in his voice. “No, reincarnation isn't real. It's a nice story people tell themselves to feel better about death, but it's not science. It's not possible.”

“Says the man who just remembered exact details of an ancient Greek battle he never fought in.” His smile held no mockery, only patience. “The surgeon whose hands know techniques that haven't been practiced in centuries. ”

“That could be explained by... by genetic memory maybe. Or some kind of collective unconscious thing. Jung wrote about?—”

“Jung wrote about archetypes and shared symbols,” Alex interrupted softly. “Not about knowing exactly how to mix specific healing herbs, or recognizing people you've never met, or dreaming in languages you've never learned.”

I had been speaking ancient Greek in the dream - not just understanding it, but thinking in it, the words as natural as breathing. “There has to be another explanation,” I insisted, but my voice sounded weak even to my own ears.

“Does there?” He leaned forward slightly, his eyes holding mine. “Why? Because it doesn't fit your modern medical understanding? Because it can't be measured in a lab or proven in peer-reviewed studies?”

“Because people don't just get reborn!” I gripped my teacup so hard I was afraid it might break. “They don't just remember past lives over tea at 3 AM because some...” I gestured at him helplessly, “some developer breaks into their apartment and starts talking about ancient battles!”

“No,” he agreed calmly. “Most people don't. But we're not most people, are we? We

never have been.”

The battlefield memory pressed against my mind. It felt more real than the kitchen around us, more true than anything except the operating room where my hands never shook.

“Why me?” I asked finally, my voice barely a whisper. “Why this? Why now?”

“Because it's time.” He reached across the counter but stopped short of touching me.

“Because some souls are meant to find each other, no matter how many lives it takes. Because you're starting to remember anyway, whether you want to or not.”

The sky began to lighten outside my window, reality pressing in around our bubble of midnight truth. I should feel afraid, I realized distantly. Should question my sanity. Should throw this man out of my home and call security and pretend none of this was happening .

Instead, I found myself memorizing the way his hands moved as he gathered his jacket, comparing them to hands that had once wielded a sword in my defense. The same elegant strength, the same controlled power, the same tendency to reach for me before catching himself.

“I still don't believe this is real,” I said, but the protest sounded weak even to me.

“You do,” he replied gently. “Part of you does, anyway. The part that remembers. The part that knew me the moment you saw me in your ER.”

At my door, Alex paused. “The memories will keep coming,” he said softly. “Not because I'm forcing them, not because of any tricks or games. But because they're yours. They've always been yours.”

Then he was gone, leaving only two empty teacups and the lingering scent of honey and lemon to prove he was ever there. My hands shook as I cleaned up, my mind full of bronze and blood and questions I wasn't sure I wanted answered.

But for now, in the grey space between night and day, between what I thought I knew and what my soul remembered, I let myself consider impossible things. The weight of herbs in my healer's bag. The way battlefield sand felt under my knees. The precise angle of Mediterranean sun through temple columns.

I touched my empty teacup, fingers tracing patterns that matched Greek designs I shouldn't know. Everything felt both sharp and hazy – the immediate reality of my kitchen overlapping with older truths trying to surface. My wedding ring caught the growing light, and guilt twisted in my chest. Not just for Michael, but for older loves, other endings I couldn't quite remember.

The first hints of rush hour traffic drifted up from the streets below, modern sounds pulling me back to the present. Soon I would need to shower, dress, become the Chief of Emergency Medicine who dealt in observable facts and measurable outcomes. I would need to face Vale across conference tables, pretending I didn't feel ancient warnings whenever he was near .

But something had shifted in the quiet hours between dreaming and dawn. Whether I believed in past lives or not, whether I accepted these impossible memories or not, I couldn't deny the simple fact that I knew things I shouldn't know. Remembered things I couldn't possibly remember.

And somewhere deep in my soul, in a place that existed before modern medicine and scientific certainty, I recognized the truth in Alex's eyes. Even if I wasn't ready to admit what that meant.



### CHAPTER 12

#### Some Truths

Four hours of research had led me down increasingly unorthodox paths. My browser tabs now included University of Virginia studies on children with unusual memories, consciousness research from reputable institutions, and – though it pained my academic sensibilities – several papers on unexplained phenomena in medical literature.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

The rational part of my brain, the part that had gotten me through medical school and surgical residency, wanted to dismiss it all as pseudoscience. But my hands... my hands remembered things they shouldn't.

“You're here late.”

Sofia's voice made me jump. I quickly minimized my browser, but not before catching her concerned frown.

“Just catching up on some reading,” I said, gesturing vaguely at the neglected patient files.

She moved further into my office, closing the door behind her. “The board meeting's not until Thursday. Those reviews can wait.”

I started organizing papers randomly, needing something to do with my hands. “I know, I just wanted to...”

“When's the last time you slept?” She settled into my visitor's chair with familiar grace. “Actually slept, not just dozed between surgeries?”

“I'm fine.”

“Mm-hmm.” Her tone carried twenty years of friendship and skepticism. “That's why you're hiding in your office at 9 PM, looking like you've seen a ghost.”

If only she knew how accurate that description felt. “Just... processing some things.”

Sofia studied me with the same careful attention she gave difficult cases. “This is about Rothschild's project, isn't it? The way Vale's been pushing back?”

“No,” I said too quickly. “Maybe. I don't know.” I turned back to my laptop, pulling up a safe article about hospital protocols. “It's complicated.”

“Isn't it always?” She stood, squeezing my shoulder gently. “Just... don't stay too late. Whatever you're researching can wait until you've had some real rest.”

After she left, I stared at my computer screen without really seeing it. My scientific mind rebelled against the possibilities I was considering, wanting hard data and repeatable results. But these memories, these inexplicable knowings, defied conventional research methods.

My fingers moved across the keyboard again, typing out new searches: “cellular memory in organ transplant recipients,” “genetic transfer of learned behaviors,” “consciousness studies in near-death experiences.” Each query led down new rabbit holes, each paper suggesting possibilities just beyond current scientific

understanding.

A knock interrupted my research spiral. Through my office window, I could see the last of the day shift heading home, realized I'd lost hours to this search for rational answers. When I looked toward my door, my heart recognized the visitor before my mind could process it.

Alex stood in my doorway, not with the promised evidence from our earlier conversation, but with something else – an old leather journal, its pages worn with time. The sight of it sent recognition through my entire being, though I knew I'd never seen it before.

“Sometimes,” he said softly, “the answers we need aren't in medical journals.”

I looked from my laptop screen full of scientific studies to the journal in his hands, then down at my own fingers still poised over the keyboard. These hands that remembered ancient medicines, that knew treatments lost to time, that recognized truths my rational mind couldn't accept.

With a decisive click, I closed the laptop. “Show me,” I said, and Alex's smile held recognition of how much those two words cost a man of science.

He moved into my office with that fluid grace I remembered from other lifetimes, settling into the chair Sofia had vacated. The journal he placed on my desk seemed to hum with potential, with answers I both craved and feared.

“Your handwriting hasn't changed much,” he said, his voice gentle with memory. “Even after all this time.”

I started to protest that he couldn't possibly know my handwriting from centuries ago, but the words died as he opened the journal. The script that flowed across those aged

pages matched the notes I'd been making all evening – the same precise slant, the same tendency to cross t's with slightly too much force.

“This is impossible,” I whispered, but my fingers reached for the journal without conscious thought.

“No more impossible than remembering ancient Greek medicine,” Alex replied.

Outside my office, the hospital settled into its quieter night rhythm. Monitors beeped and the nurses who made their rounds by the hour.

“Do you trust me?” he asked suddenly, his voice soft but intent.

The question should have been absurd. He was practically a stranger;. Every logical part of my mind screamed that I shouldn't trust him, that this whole situation was insane.

But my soul...

“Yes,” I heard myself say. “God help me, but I do.”

Alex stood, holding out his hand. “Then come with me. There's something you need to see.”

I stared at his offered hand, feeling the moment balance on a knife's edge. Behind me, my laptop screen still displayed medical studies and scientific papers. Before me, Alex waited with patience learned across centuries.

The choice felt bigger than just whether to leave my office – it was about which truth I was ready to accept.

“My car's downstairs,” he said quietly. “And I promise, this will make more sense than anything you'll find in those research papers.”

My hand lifted of its own accord, fitting into his like it had done a thousand times before. The contact sent recognition sparking through my entire being.

As we walked through the hospital corridors, Alex's hand warm and steady in mine, I realized I'd just crossed a threshold. Whatever came next would change everything.

And somehow, that didn't feel as frightening as it should.

Alex's car glided through empty streets, Manhattan sleeping around us. The leather seats probably cost more than my first car, but nothing about the luxury felt ostentatious. Like everything else about Alex, it simply was – comfortable, precise, chosen with care rather than flash.

I should feel uncomfortable, I realized distantly. Should question the madness of leaving my office in the middle of the night with a man who claimed to know me across centuries. Instead, I found myself studying his profile against passing streetlights, noting how the changing shadows caught the distinguished grey at his temples.

“In Florence,” I said suddenly, the words rising unbidden, “you used to watch me paint like this. From the shadows.” The memory surfaced like a bubble breaking, clear and perfect and impossible.

Alex's hands tightened slightly on the steering wheel, but his voice stayed gentle. “What else do you remember about Florence?”

I closed my eyes, letting the motion of the car rock me back through time. “Light through studio windows. The smell of oils and pigments. Your voice speaking Italian

– not textbook Italian, but something older. Tuscan dialect, maybe.”

When I opened my eyes, I found Alex watching me in brief glances between traffic signals. The intensity in his gaze should have been unsettling. Instead, it felt familiar. Safe.

Michael had loved Florence too. We'd planned to visit for our tenth anniversary, had looked at villas and art tours and...

“It's okay,” Alex said softly, reading my tension. “All of it – the memories, the grief, the confusion. It's okay to feel everything at once.”

The car turned into the West Village, where historic architecture stood proud against modern development.

“Here,” Alex said, pulling into a private parking spot beneath an old converted warehouse.

He led me through a discrete entrance, up stairs that creaked with age.

“I've kept things,” Alex explained, his voice soft in the midnight quiet. He paused before a heavy wooden door, key sliding home with well-oiled precision. “Pieces of our lives. Proof, if you need it.”

The space beyond caught my breath in my throat. Part gallery, part archive, it held the kind of careful curation Michael had always admired in small museums. Paintings lined the walls – some ancient, some newer, all carrying an energy I recognized in my bones. Track lighting illuminated each piece precisely, creating pools of warmth in the midnight shadows.

My hands reached out without conscious thought, fingers hovering over a signature

on the nearest canvas. My own name, written in Renaissance script I shouldn't know how to read.

“These are all...?” I couldn't finish the question, but Alex understood.

“Yours,” he confirmed gently. “From different times, different lives.” He moved through the space with familiar grace, illuminating pieces one by one. “Florence, 1487. Paris, 1924. Each time you're drawn to art, to healing, to creation.”

I drifted between paintings like a man in a dream. Here, a Greek temple against a sunset sky, oils still carrying the scent of memory. There, a jazz club in smoky colors, music almost audible in the brushstrokes. Every canvas felt like a window into another life – lives I shouldn't remember but somehow did.

“And you?” I asked, turning to find Alex watching me with that ancient tenderness. “What are you drawn to?”

“Finding you. Always finding you.”

The words should have felt overwhelming, dramatic, too much. Instead, they settled into my soul like puzzle pieces clicking home. But...

“Michael,” I whispered, my hand going to my ring. “I loved him. Love him still.”

“Of course you do.” Alex's voice held no jealousy, only understanding. “Love doesn't divide, Eli. It multiplies. What you had with Michael was real and true and precious. Nothing about these memories changes that.”

I stopped before a particular painting – a sunlit studio in Florence, afternoon light falling through tall windows. In the foreground, an easel held a half-finished canvas. But in the background, partially hidden in shadow, a figure watched the artist work

with undisguised devotion.

“You never said anything,” I murmured, the memory surfacing like a photograph developing. “You'd just... be there. Watching.”

“You were so focused when you painted,” Alex said softly, coming to stand beside me. “So completely in your element. I didn't want to interrupt.”

The tenderness in his voice made my heart ache – not just with remembering, but with the realization that he looked at me the same way now. Had watched me work in the ER with that same quiet devotion.

“I don't know how to do this,” I admitted, gesturing at the gallery of impossible memories around us. “How to reconcile what I'm remembering with what I know. With who I am now.”

“You don't have to figure it all out tonight.” His smile held centuries of patience. “The memories will come as they're meant to. The understanding too.”

“How can this be real?” I whispered, but the question held less skepticism than before. “How can all of this be real?”

“Some things are beyond scientific explanation,” Alex replied, moving to stand beside me again. Not touching, but close enough that I could feel his warmth. “Some truths have to be felt rather than proven.”

My wedding ring caught the gallery lights, and I twisted it absently. “Michael and I were happy,” I said softly. “Really, truly happy.”

“Yes,” Alex agreed simply. “You were. Are. That happiness is part of who you are, part of what made you ready to remember everything else.”



My logical mind still rebelled against what my soul had already accepted – the paintings that carried my signature through different eras, the journals filled with my handwriting in languages I shouldn't know, photographs that captured impossible moments across time.

“Why do you remember and I don't?” I asked finally, voicing the question that had been building all night. “Why are your memories clear when mine come in fragments?”

Alex's expression shifted to something careful, almost guarded. The change was subtle, but after hours of studying his face by gallery lights, I caught it instantly.

“That's part of what happened,” he said softly. “Part of the pattern we need to break.”

His hand hovered near mine on the edge of a display case, not quite touching but close enough that I could feel the warmth of him. The space between our fingers felt charged with possibility and hesitation, like the moment before lightning strikes.

Outside, Manhattan was waking up. Traffic sounds drifted up from the streets below, delivery trucks making their morning rounds, the city returning to its normal rhythms. Reality pressing in around our bubble of midnight revelations.

Alex stepped back smoothly, understanding in his eyes.

“You have questions,” he said, his voice gentle. “Many more than we can answer now. But the memories will come. They always do.”

I looked down at my hands, noting with distant surprise that they were steady despite everything we'd discovered tonight. These surgeon's hands that remembered ancient medicines, artist's hands that had created beauty across lifetimes.

“The battle,” I started again, needing to understand that one crucial memory that had started all this.

But Alex was already shaking his head. “Not yet. Some truths need time.”

Morning light strengthened, breaking the spell of our night among memories. I needed to get home, shower, become Dr. Monroe again before my morning rounds. But as I turned to leave, Alex caught my wrist.

The touch sent recognition sparking through my entire being – not just physical attraction, but soul-deep knowing. His fingers were warm against my pulse point, the contact both foreign and achingly familiar.

“Take care of yourself,” he said softly, urgency threading through his voice .

I nodded, but hesitated at the door. “Will you tell me the rest? Eventually?”

His smile held both promise and warning. “When you're ready. When remembering won't break you.”

The city embraced me as I stepped out into early morning light – car horns and coffee carts, delivery trucks and early commuters, all the familiar rhythms of my current life.

The sun caught my wedding ring, and for once the sight didn't bring only pain. Michael's love was still there, still real and precious. But now it felt like part of a larger pattern, a thread in a tapestry I was only beginning to understand.

At the corner, I paused to look back at the old warehouse. Alex still stood at the window, his figure barely visible in the strengthening dawn.

This time would be different. I didn't know how I knew that, but the certainty settled

in my bones like truth.

For now, I had patients to heal, a department to run, a life to live in this particular present. But as I turned toward the hospital, my hands remembered everything they'd ever been – surgeon, artist, healer, lover – and for the first time since Michael's death, the future felt full of possibility rather than just survival.

Even if that possibility came wrapped in impossible memories and ancient warnings.

Even if understanding might break me before it healed me.

### CHAPTER 13

#### Painted Hearts

##### Florence 1487

Florence was painted in shades of gold and terracotta as I made my way through streets already bustling with life. My fine clothes marked me as nobility despite my attempts at discretion – silk and velvet in Medici colors, impossible to truly disguise. But today I barely noticed the usual deference of passing merchants and artisans, my mind focused entirely on my destination.

I'd first seen his work in the church of Santa Croce – a small Madonna that caught the light in ways that made my heart stop. There was something about his technique, about the way he captured human emotion in divine subjects, that spoke to something deep in my soul. The art world had been whispering about this new talent, this Elia Montari whose paintings seemed to glow from within.

The studio occupied the top floor of an old building, its windows catching the best morning light. I'd walked past several times, watching him work from afar – the total focus in his expression, the grace of his movements as he mixed colors and applied paint with careful precision.

The studio door stood open to catch the morning breeze, sending the scent of oils and pigments spilling into the street. The space beyond felt alive with creativity and warmth, half-finished canvases catching light like captured prayers.

Elia looked up as I entered, and for a moment I forgot the carefully prepared speech I'd practiced. His eyes were green-gold in the morning light, bright with intelligence and gentle humor despite his attempt at professional distance.

“My lord Medici,” he said, offering a perfectly correct bow. “This is an unexpected honor.”

“Your Madonna has caught the attention of my family,” I said, finding my voice. “We would commission something... larger.”

“You're too kind.” His modesty wasn't false – there was a genuine humility about him that made my carefully maintained noble poise want to crack. “Though I fear your family's usual artists might be better suited...”

“I know what I want,” I interrupted gently. “Show me what you're working on. Please.”

He hesitated only briefly before gathering several sketches, spreading them across a table beneath the largest window. Our hands brushed as he pointed out details, and I tried not to notice how the contact made my pulse jump.

“The play of light here,” he said, indicating a study for a Nativity scene, “I want it to feel like dawn breaking. Like hope made visible.”

I leaned closer, breathing in the scent of paint and possibility. “It's beautiful,” I said simply, honestly. “You see light differently than other artists.”

A faint blush colored his cheeks at the praise. “Light is everything in painting. It's what gives life to mere pigments and canvas.”

His apprentice arrived with wine – a courtesy for an important patron – and I caught

myself studying his profile against the morning light. He moved with such certainty among his paintings, such quiet joy in his work. It made me want to stay here forever, just watching him create.

“The commission,” I said, forcing myself back to business. “The family chapel needs something significant. Something that captures both divine and mortal truth.”

“That's a heavy burden to place on paint and canvas,” he replied, but his eyes had that spark that suggested he welcomed the challenge.

“You'll manage it,” I said softly. “I have faith in your vision.”

He looked at me with slight surprise, as if unused to such direct praise. “You speak as though you know my work well, my lord.”

“Alessandro,” I corrected gently. “Please. And I've studied every piece of yours I could find. There's something special in how you paint. Something real.”

The morning light caught his profile as he turned back to his sketches, and I had to stop myself from reaching out to trace the line of his jaw, the curve of his neck. He was so beautiful when he worked, lost in the joy of creation.

“This will take time,” he said finally, indicating the scale of work we'd discussed. “Months, at least. The family may not wish to wait...”

“Time,” I replied, letting myself smile slightly, “is something I have in abundance. Take whatever you need to make it perfect.”

He nodded, already reaching for fresh paper to sketch new ideas. His fingers moved with wonderful precision, creating beauty with careful dedication that made my heart ache.

“Return tomorrow?” he asked, then flushed slightly at his own forwardness. “That is, if my lord has time to discuss the composition further...”

“Alessandro,” I corrected again, gentler this time. “And yes. Tomorrow.”

I left him there in his paint-scented sanctuary, morning light turning his workspace into something almost sacred. The street below felt colder somehow, less real than the warm space I'd just left.

But tomorrow... tomorrow I would see him again. Would watch him work, would listen to him talk about light and color and truth. Would fall a little more in love with the way his hands moved across canvas, the way his eyes lit up when discussing his art, the way he made the world more beautiful just by being in it.

For now, that was more than enough.

Weeks flowed like paint into months, each day bringing me back to Elia's studio with new excuses to linger. The other artists whispered about my frequent visits – a Medici patron spending so much time with a relatively unknown painter. But I couldn't stay away. Watching him work was like watching sunrise, each brush stroke revealing new beauty I hadn't known to look for.

The commissioned piece grew slowly, transforming from sketches to underpainted forms to something magnificent. Though ostensibly a religious scene for the family chapel, I saw our story hidden in every detail – in the way light fell across upturned faces, in the tender gestures between figures, in the healing hands of saints that matched Elia's exactly.

“The light changed,” I said one evening, another excuse to stay as the sun painted his studio gold. “You should wait until morning to finish that section.”

Elia smiled without looking up from his palette, hands moving with practiced grace as he mixed colors. “You said that yesterday, my lord. And the day before.”

“Alessandro,” I corrected automatically, loving how the informality made him blush slightly. “And perhaps I simply enjoy watching you work.”

His hands stilled briefly on his brushes, that lovely color rising in his cheeks again. “You must have more important things to do than watch paint dry.”

“Nothing more important than this.”

The words came out more honest than I'd intended, making him look up finally. Evening light caught his profile, turning him into one of his own paintings – all perfect angles and warm colors and grace that made my heart ache.

I'd taken to bringing him small gifts – the finest ultramarine pigments, brushes from Venice, candied fruits that made him smile. Today's offering sat unopened on his workbench, wrapped in silk that matched his eyes. He treated each present like something precious, though they were nothing compared to what I wished I could give him.

“You've painted yourself as the wounded saint,” I observed, studying the massive canvas that dominated the studio's north wall. The figure's face was technically different from Elia's, but I saw him in every line – in the gentle hands, in the upturned gaze, in the way light seemed to radiate from within.

His brush stilled. “And you as the healing angel,” he replied quietly, then looked startled by his own admission.

The studio was empty save for us, Florence's evening bells creating privacy with their bronze song. I moved closer, drawn by a smudge of paint on his cheek that I ached to



wipe away.

“The resemblance is remarkable,” I said carefully, not wanting to spook him. “Almost as if you've seen that scene before somewhere.”

Elia's hands moved restlessly over his palette, mixing colors that perfectly matched the sky outside. “Sometimes,” he admitted, “when I'm painting, it feels like I've done this before. Not painting, exactly, but... creating. Making something from nothing.”

I watched those beloved hands, the precise way they held brushes, the careful attention they gave to every detail. “Perhaps we have,” I said softly. “Perhaps some souls are meant to find each other, meant to create beauty together.”

Elia's brush traced the angel's wings – my wings, though he didn't know why he'd painted them that way.

“You speak strangely sometimes,” he said, but his voice held warmth rather than accusation. “Like you're from some other time entirely.”

“Do I?” I moved to stand beside him, close enough to smell paint and oils and the essence of him. “Or perhaps you just understand me in ways others don't.”

He turned slightly, and suddenly we were too close, the space between us charged with everything unsaid. The paint smudge on his cheek begged for my touch. His eyes held questions he wasn't ready to ask .

“I should go,” I said reluctantly, though everything in me wanted to stay. “It's getting late.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked, like he did every evening, though we both knew I'd come regardless.

“Tomorrow,” I promised. Always tomorrow, always another chance to be near him, to watch him create beauty with those perfect hands.

The streets of Florence embraced me as I left. Above, his studio windows still glowed with lamplight while outside all the lamplights were dimmer.

Tomorrow I would bring him more pigments, more excuses to stay, more chances to fall in love with the way he saw the world. And maybe, eventually, he would understand why his hands shook when our fingers brushed, why his heart recognized mine across a crowded room, why every angel in his paintings wore my face.

For now, it was enough to watch him work, to be near him, to see him falling in love with art the way he had once loved healing. Everything else would come in its own time.

Florence's night air carried the scent of jasmine and possibility. Somewhere in the city, bells tolled the hour, their bronze song marking another day of finding him, watching him, loving him from whatever distance he allowed.

Tomorrow. There would always be tomorrow.

Florence turned to liquid gold in the hour before sunset, painting everything in light that made miracles seem possible. I found Elia where I always did – in his studio, hands stained with pigments, completely lost in his work. But today was different. Today the massive canvas was finally complete, and the story it told took my breath away.

Every angel wore my face. Every saint held his hands. Our love story written in sacred imagery, hidden in plain sight for anyone with eyes to see .

“It's finished,” he said softly, not turning as I approached. “Though I don't know if I'll

ever understand why I painted it this way.”

I moved closer, drawn by the paint smudge on his cheek that I'd ached to touch for months. “It's perfect,” I whispered. “It's us.”

He turned then, those beloved eyes wide with something between recognition and revelation. “Alessandro,” he breathed, and my name on his lips was both prayer and permission.

I cupped his face between my hands, thumbs brushing those impossible cheekbones as his paint-stained fingers clutched at my fine silk doublet. When our lips met, the whole world condensed to this single point of contact – this kiss that felt like coming home, like finding something I'd lost lifetimes ago.

“I know you,” he whispered against my mouth. “I've always known you.”

The confession broke something open between us. Suddenly we were clinging to each other, kisses turning desperate with the weight of too much time apart. His hands left paint stains on my clothes that I would treasure like badges of honor. My fingers tangled in his hair, memorizing its texture all over again.

“Stay with me,” I breathed between kisses. “Stay with me this time.”

He pulled back slightly, confusion flickering across his face at my strange phrasing. But before he could question it, a shadow fell across the studio floor.

My heart recognized the threat before my mind could process it. Valentino stood in the doorway, his cardinal's advisor robes blood-red in the evening light. His eyes held something dark and ancient as they took in our embrace, the painted evidence of our love surrounding us.

“No,” I whispered, already trying to push Eli behind me. “Not again. Not this time.”

But Valentino's face held no triumph, only a haunted understanding as he gestured to the guards waiting in the hallway. “I'm sorry,” he said softly .

Everything happened too fast after that. Guards flooding the studio. Accusations of heresy. Elia's paintings – our beautiful story – torn from walls and burned in the street below. I tried to fight, tried to use my family's influence, but Valentino had built his case too carefully.

“The paintings are blasphemous,” he declared to the hastily convened church council. “Look how he corrupts sacred imagery with mortal love. How he twists divine truth to serve earthly desire.”

But his eyes held no zealot's fire – only a desperate certainty that he was somehow protecting us from something worse. Like he remembered fragments of older patterns but couldn't quite grasp their meaning.

They took Elia away in chains while I watched helplessly, my wealth and power suddenly meaningless against the Church's authority. The last glimpse I had of him was his face turning back to mine, those beloved hands reaching out before guards yanked him roughly forward.

I spent days plotting rescue attempts, calling in every favor my family name could command. But Valentino's influence ran deeper than I'd known, his accusations spreading through Florence like poison.

When they finally let me see Eli in his cell, he was already changed. They'd kept him in darkness, but his hands had found ways to create even here – our story scratched into the walls with stolen charcoal, my eyes drawn over and over in desperate repetition.

“I dream of you,” he whispered as I pressed against the bars separating us. “Not just here, not just now. I dream of other times, other places. Why do I dream of you?”

“Because we've loved before,” I said, no longer caring who might hear. “Because we'll love again. Because some souls are meant to find each other, no matter what tries to keep them apart.”

His paint-stained fingers threaded through mine through the iron bars. “I wish I understood why this feels like goodbye. Like we've said goodbye before.”

“No goodbyes,” I promised fiercely, though my heart was breaking. “I'll find you. I'll always find you.”

But we both knew what was coming. The Church's judgment had been decided before the trial even began. Valentino watched from the shadows as they pronounced sentence, his face a mask of grief he didn't seem to understand.

The end, when it came, was both swift and eternal. They took him at dawn, while Florence's bells sang bronze hymns to the rising sun. I wasn't allowed to be there, but I felt the moment he was gone – felt it like my own heart being torn from my chest.

Valentino found me in my palazzo afterwards, his presence both unwelcome and somehow necessary. “You don't understand,” he said softly. “I had to. The pattern must be maintained, or something worse...”

But he couldn't finish the thought, couldn't explain what drove him to destroy what he didn't fully comprehend. His hands shook as he reached for explanation he couldn't quite grasp.

I looked at him – really looked at him – and saw the weight of centuries pressing behind his eyes. “You remember, don't you? Fragments. Pieces. Enough to know

you've done this before, but not enough to know why.”

He flinched as if struck. “The dreams... the memories that can't be memories... I thought I was protecting...”

“You were wrong,” I said simply. “You've always been wrong. And you'll always be wrong, until you remember enough to break the pattern instead of maintaining it.”

I left him there, surrounded by wealth that meant nothing without Elia's paint-stained hands to give it warmth. Florence's golden light turned to shadow as I walked empty streets, each step taking me further from the love we'd barely had time to reclaim.

But I would find him again. I would always find him again.

Even if it took a thousand lifetimes to break this pattern. Even if I had to search through centuries to bring him home.

In his cell, they found the walls covered with our story – angels wearing my face, saints with his hands, love stronger than time itself carved into stone with desperate devotion. Valentino ordered the cell sealed, but couldn't bring himself to have the drawings destroyed.

Some loves, after all, refuse to be erased.

Even if their ending is written in shadow and separation.

Even if the pattern holds for now.

Even if goodbye feels like forever.

Until next time, beloved.

Until next life.

Until I find you again.

### CHAPTER 14

#### Lost and Found

“ Multiple teams incoming,” Sofia called as I reached the trauma bay. “First ambulance, two minutes out.”

The boy arrived in a chaos of sirens and shouting, paramedics rattling off stats that painted an increasingly desperate picture. Dark curls peeked out from the emergency blanket, Spider-Man pajamas visible where it had slipped. His small hand found mine as we transferred him to the trauma table, fingers ice-cold against my palm.

“Hey buddy,” I said, keeping my voice steady as we worked. “I’m Dr. Monroe. We’re going to take good care of you, okay?”

His eyes flickered open briefly – beautiful brown eyes full of complete trust. “Tommy,” he whispered. “My name’s Tommy.”

“Nice to meet you, Tommy. Can you squeeze my hand for me?”

The weak pressure of his fingers sent warning signals through my professional awareness. Too weak, too slow, but still fighting. Still here.

We moved with desperate efficiency, my team anticipating orders before I had to voice them. Sofia handled the parents – I caught glimpses of their terror-white faces through the trauma room windows, heard fragments of her gentle explanations as we worked.



“Type and cross four units,” I ordered, noting Tommy's falling pressure. “Get me the ultrasound. Where's my surgical consult?”

Each intervention bought seconds, then minutes, but I could read the trajectory in dropping numbers and failing responses. My hands never shook as we placed lines, administered medications, fought against injuries that would challenge an adult body, let alone one so small.

“Staying with us, Tommy?” I asked between procedures. “Keep fighting, buddy. You're doing great.”

His eyes opened again, finding mine with that same absolute trust. “It hurts,” he whispered.

“I know.” I squeezed his hand gently. “But you're being so brave. Just hold on a little longer.”

The monitor's wail cut through everything else.

“No pulse,” someone called. “Starting compressions.”

My hands moved to Tommy's chest automatically, finding the precise spot for pediatric CPR. His ribs felt like bird bones beneath my palms as I started compressions. One-two-three-four...

“Push one of epi,” I ordered. “Charge to 120.”

The defibrillator whined as it charged. Tommy's Spider-Man pajamas had been cut away, leaving him looking impossibly small on the trauma table. One-two-three-four...

“Clear!”

His tiny body jerked with the current. The monitor showed no change.

“Again. Charging to 150.”

One-two-three-four... My arms began to ache, but I wouldn't let anyone take over compressions. Not yet. Not while there was still a chance.

“Dr. Monroe.” Sofia's voice carried gentle warning. “Eli. ”

“Push another round of epi,” I said instead of acknowledging her tone. “Where's my surgical consult?”

“Eli.” Her hand found my shoulder, squeezed gently. “He's gone.”

I kept counting compressions, kept watching the monitor for any sign of response. One-two-three-four...

“Time of death, 3:22 AM.”

My voice came out steady, professional. My hands didn't shake as I stripped off my gloves, as I documented the time, as I prepared to face Tommy's parents. They didn't shake, but for the first time in my career, I wished they would.

Sofia followed me into the quiet room where Tommy's parents waited. Their eyes found mine immediately, hoping for miracle I couldn't give.

“I'm so sorry,” I said softly. “We did everything we could, but Tommy's injuries were too severe.”

The mother's cry would haunt my dreams – a sound of pure anguish that cut through every professional defense I'd built. The father caught her as she crumpled, his own tears silent but no less devastating.

Sofia found me later in my office, staring at nothing. “You did everything right,” she said quietly. “His injuries were incompatible with?—”

“I know.” My hands curled into fists on my desk. “I know the statistics, the probability curves, the medical reality. I know.”

“Eli.” Just my name, but it carried decades of friendship and concern. “You can't save everyone. You know that.”

“He was eight years old.” My voice cracked slightly. “He was wearing superhero pajamas.”

“I know.” She reached across the desk, covered my clenched fist with her hand. “I know.”

Soon the day shift would arrive, bright and fresh and unaware. New traumas would come in. Life would continue its endless cycle .

But somewhere in this city, parents were living their worst nightmare. A child's bedroom stood empty, Spider-Man sheets still rumpled from his last sleep. And my hands... my steady surgeon's hands that never shook... they felt heavier than they ever had before.

“Dr. Monroe?” The nurse's voice was gentle. “Tommy's parents are here. They'd like to speak with you.”

My heart stumbled, but my face remained professionally composed. The small

consultation room felt too tight, too warm as they entered – their grief a tangible thing that pressed against the walls, that made the air thick and heavy.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Tommy's father said. His voice cracked on the words. “We just... we need to understand.”

I walked them through it again – every intervention, every attempt, every moment we'd fought to save their son. My voice stayed steady, clinical enough to provide distance but gentle enough to show care. This was what I did. What I'd always done. Professional walls protecting everyone from the raw edges of loss.

But then Tommy's mother reached for my hands.

“These hands,” she whispered, her fingers trembling against mine. “These were the last hands to touch my baby's heart.”

Something inside me fractured. Her grip felt desperate, like she was trying to find some last connection to her son through my touch. My carefully maintained composure wavered as she held on, as her tears fell onto our joined fingers.

“He was so brave,” I heard myself say, my voice rougher than usual. “He fought so hard.”

Sofia materialized beside me, her presence steady and grounding. But I saw the concern in her eyes, felt how she shifted slightly closer as if to catch me if I fell.

“Did he say anything?” Tommy's father asked. “At the end?”

The truth would only hurt them more. “He wasn't in pain,” I said instead. “He wasn't afraid.”

They clung to each other as they left, supporting each other through unimaginable loss. I watched them go, my hands still feeling the ghost of a grieving mother's touch .

The rest of my shift passed in a blur of motion and routine. My hands moved through familiar patterns – suturing lacerations, signing charts, performing procedures that would normally ground me in the present. But my mind kept returning to small hands: Tommy's going slack in my grip, his fingers so cold at the end.

“Dr. Monroe?” Dr. Yang's voice pulled me back to the present. She held out a chart tentatively. “The labs you requested...”

I signed without really seeing the numbers, my signature perfectly legible despite the tremor I couldn't quite suppress. The staff watched me with careful concern, whispering when they thought I couldn't hear.

Even Vale, passing in the corridor, studied me with an expression I'd never seen on him before. Something almost like understanding crossed his features before his usual mask slipped back into place.

Dawn painted my office windows in colors that felt wrong after such loss. I stared at my hands – steady enough to save lives, useless when it mattered most. The knock at my door startled me.

Vale entered without his usual assertive presence. For once, there was no political maneuvering in his stance, no hidden agenda in his approach. Just a cup of coffee placed carefully on my desk, and something in his eyes that looked almost like kindness.

“Sometimes,” he said quietly, “the weight becomes too much to carry alone.”

I stared at the coffee, then at him, trying to reconcile this version of Vale with the man who'd been undermining my department for months. "Why are you here?"

"Because I remember." He settled into the chair across from me, his usual sharp edges somehow softer. "I remember what it feels like to lose a child under your care. To have all your skill, all your knowledge mean nothing in the end."

Something in his voice made me look up. His eyes held shadows I'd never noticed before, grief that felt older than our hospital rivalry.

"It doesn't get easier," he continued softly. "It shouldn't get easier. But you learn to carry it. To let it remind you why we do this impossible thing."

"Why are you being kind to me?" The question came out more raw than I intended.

His smile held no calculation for once, just tired understanding. "Because some burdens transcend politics. Some pains deserve recognition, even between... opponents."

We sat in strange, almost comfortable silence as dawn strengthened outside. The coffee grew cold between us, but its presence felt like an offering, like a momentary truce in whatever game we usually played.

"How do you do it?" I asked finally. "How do you keep going when your best isn't enough?"

"You honor the ones you couldn't save by fighting harder for the next one." He stood, straightening his perfect suit. "And you remember that even the steadiest hands sometimes need to shake."

My hands still felt heavy with the weight of Tommy's trust, with the grief of his

mother's touch. But somehow Vale's words had helped, had given permission for the tremor I'd been fighting all night.

Sometimes the steadiest hands need to shake.

Sometimes the strongest walls need to crack.

Sometimes even healers need to break a little, to remember why they heal at all.

I picked up the coffee Vale had brought – a peace offering, a recognition, a moment of humanity between adversaries. Its warmth had faded, but something of its intention remained.

Vale hadn't moved from his chair, his presence unusually still in my normally private space. The coffee between us had gone completely cold, but neither of us seemed inclined to acknowledge it. Something had shifted in the quiet dawn light, some wall lowered that I hadn't even known existed.

“I'm placing you on leave,” Vale said finally, his voice lacking its usual sharp edge. “Two weeks, paid. Time to...” He paused, choosing his words with unusual care. “Process recent events.”

I stiffened. “You don't have the authority to do that.”

“We're both department heads,” he acknowledged. “Neurology doesn't outrank Emergency—not in any real way.” He met my glare without flinching. “Which is why I went to the board first.”

Anger flared, burning through the exhaustion weighing me down. “You went over my head?”

“You left me no choice,” he countered smoothly. “You haven’t taken a single day off since—” He stopped, but we both knew what he meant.

“My department is running fine,” I shot back. “I don’t need a forced vacation.”

“You argued the same thing with them,” he said. “And yet, here we are.”

My protest had been automatic, more reflex than real conviction, and Vale had met each of my points with the same quiet certainty. Still, I found myself really looking at him for perhaps the first time. Shadows lurked under his eyes, something that looked remarkably like regret aging his usually perfect features.

“Is this official censure?” I asked, but we both knew it wasn’t.

His smile held no triumph, only a tired understanding that felt strangely familiar. “No. This is... one doctor recognizing when another needs space to breathe.”

The words themselves were simple enough, but something in his tone made my exhausted mind stutter. Vale had never shown this side before.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The usual push and pull between us had quieted into something else, something unfamiliar. I should have kept fighting, should have insisted that I was fine. But the truth was, I wasn’t even sure what “fine” was supposed to feel like anymore.

Vale exhaled, a slow, measured breath. “Take the leave, Dr. Monroe.” His voice carried something I’d never heard from him before—not quite kindness, but perhaps its older cousin. “Some patterns need to be broken.”

A knock interrupted whatever response I might have formed. Sofia stood in my doorway, concern written clearly across her features.



Vale rose smoothly, his usual polished demeanor settling back into place like armor. But something of that shared understanding lingered in his eyes as he nodded to both of us.

“Two weeks,” he reminded me. “Not a day less.”

I watched him leave, trying to reconcile this version of him with the man who'd been my professional nemesis for so long.

Sofia lingered nearby, watching me with that sharp, assessing gaze of hers. After a beat, she crossed her arms. “What was that about?”

I let out a slow breath, rubbing a hand over my face. “Vale had me put on leave. Two weeks, paid.” The words felt strange coming out of my mouth, like they belonged to someone else.

Her brows lifted. “He can do that?”

“He got it approved before he even came to me,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Apparently, arguing was just a formality.”

Sofia sighed, then reached for my bag, helping me gather my things with the same steady presence that had kept me from completely unraveling more times than I could count. “He’s right, you know,” she said softly. “About needing space sometimes.”

“I don't know how to do this,” I admitted quietly. “How to just... stop. Take time.”

“Maybe that's exactly why you need to.” Sofia squeezed my shoulder gently. “Two weeks to process not just today, but everything else that's been happening. All the changes, all the memories, all the things you've been trying so hard to rationalize away.”

The sun had fully risen now, painting the hospital in colors that felt both foreign and achingly familiar. Two weeks stretched ahead – time I hadn't allowed myself since Michael's death. Time to face not just today's loss but all the questions I'd been avoiding.

“Will you be alright?” I asked Sofia, doctor's instinct making me worry about leaving my department.

Her smile held fond exasperation. “We managed without you before you were chief. We'll manage for two weeks.” She started gathering files I'd been reaching for. “No work. Vale's orders, and for once, I agree with him.”

“That's a first.”

“Maybe he's human after all.” She paused, considering. “The way he looked at you just now... I've never seen that expression on his face before. Like he understood exactly what you're going through.”

“Maybe he does.”

We finished packing in comfortable silence. The hospital hummed around us, life's endless cycle continuing despite personal griefs. Somewhere in this building, other healers' hands were saving lives, losing battles, carrying on the eternal dance between skill and fate.

“Go home,” Sofia said gently. “Rest. Let yourself feel whatever you need to feel.”

I nodded, gathering my coat with hands that couldn't quite stop trembling.

“Some patterns need to be broken,” I murmured, echoing Vale's words.

Sofia looked at me sharply, but didn't comment. Instead, she just hugged me – quick but fierce, professional distance set aside for friendship's sake.

“Call if you need anything,” she said. “Day or night.”

I walked out of my office feeling strangely light, as if setting down burdens I hadn't known I carried. The hospital corridors held different shadows in the morning light, showing me new angles to a place I thought I knew completely.

Two weeks to process, to remember, to understand why today's loss had cracked something open that felt older than my current grief. Two weeks to face whatever memories kept surfacing, whatever truths kept trying to break through my careful walls.

Maybe Vale was right. Maybe some patterns did need to be broken.

Maybe healing hands sometimes needed to shake, to remember why they healed at all.

For now, I let Sofia guide me out, let her steady presence anchor me to this moment rather than all the ones pressing at the edges of my mind. My phone felt heavy in my pocket, Alex's offered comfort waiting like a lifeline I wasn't quite ready to grab.

One step at a time. One breath at a time. One moment at a time.

Until my hands remembered how to be steady again.

Until I understood why Vale's eyes had held such ancient understanding when he looked at me over cooling coffee and lowered walls.

Two weeks.

Time to remember.

Time to understand.

Time to heal.

### CHAPTER 15

#### Brother's Keeper

A lex's text had seemed simple enough. Dinner at his place, a chance to talk after my forced leave from the hospital. Just what I needed after the week I'd had – quiet conversation, maybe some answers about the strange memories that kept surfacing.

Instead, I stood frozen in a mansion's grand foyer, surrounded by New York's elite in evening wear that probably cost more than my yearly salary. My casual blazer and jeans might as well have been hospital scrubs for how out of place they looked among the designer suits and cocktail dresses.

“Breathe,” Rachel whispered, squeezing my arm. Thank god I'd called her in panic from the car. She'd arrived in record time, somehow perfectly dressed in a deep blue gown that looked like she'd planned for this all along.

“It's just people.”

People who looked effortlessly elegant, while I felt like a lost medical resident who'd stumbled into the wrong event. I glanced at her, about to protest, and finally took in the full picture—her perfect posture despite the undeniable swell of her stomach.

I exhaled. “You’re six months pregnant. How are you still making this look easy? ”

She smirked, shifting just enough to nudge me forward with the weight of her very-much-there baby bump. “Because I’m not the one panicking in a rich man’s

doorway.”

But it wasn't just people. It was the Rothschilds' annual family gathering – old money, corporate power, and social influence all wrapped in perfect tailoring and practiced smiles. I felt like an intruder in a world I didn't belong in.

“I'm going to kill him,” I muttered, earning a small laugh from my sister.

“No, you're not. You're going to smile and let me handle the small talk.” She smoothed my collar with practiced efficiency. “Besides, you look fine. Distinguished, even.”

“Distinguished” wasn't the word for how I felt watching silver-haired society matrons whisper behind their hands, their gazes sharp with curiosity.

Alex found us before I could convince Rachel to help me escape. He looked devastatingly handsome in a tuxedo that probably cost more than my car, but his eyes held apologetic understanding as he approached.

“I'm so sorry,” he murmured, close enough that only Rachel and I could hear. “I didn't know Father had moved the party date. I would have warned you.”

He looked genuinely distressed at my discomfort, and something about his concern helped steady my nerves.

“It's fine,” I lied, but managed a small smile. “Though some warning would have been nice.”

Rachel, bless her teacher's instincts for social navigation, smoothly deflected attention from my inappropriate attire by engaging nearby socialites in conversation about her school's charity program. She had them eating out of her hand within

minutes, their initial disdain melting into genuine interest as she described the impact of arts education on underprivileged students.

But I still felt eyes on me – calculating, curious, judging. This wasn't my world. Give me a trauma bay any day over these shark-filled social waters.

“So this is the famous Dr. Monroe.” The voice carried warmth that didn't quite reach shrewd eyes. Will Rothschild embodied everything his brother wasn't – perfectly polished, smoothly corporate, with a smile that promised friendship while assessing weakness. His handshake lingered a fraction too long, his gaze too intense as he studied me.

“Alex has been quite mysterious about you,” he continued, his tone suggesting layers of meaning I couldn't quite grasp. “Though I suppose that's understandable, given the circumstances.”

Something ancient and warning stirred in my gut at his words, but this time, Alex moved swiftly. “Will,” he said quietly, a hint of warning in his tone, “I'll accompany you both on the tour.”

Will's smile didn't falter. “Of course,” he said smoothly, “after all, we're practically family now, aren't we?”

The grand house opened before us – room after room of old money elegance and carefully curated history. Will gestured expansively, “The Rothschild legacy, built over generations. Family tradition means everything here.”

The implied contrast with my own more modest background wasn't subtle. “It's very impressive,” I said neutrally, wishing I'd kept my water glass. My hands felt empty, useless without something to hold.

“Alex has always been... unconventional in his choices.” Will's smile remained perfect, but something flickered in his eyes. “Though I must admit, you're not what I expected.”

“And what did you expect?” I asked.

“Someone more... calculated, perhaps. Someone seeking to benefit from the Rothschild name.” He studied me with unsettling intensity. “Instead, you seem almost reluctant to be here. ”

Alex's hand brushed mine briefly, a subtle signal of support. “Eli doesn't need to prove anything,” he said evenly.

“I'm not interested in his position or his name,” I interrupted, surgeon's directness cutting through social niceties. “I barely understand what's happening between us as it is.”

Will's laugh held genuine amusement. “Refreshingly honest. I can see why he's drawn to you.”

They'd reached the gallery – walls lined with generations of Rothschild portraits. Will paused before a massive painting, those aristocratic eyes seeming to follow our movement. “You know, it's fascinating,” he continued, his tone changing subtly. “The remarkable resemblance between you and a doctor who once treated our great-grandfather.”

“I'm sure it's just coincidence,” I said, trying to keep my voice level.

Alex stepped closer, his presence a protective barrier. “Will,” he said softly, “perhaps we could continue this conversation another time.”



But Will wasn't finished. "Do you dream, Doctor?" he asked softly. "About other times, other places? About lives you couldn't possibly have lived?"

"That's enough," Alex's voice cut through the room, sharp and final. The ancient danger I'd glimpsed earlier returned, transforming his usually warm demeanor.

Will's perfect smile returned instantly. "Just sharing some family history," he said lightly, smoothing his jacket. "No harm done."

"My mistake," Will murmured, moving toward the door with fluid grace. He paused briefly beside his brother, something unspoken passing between them. "See you on the dance floor," he said, then was gone.

"Are you alright?" His hand hovered near my arm, not quite touching.

"What was that about?" I demanded, my voice shakier than I liked .

"Like he recognized you?" Alex's expression held careful neutrality. "Will has his own demons to wrestle with. His own memories to reconcile."

"That's not an answer."

"No," he agreed softly. "But it's all I can give you right now. Not here, not with?"

Footsteps interrupted whatever he might have said. Rachel appeared, slightly breathless, her eyes taking in the scene with quick assessment.

"There you are," she said, relief clear in her voice. "David just arrived. He's asking for you, Eli."

A lie, but a welcome one. An excuse to escape the weighted air of the gallery, the

watching portraits, the questions I wasn't ready to ask.

“We should go,” I said, already moving toward the door. But Alex caught my hand, the contact sending warmth through my entire body.

“Tomorrow,” he said quietly. “Dinner, just us. I'll explain everything I can.”

I looked at our joined hands, at the way they fit together like they'd done it a thousand times before. “Everything?”

“Everything you're ready to hear.”

Rachel's presence kept me grounded as we made our way back downstairs, her steady support helping me navigate the rest of the evening. But I couldn't shake the memory of Will's desperate questions, of those painted eyes that looked too familiar, of the way Alex had appeared exactly when needed – like he'd done it before, like he always would.

“You're still in those clothes,” Rachel observed as I slumped at her kitchen counter. “Take it off before you get pasta sauce on it.”

The normalcy of her kitchen after the opulence of the Rothschild mansion felt like coming up for air. David moved around the stove with firefighter efficiency, the smell of garlic and tomatoes filling the space with comfort.

“I have sweats in the guest room,” my sister continued, already pushing me toward the stairs. “Go change. We're having emergency comfort food and you're going to tell us what happened after I lost sight of you.”

“Nothing happened,” I protested, but let her propel me upward.

The guest room – more accurately, my room whenever I needed it – held familiar touches. A spare set of clothes, medical journals I'd left last visit, photos from happier times.

When I came back down in worn sweats and one of Michael's old t-shirts that had migrated here somehow, David was plating his famous pasta while Rachel poured wine with determined purpose.

“Alright,” she said once we were settled. “Start with Will Rothschild cornering you in that gallery.”

I pushed pasta around my plate, suddenly fascinated by the pattern of sauce and noodles. “He was just being protective of his brother.”

“Bull.” Rachel's teacher voice came out full force. “I saw his face when he was leading you away. That wasn't protective, that was... something else.”

David set a garlic bread basket between us with careful neutrality. He'd always been good at knowing when to let Rachel handle things and when to intervene.

“He asked strange questions,” I admitted finally. “About dreams and memories. About Alex and me. Like he knew something I didn't.”

“And Alex?” Rachel's voice softened. “He seemed... intense when he found you.”

The wine was good – probably from the collection Michael had started, that Rachel had inherited by unspoken agreement. “Alex was... he was different than I've ever seen him. Dangerous, almost.”

“Because his brother was threatening you,” David pointed out, breaking his careful silence. His firefighter's instincts for human nature often cut straight to truth.

“Will wasn't threatening me exactly...” But even as I said it, I remembered the desperation in those eyes, the way he'd backed me against the wall. “It was more like... like he was trying to warn me. Or himself. I don't know.”

Rachel's hand found mine across the counter. “You like Alex.”

It wasn't a question, but I answered anyway. “I barely know him.”

“That's not what I asked.”

I sighed, letting my head drop onto my folded arms. “I don't know what I feel. It's all confused with... with everything else.”

“With Michael?” Her voice held no judgment, just understanding.

“With Michael. With work. With these strange dreams I keep having.” I lifted my head to find both of them watching me with careful concern. “Everything feels... shifted somehow. Like I'm seeing the world through someone else's eyes.”

David set a fresh glass of wine by my hand. “Maybe that's not a bad thing. Seeing differently.”

“You didn't see Will's face,” I countered. “The way he looked at me, like... like I was taking something that belonged to him.”

“Alex doesn't belong to anyone,” Rachel said firmly. “And neither do you.”

The pasta was perfect, because David never cooked anything less. The wine was excellent, because Michael had chosen it. The company was exactly what I needed, because my sister had always known how to hold me together when I started falling apart.

“I’m supposed to have dinner with Alex tomorrow,” I said finally. “Just us this time. He promised to explain everything.”

“Are you going to go?” Rachel’s question held no pressure, just support for whatever I decided.

I thought about the way Alex had looked at me in the gallery, the mix of protection and something deeper in his eyes. About the way his hand had felt under mine in the car. About the strange sense of recognition that kept pulling me toward him despite everything.

“Yes,” I decided. “I need... I need to understand what’s happening. Why everything feels so strange lately.”

Rachel squeezed my hand again. “Then we’ll be here after. Whatever happens.”

“Whatever you need,” David agreed, already starting dishes because he was that kind of husband. “Even if it’s just more pasta and wine.”

I looked at them – my sister who’d always been my anchor, her husband who’d become the brother I needed – and felt steadier than I had all night.

“Tell me about your students,” I said suddenly. “Something normal. Please.”

Rachel launched into a story about the fourth grade science fair, her hands painting pictures in the air as she described creative disasters and unexpected triumphs. David added commentary from his recent school visit with the fire truck, and slowly the weight of the evening began to lift.

This was real. This was solid. This was family and comfort and everything I knew to be true.

### CHAPTER 16

#### Watching

Florence, 1587

Rain slicked the cathedral walls as I made my way through darkened streets. William's footsteps echoed behind me, my brother's presence as constant as shadow in this life. Something about the way he watched over me felt both comforting and strange - like he knew things I didn't, saw dangers I couldn't recognize.

"You don't have to follow me," I called without turning. "I know you're there."

"Someone has to watch your back." He emerged from shadows that seemed to know him too well. "The Medici have eyes everywhere, Alessandro. And your artist friend has drawn their attention."

I paused beneath a stone archway, studying my brother in flickering torchlight. William had changed lately - his movements carrying weight beyond his years, his eyes holding knowledge that made my soul stir with almost-recognition.

"Elia's paintings carry no threat to them."

"His paintings show truth they'd rather keep hidden." William moved closer, something ancient flickering behind his careful words. "The way he captures light, the healing in his brush strokes - it speaks to something older than their power. Something they fear."

The words sent shivers down my spine, though I couldn't say why. Before I could question him, movement caught my eye. Torchlight revealed armed men surrounding Elia's studio, their weapons poorly concealed beneath fine cloaks.

“Medici guards,” I started, but William cut me off.

“Not guards. Assassins.” His voice carried command I'd never heard before. “Go. Get him out through the back. I'll handle this.”

“William-“

“Go!” For a moment, power seemed to crackle around him - impossible power that made reality feel thin. “Keep him safe. I'll find you later.”

I wanted to argue, to protect my younger brother, but something in his eyes stopped me. This wasn't the William I'd grown up with. This was someone older, more dangerous. Someone who knew exactly what he was doing.

By the time I got Elia safely away through the hidden exit, five bodies cooled on rain-washed cobblestones. I never saw William fight them, but something about the precise blade work felt practiced, ancient. Like he'd been protecting us forever.

He found us later at our emergency chapel. His movements were steady as he produced Elia's most important works, saved somehow despite the chaos. No blood stained his fine clothes, no evidence remained of what he'd done to protect us.

“Your studio...” Elia began, his hands shaking as he cleaned paint from his fingers.

“Is being cleaned as we speak.” William's smile held secrets I couldn't read. “No evidence will lead back to any of us.” He set down a leather satchel carefully. “Your most important works are here. The rest...” A shrug that carried too much

understanding. “Art is temporary. Life matters more.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly, squeezing his shoulder. “Brother.”

Something flickered in his eyes - pain or knowledge or both. Like the word meant more than I could understand, carried weight beyond this one life. But his smile remained gentle as he watched us, protective as always though I couldn't grasp why it felt so ancient.

“You should rest,” William said, his voice carrying that strange double quality I'd noticed more often lately - both my younger brother and something far older. “The Medici won't try again tonight.”

“How can you be so sure?” Elia asked, his hands finally steady as he examined his saved works.

William's laugh held edges of something I almost recognized. “Because they learn quickly when their lessons are written in blood.” His eyes met mine across the chapel's candlelight. “Some warnings only need to be given once.”

I wanted to question him - about the bodies in the street, about how he'd known exactly when to be there, about why watching him move in battle had felt like remembering something I'd seen a thousand times before. But the words stuck in my throat as another wave of almost-recognition hit me.

The way he stood between us and the door, guardian position as natural as breathing. How his hands moved over Elia's paintings with reverence that felt older than art. The precise way he'd arranged our escape route, like he'd spent lifetimes learning how to protect us.

“There's something you're not telling me,” I said finally, the words falling into



candlelit silence. “Something about why you're really here.”

Pain flashed across his face again - ancient and raw and gone so quickly I might have imagined it. “I'm here because you're my brother,” he said softly. “Because family protects its own.”

But the word 'family' carried weight I couldn't quite grasp. Like he meant something larger than blood ties, something that encompassed Elia too though we'd only known him months in this life.

My head ached suddenly with pressure that felt like trying to remember dreams. Images flickered at the edges of my vision - William in different clothes, different times, always watching. Always protecting. Always carrying that same ancient pain behind his careful smile.

“Alessandro?” Elia's voice pulled me back. His hand found mine with familiar ease, though we hadn't known each other long enough for such intimacy to feel natural. “You look pale.”

William's expression shifted as he watched us, something desperate and loving and terrible crossing his features before his careful mask slipped back into place. For just a moment, I thought I saw tears in his eyes, though when he blinked they were gone.

“Dawn soon,” he said, voice steady despite what I'd glimpsed. “I've arranged rooms at the monastery. Brother Thomas owes me a favor.” His smile turned wry. “Several favors, actually.”

“You always know exactly what to do,” I mused, studying him in the fading candlelight. “Always turn up exactly when needed. Almost like...”

“Like what?” He kept his tone light, but something hungry flickered in his

expression.

“Like you've done this before,” I finished quietly. “Many times.”

William went very still, and for a heartbeat I thought he might actually tell me something - explain why everything about him felt like echoes of older truths. But then his smile returned, carefully measured once more.

“Get some rest,” he repeated gently. “Both of you. I'll keep watch.”

As Elia and I followed Brother Thomas through torch-lit corridors, I glanced back one last time. William stood in the chapel doorway, candlelight painting him in shades of gold and shadow. Something about his posture made my chest ache - the lonely vigilance, the weight of watching, the love that felt too big for just this one life.

“Your brother,” Elia said softly as we walked, “he's... different. Like he knows things he shouldn't. Sees things we can't.”

“Yes,” I agreed, though the word felt inadequate. “He's always been that way. At least...” I paused, frowning. “I think he has. Sometimes it's hard to remember, like trying to hold onto water. ”

Elia's hand found mine again in the darkness. “Does he ever remind you of someone? Someone you can't quite remember?”

But before I could answer, the pressure in my head returned - images of other times, other places, William's face watching through centuries with that same desperate love. I shook it off, clinging to what felt real. This life. This moment.

Leave the mysteries for tomorrow.

But in the chapel below, my brother kept his vigil. The brother who moved like he'd fought a thousand battles, who loved with fierce desperation I couldn't understand, who watched over us with eyes that had seen too many endings.

London, 1650

The plague doctor's mask felt suffocating in the summer heat as I made my way through London's cramped streets. Normally, a lord shouldn't be tending to the sick himself, but something about the physician working in the poor district had drawn me here - like a hook behind my ribs pulling me inevitably closer.

"You shouldn't be here, Lord Blackwood." William Rivers' voice carried no surprise as he materialized from the shadows. The merchant's influence had grown considerably in recent months, though something about his bearing spoke of older power than mere commerce could explain. "The fever district is no place for nobility."

"And yet here you are." I studied him in the dim light, trying to understand why this merchant felt so familiar, so trustworthy despite our brief acquaintance. "Always appearing when needed."

"Someone has to watch over things that matter." His smile held secrets as he fell into step beside me. "Especially when noble lords are drawn to things they don't understand."

The narrow street opened into a makeshift hospital - an old church repurposed for healing. Inside, Dr. Elliot Crow worked with quiet efficiency, his hands moving with knowledge that shouldn't exist in this primitive age of medicine. No plague mask covered his face despite the risk. Something about the way he touched the sick made them heal faster than any medical knowledge could explain.

“The Church is watching him,” Rivers said softly. “They don't understand how he saves so many. Think it's witchcraft or worse.”

A chill ran down my spine despite the summer heat. “They wouldn't dare-“

“They're sending investigators tomorrow.” He produced papers with practiced ease. “Unless someone with proper authority intervenes.”

I studied the documents - royal pardons, letters of protection bearing signatures that would have taken months to obtain. All dated perfectly, all exactly what we needed.

“How did you-“

“I have my methods.” Rivers' eyes never left Eli as he worked. “Some things are worth any price to protect.”

The way he said it made my head ache with almost-memory. Like I'd heard him say similar things in other times, other places. His presence beside me felt both new and ancient - a stranger who somehow knew exactly what we needed before we needed it.

“My lord?” Eli's voice pulled me back. He'd finished with his patient, hands steady despite hours of work. “You shouldn't be here without protection.”

“He has protection,” Rivers said quietly. Something passed between them - recognition that shouldn't exist, trust that felt older than this brief acquaintance.

I watched them carefully, trying to understand why everything about this felt like echoes of older patterns. Why my heart pulled toward this common physician. Why this merchant moved like he'd orchestrated this meeting across lifetimes.

Later, after Eli returned to his patients, I cornered Rivers in the church's shadowed

alcove. “Tell me the truth. Why are you really helping us?”

For a moment, his careful mask cracked. I saw someone ancient and tired, someone who had watched this scene play out countless times before. Someone who loved us enough to reshape reality itself, though I wouldn't understand that truth for many lives to come.

“Because some things matter more than power or position,” he said finally. “Some bonds transcend time itself, though you can't remember why yet.”

The summer night pressed close as we left the makeshift hospital. Through the windows, I could see Eli still working, his hands moving with knowledge pulled from lives he couldn't remember. Rivers watched him too, ancient love and pain mixing in his expression.

“Will you tell me someday?” I asked quietly. “What you're not saying? Why everything about this feels like remembering something I've forgotten?”

Rivers' smile held centuries of secrets. “When you're ready to understand. When you're ready to remember everything.”

### CHAPTER 17

#### Everyday Spaces

The bell above La Colombe's door chimed exactly as I remembered it. I froze just inside, realizing too late that exhaustion had led my feet down familiar paths. I hadn't been here since the accident – couldn't face the baristas who used to greet us by name, the corner table where Michael would spread architectural drawings across worn wood, debating renovation plans over cooling coffee.

The morning crowd pressed around me, but I couldn't make myself move. Everything was exactly the same – the copper espresso machines gleaming in early light, the chalkboard menu with its artistic flourishes, even the peculiar way sunshine caught the glass pastry case. Only Michael was missing, and that absence felt bigger than the entire space.

“Their Ethiopian roast is still excellent,” Alex's voice came from behind me, gentle but grounding. “Though I've had better.”

His unexpected presence should have felt intrusive in this space that held so many memories of Michael. Instead, it somehow made breathing easier. Like having a witness made the moment less overwhelming.

“I haven't been here since...” I gestured vaguely, not needing to finish the sentence .

Then something clicked. “Wait a minute,” I turned to face him fully. “How do you keep doing this? First the hospital garden, then that bookstore on 73rd, now here. Are

you following me?”

Alex's smile held both mischief and warmth. “Maybe I'm just very good at being in the right place at the right time.”

“Or maybe you have a very sophisticated surveillance system,” I said, but found myself smiling despite everything.

“Please,” he laughed softly. “If I had sophisticated surveillance, I'd have better timing with the hospital board meetings. Join me for coffee?”

I should have pressed for a real answer, should have questioned this strange pattern of perfectly timed appearances. Instead, I found myself nodding, letting him guide me toward a table – not Michael's corner, but a new space with morning light painting everything in gentle gold.

“Medium Ethiopian, extra shot?” he asked over his shoulder.

“With—”

“A touch of honey,” he finished, already ordering.

“How did you know my coffee order?” I asked as he set two steaming cups between us.

His smile held warmth without pity. “The same way I know you've been avoiding this place for six years. The same way I know why you're here now – muscle memory after a long night shift, your feet following paths they remember even when your mind tries to forget.”

“Michael's order was different,” I said, fingers tracing the cup's warmth. “Ethiopian

roast, three shots, enough honey to make the baristas cringe. He said coffee should be strong enough to wake you but sweet enough to make you smile.”

“Tell me about him?” Alex's question held no jealousy, no agenda, just quiet invitation.

Something in my chest loosened – not healing exactly, but the possibility of it. “He loved buildings the way I love medicine. Not just the structures, but the stories they held. The lives lived in their spaces.”

“That's why he specialized in restoration?”

I nodded, taking a sip of perfectly prepared coffee. “He said every old building had secrets to share, if you knew how to listen. He used to drag me to construction sites on weekends, pointing out architectural details I never would have noticed.”

“What was his favorite?” Alex's interest felt genuine, his attention focused completely on my words.

“The Public Library.” I smiled at the memory. “He spent six months working on preservation plans for the Rose Reading Room. Said it was like touching history, like being part of something eternal.”

The light caught Alex's profile as he listened, turning him into something almost painted. But his presence remained solid, real, anchoring me in this moment rather than letting me drift into grief.

“The last project he was working on...” I swallowed hard, but the words wanted to come. “It was a hospital renovation. Historical preservation while maintaining modern medical standards. He was so excited about combining our worlds.”



“That sounds like him.” Alex's voice held such certainty that I looked up sharply. “Someone who could see the beauty in both old and new, who could bridge different worlds.”

“You talk like you knew him.”

“I know you,” he said simply. “And I can see how much he shaped the person you are now. How much he's still shaping you, even in his absence.”

The words should have hurt, should have felt like pressure on a bruise. Instead, they settled into my chest like truth I hadn't known I needed to hear.

“I miss him,” I whispered, the confession feeling safe in this quiet morning space. “Every day, in a thousand little ways. But sometimes... sometimes I worry I'm starting to forget things. The exact sound of his laugh. The way his hands moved when he talked about architecture.”

“You're not forgetting,” Alex said softly. “You're just... making room for the memories to breathe. For grief to settle into something you can carry without breaking.”

I studied him over my coffee cup, this man who somehow knew exactly what to say, who had appeared in my life like something from a half-remembered dream.

The morning crowd ebbed and flowed around us, but our table felt like its own pocket of time. Like a space where past and present could coexist without breaking each other.

“Dinner is still on for tonight?” Alex asked finally, giving me space to change the subject.

“Yes,” I found myself saying. “Though I'm not sure I'm ready for whatever truth you're planning to share.”

“Truth comes in its own time,” he replied. “For now, there's coffee and morning light and memories that deserve to be spoken aloud.”

I looked around the café – at Michael's empty corner, at the baristas who still snuck glances at me with careful concern, at this new table that held its own kind of promise.

Maybe that's what healing really was. Not forgetting, but making room for new memories alongside the old. Not moving on, but moving forward with all the pieces that made you who you are.

The phone rang precisely at 7:15 AM, catching me mid-coffee. I'd barely been home twelve hours after the Rothschild party, my mind still churning with Will's strange questions and Alex's cryptic promises.

“Dr. Monroe,” Vale's voice was crisp, professional – and entirely out of place on my first day of mandatory administrative leave. “I need you to come to the office.”

I nearly laughed. “Excuse me?”

“There are urgent forms that require your immediate attention. Your signature is critical for the hospital development project.”

Something felt off. Mandatory leave meant exactly that – mandatory time away from the hospital. Bureaucratic procedure was clear: no work, no contact, complete disconnection. “That's not how administrative leave works,” I said carefully. “Is there a problem?”

A pause. Just long enough to confirm something was definitely wrong.

“The board needs your specific authorization,” Vale pressed. “I can email the documents, but they prefer?—“

“No,” I interrupted. “If the board needs something, they can contact my representative. That's standard protocol for someone on leave.”

Another pause. Then, “Dr. Monroe. Your presence is required.”

The command beneath the words was new. Vale had never spoken to me like that before – not in all our years working together. My surgeon's instincts, the same ones that had me reading micro-expressions in critical moments, were screaming.

“I'll be there in an hour,” I found myself saying, though every rational part of me knew I shouldn't.

I wasn't even dressed for the hospital. Worn jeans, a soft navy sweater I'd grabbed from the back of my closet – clothes meant for a quick coffee run or picking up groceries, not for official business. My hospital badge was tucked into the pocket of my jacket, an afterthought, a reminder that I was technically still on administrative leave.

I think Vale just wanted to keep an eye on me during my forced leave. But I needed the distraction – anything to keep my mind from spinning around the conversation I'd overheard in the coffee shop that morning, a fragment of dialogue that had sent a chill down my spine .

My phone buzzed just as I was contemplating the merits of reorganizing my entire filing system: “Roof in 10? Brought sustenance.”

I had no real excuse to refuse. With forced leave keeping me from seeing patients, my schedule was an endless stretch of paperwork and restless energy. A moment of hesitation—professionalism warring with something deeper, more instinctive.

Instead, I found myself taking familiar stairs two at a time, emerging into afternoon sunshine to find Alex arranging what looked like a proper picnic.

“Is that from Mai Thai?” I asked, recognizing the containers that Rachel was always praising. “How did you even get them to deliver here?”

“Who says they deliver?” Alex's smile held playful mystery as he handed me a container that smelled amazing. “Some things are worth a personal trip.”

“How did you know I'd be free?” I settled onto the blanket he'd somehow produced, noting how he'd chosen my favorite spot – the one with the best view of the city skyline.

“I didn't.” He started arranging spring rolls with careful precision. “But I've learned to take chances.”

“Is that what this is?” I gestured between us, surprised by my own boldness. “Taking chances?”

Alex considered this while adjusting the napkins – real cloth ones, because of course they were. “I think it's about choices,” he said finally. “Fate might bring people together, but it's choice that keeps them there.”

“That's very philosophical for a rooftop picnic,” I observed, but found myself smiling.

“What can I say? Good Thai food brings out my profound side.”

The food was perfect – spicy enough to wake up my taste buds after too many hospital cafeteria meals. We fell into easy conversation about hospital politics, about Alex's latest development project, about Sofia's uncanny ability to know everything that happened in the ER.

“She terrifies the board, you know,” Alex said, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Will tried to exclude her from a meeting once. Just once. The look she gave him – I thought he might spontaneously combust.”

His impression of his brother's affronted expression startled a laugh from me – real, unguarded, free. The sound surprised me so much I almost choked on my pad thai.

“When was the last time you laughed like that?” Alex asked softly, not pushing, just curious.

I started to say something deflective, but honesty won out. “I don't remember. Before Michael, probably.”

But the admission didn't hurt like it should have. Maybe it was the sunshine, or the excellent food, or the way Alex watched me with warm understanding rather than pity.

“Marcus tried to cook Thai food once,” he said, smoothly changing the subject. “Set off every smoke alarm in the building. The fire department actually showed up.”

“No way.”

“Hand to god. Will still brings it up at family dinners. Though to be fair, Marcus's French cuisine is exceptional.”

I found myself relaxing into the moment – into good food and easy conversation and

afternoon light that made everything feel possible. Alex told stories about development projects gone hilariously wrong, about Will's attempts to modernize their family's ancient filing system, about corporate politics that somehow seemed funny rather than cutthroat when he described them.

“You make everything feel so... normal. Even when nothing about this situation is normal.”

He considered this while offering me the last spring roll. “Maybe because normal is overrated. Maybe what feels right is more important than what feels expected.”

“Is that what this feels like to you? Right? ”

His eyes met mine, warm with something that made my heart skip. “What does it feel like to you?”

Before I could answer, my pager buzzed – Sofia, probably wondering where I'd disappeared to. Alex started packing up with efficient grace, somehow making even cleanup feel elegant.

I helped him fold the blanket, our hands brushing in a way that sent warmth through my entire body. The afternoon light caught his profile, turning him into something almost painted, but his presence remained solid and real.

“Thank you,” I said as we headed back toward the stairs. “For lunch, for stories, for...”

“For taking chances?” His smile held gentle teasing.

“For making it feel possible,” I finished softly.

He paused at the door, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. "Possible is good," he said finally. "Possible is where everything begins."

I watched him disappear down the stairs, carrying his picnic supplies with the same grace he seemed to do everything. The afternoon stretched ahead – more paperwork, more of Vale's suspicious attention, more questions I wasn't sure I was ready to ask.

The city settled into evening as we walked, streetlights flickering to life one by one. Alex had insisted on accompanying me after my shift ran late, claiming he was headed this direction anyway. We both knew it was a lie – his penthouse was in the opposite direction – but neither of us mentioned it.

Our path took us past the skeleton of a new building, steel beams reaching toward stars just beginning to emerge through Manhattan's light pollution. My steps faltered. Michael would have loved this – would have already had his sketchbook out, explaining about load-bearing walls and aesthetic balance with that infectious enthusiasm that made even physics sound like poetry.

"Tell me about his work," Alex said quietly, reading my silence. Not 'are you okay' or 'we can go another way,' but an invitation to remember.

"He loved impossible things," I found myself saying as we continued walking. "Buildings that shouldn't stand but do. Spaces that feel bigger than they are. He said good architecture was like good magic – it made people believe in the impossible."

Alex's steps matched mine perfectly, his presence steady but not crowding. "He sounds like he understood something fundamental about spaces."

"He did. This renovation he was working on, at the Natural History Museum? Everyone said the suspended gallery couldn't work, that the cantilevers would be too unstable. But he proved them wrong. Made something beautiful that shouldn't have

been possible.”

We walked in quiet after that.

The restaurant Alex chose was small and private, tucked away in a quiet corner of the Village. No Rothschild ostentation here – just warm lighting, exposed brick, and a quiet table far from curious eyes. Something about the space felt familiar, though I knew I'd never been here before.

“You promised me answers,” I said after our wine arrived. “Real ones this time.”

Alex studied his glass, something ancient flickering across his features. “What do you remember about the dreams? About Greece?”

My hands tightened around my water glass. “Fragments. A battlefield. Healing tents. The smell of herbs I've never used but somehow know how to prepare.”

“There was a war,” he said quietly. “Not the one in the history books – this was smaller, more personal. A territorial dispute that shouldn't have mattered, except...”

“Except?”

“Except it brought you to the healing temple. To me.” His eyes met mine across the table. “You were their finest healer. I was a warrior who'd never believed in the gods until I saw you work.”

“This is insane,” I whispered.

“The war started because of pride,” Alex continued. “A petty argument between city-states that escalated into bloodshed. But it became something else when Vale – when Valerius discovered certain texts in the temple library.”



“Valerius?” The name sent shivers down my spine. “You mean Vale?”

“He was your mentor then. A priest who'd taught you everything about healing. But he found something in those ancient scrolls – something about transferring life force, about cheating death itself.”

The waiter arrived with our appetizers, forcing a pause in the conversation. I used the moment to try to steady my racing thoughts, to find logical ground in this impossible story.

“You're telling me we're... what? Reincarnated? That Vale and I were some kind of ancient healers?”

“I'm telling you that some souls are bound together across time,” Alex replied. “That some connections are strong enough to survive death itself. Even when remembering causes pain.”

“And Vale? What's his role in all this?”

Something dark crossed Alex's expression. “He was brilliant, but that brilliance turned to obsession. The texts he found... they weren't meant for mortal hands. When you refused to help him experiment with them...”

“Stop.” I pushed back from the table slightly, needing physical distance. “This is too much. You're talking about ancient magic and immortal souls like they're real things. Like I'm supposed to just accept that my hospital administrator used to be some kind of dark priest?”

“I'm telling you what you asked to know,” Alex said gently. “What part of you already recognizes as truth, even if your mind rebels against it.”

“And you? What were you in this story?”

His smile held centuries of memory. “I was the fool who fell in love with a healer who believed every life was sacred. Who watched you save countless soldiers without ever asking which side they fought for. Who learned what real strength looked like from your steady hands and unfailing compassion.”

“Until what?” I asked, though part of me didn't want to know. “How does this story end?”

“It doesn't.” Alex reached across the table but stopped short of touching me. “That's the point. It never really ends. We find each other, again and again. Sometimes we get it right. Sometimes...”

“Sometimes Vale interferes?” The words came from some place deeper than conscious thought.

“Sometimes patterns repeat themselves,” he agreed carefully. “Unless we choose to break them.”

I stared at my untouched food, trying to process what he was saying. “Why tell me this now? Why not wait until I remember on my own?”

“Because Vale is remembering too. And his memories... they're fragmenting, distorting. He thinks he's protecting you, but he's working from incomplete information.”

“Protecting me from what?”

Alex's expression held ancient grief. “From me. From what loving me has cost you in every life.”

“I can't...” I stood abruptly, needing air. “This is too much. I need...”

“Time,” Alex finished softly. “I know. Take whatever time you need. But Eli...” He caught my eye, his gaze holding centuries of love and regret. “Be careful. Vale thinks he's saving you, but his methods... they've always had unintended consequences.”

I practically fled the restaurant, the cool night air helping clear my head. But I couldn't escape the ring of truth in Alex's words, or the way my hands remembered ancient medicines, or the bone-deep recognition I felt every time he looked at me.

Behind me, I heard Alex settle the bill, give me space while still watching over me. The gesture felt familiar – like he'd done it before, like he'd always known when to push and when to let me find my own way back.

“I should have told you differently,” he said when he finally joined me outside. “Given you more time to adjust.”

“Would it have made a difference?” I asked, watching city lights reflect off passing cars. “Would any of this make sense no matter how you explained it?”

His smile held gentle understanding. “Probably not. Truth rarely makes sense when it first finds us.”

We walked in silence for a while, each lost in our own thoughts. The city felt different somehow – older, deeper, full of shadows that might hold memories I wasn't ready to face.

“Michael...” I started, then stopped, uncertain how to frame the question.

“Was real,” Alex finished firmly. “Your love for him was real. Is real. Some souls are meant to find each other in every life, but that doesn't make other loves less

meaningful.”

Something in my chest loosened at his words – not healing exactly, but the possibility of it. The knowledge that I could hold both past and present, both memory and possibility, without betraying either.

We reached my building as the last light faded.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “For telling me. Even if I'm not ready to believe all of it.”

“You will.” His certainty should have felt presumptuous but instead felt like promise. “When you're ready. When the memories finish surfacing.”

As I watched him walk away, I touched my wedding ring – a gesture that had become habit. But for the first time, it felt less like an anchor holding me in grief and more like a reminder that love, like time itself, wasn't always linear .

Tomorrow would bring more questions, more half-remembered truths, more moments that felt both strange and familiar. But for now, the night air held possibility rather than just memory.

For now, that was enough.

### CHAPTER 18

#### New Places

The exhibition invitation felt impossibly heavy in my hand as I waited outside Eli's building. I'd faced him across battlefields, watched him create masterpieces in Renaissance studios, heard him play jazz in smoky Paris clubs. But somehow this moment felt more crucial than any that had come before.

When he opened the door, hair slightly mussed from what was clearly a much-needed nap, my carefully prepared speech vanished. He looked softer somehow, more vulnerable in worn sweats and an oversized shirt.

"Alex?" His surprise held no rejection, just genuine confusion. "What are you doing here? Didn't we just spend the whole day together?"

"I know, I'm sorry to just show up, but..." I shifted, feeling strangely nervous. In centuries of knowing him, this part never got easier. "I wanted to ask you something. In person."

He studied me for a moment, then stepped back. "Come in. I was just making tea."

His apartment felt different in evening light - less a shrine to grief and more a space beginning to breathe again. Medical journals mixed with architectural magazines on the coffee table. A half-finished painting stood on an easel by the window.

That made Alex smile since he knew that, despite everything, the artist in Eli hadn't

been lost. Maybe it had been buried—drowned beneath exhaustion and duty—but it was still there, resurfacing in slow, careful strokes of color. A quiet kind of healing.

“There's an exhibition opening at the Morgan,” I said, watching his movements in the kitchen. “Contemporary architects reimagining historical spaces. Innovative preservation techniques, adaptive reuse...”

His hands stilled on the kettle. “Sounds like something Michael would have loved.”

“Yes,” I agreed quietly. “It is. That's part of why I wanted to ask you properly.”

He turned, something cautious in his expression. “Ask me what?”

“To go with me.” I met his eyes steadily. “As a date.”

The word hung between us, weighted with possibility and fear. I watched emotions flicker across his face - recognition, interest, guilt, uncertainty.

“I know it's complicated,” I continued before he could speak. “I know you're still processing everything I told you about our past. But this isn't about that. This is about now. About who you are in this life, all parts of you.”

“Alex...” His voice held warning, but not rejection.

“You don't have to answer right away,” I offered. “The exhibition runs for months. I just... I wanted you to know that I understand what I'm asking. What it means.”

His fingers went to his wedding ring - not twisting it anxiously like he used to, just touching it thoughtfully. “I'm not ready to take it off.”

“I would never ask you to.” I stayed where I was, giving him physical space to

process. “Some loves don't need to end for new ones to begin. Some hearts are big enough for both memory and possibility.”

The kettle clicked off, making us both jump slightly. Eli busied himself with tea preparations, his surgeon's hands precise even in this domestic task. I recognized his need for movement, for practical action while processing emotional complexity.

“Why now?” he asked finally, setting a cup in front of me.

“Because this isn't about the past,” I said carefully. “Yes, I've loved you through lifetimes. Yes, there are complications and dangers we'll need to face. But right now, this moment, I'm just a man asking someone he cares about to share something beautiful.”

He sank into the chair across from me, his expression thoughtful. “The exhibition... you chose it deliberately.”

“Because it bridges worlds,” I acknowledged. “Like you do. Medicine and art. Science and soul. Past and present.”

“And you think I'm ready for that?”

“I think you're ready to consider it.” I wrapped my hands around the warm teacup, anchoring myself in this moment rather than all the others we'd shared. “Ready to imagine possibility without feeling guilty for it.”

Silence stretched between us, but it felt comfortable rather than tense. Outside, Manhattan's evening lights painted patterns on his walls - not quite like temple fires or studio candles or jazz club spotlights, but beautiful in their own way.

“Friday,” he said suddenly, his voice steady. “The exhibition opens Friday, right?”

Hope bloomed in my chest, cautious but real. “Yes. But we could go another time if?—”

“Friday's good.” His smile held hints of the one I remembered from a thousand lifetimes, but also something entirely new.

“Are you sure?” I had to ask, had to give him every chance to back away.

His hands were perfectly steady as he lifted his teacup. “No,” he admitted. “But I think... I think that's okay. To not be sure but try anyway.”

Relief and joy mixed in my chest as I nodded. We sat in companionable silence, drinking tea and watching city lights paint new patterns on familiar walls. This was what I'd learned through centuries of loving him - that sometimes the quietest moments held the most meaning.

“I should go,” I said eventually, noting the fatigue around his eyes. “You need rest.”

He walked me to the door, his movements more relaxed than when I'd arrived. At the threshold, he paused. “Alex?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. For understanding about the ring. About... everything.”

“Always,” I replied softly, meaning it across lifetimes. “Some things don't need to be either-or. Some hearts have room for both what was and what could be.”

His smile held promise as he closed the door between us. Walking home through Manhattan's evening bustle, I felt lighter than I had in years. Centuries of loving him had taught me patience, had shown me how to navigate the delicate space between



memory and possibility.

Friday stretched ahead like a door about to open. Not to the past this time, but to something new. Something that honored all the lives we'd shared while creating space for the one we were living now.

For the first time since finding him again, I felt truly hopeful.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of corporate meetings and development plans. Marcus kept giving me knowing looks every time I checked my phone, while Will's empty office seemed to watch my distraction with silent understanding. I threw myself into work, reviewing architectural plans and acquisition documents with forced focus, but my mind kept drifting to Friday, to the promise of seeing Eli in a space that wasn't bound by hospital politics or ancient magic .

I spent Thursday evening in my penthouse office, pretending to review quarterly reports while actually researching the Morgan's current exhibitions. The architectural renovation pieces would interest him, I knew, but not just because of Michael's influence. Eli had always understood the importance of preserving history while building something new – in every life, every incarnation.

Sleep proved elusive that night, memories and anticipation mixing into something that felt both ancient and completely new. When dawn finally broke, I found myself standing in my closet, putting more thought into casual wear than I ever did into business suits.

Friday arrived with unexpected speed, finding me waiting in the Morgan's elegant lobby. I'd arrived early, a habit born of centuries of anticipation, but Eli surprised me by being even earlier. He wore a carefully casual outfit that spoke of time spent choosing – dark jeans and a grey sweater that made his eyes look greener than usual.

“I hope I'm not too early,” he said, fidgeting slightly with his coat.

“Perfect timing,” I assured him, drinking in the sight of him in this space. He looked more rested than he had all week, more present somehow.

The exhibition opened before us like a carefully crafted story.

“Michael would have loved this lighting design,” he said softly, studying a model of a converted church. “The way it highlights the original architecture while creating something completely new.”

I watched him carefully, noting how his hands moved as he spoke – still a surgeon's precision, but with an artist's appreciation. As we progressed deeper into the exhibition, I noticed a subtle shift in his observations.

“Michael did something similar with that brownstone renovation,” he commented, pointing to a particular structural solution. “ Though his approach to the support beams was more traditional.”

The transition from “would have” to “did” felt significant – like he was finding ways to carry Michael's memory forward rather than being trapped in what might have been. His enthusiasm grew as we discovered each new section, his natural intelligence engaging with the technical aspects while his artistic soul responded to the beauty.

When we reached the sustainable materials display, something remarkable happened. Eli's excitement became entirely his own, untethered from grief or memory.

“Look at this integration of recycled elements,” he said, gesturing animatedly at a particular model. “The way they've preserved the historical facade while completely reimagining the interior infrastructure. It's like...” He paused, searching for words to

capture what moved him.

“Like finding ways to honor the past while building something new?” I suggested gently.

Our eyes met, and suddenly we weren't talking about architecture anymore. The moment stretched between us, heavy with meaning beyond building materials and design principles.

Eli's hand moved to his wedding ring, but the gesture felt different than it had before. Less like a shield, more like acknowledgment of a foundation we were building upon. “Yes,” he said softly. “Exactly like that.”

I watched emotions play across his face – not guilt this time, but something more complex. More hopeful. “Some structures,” I offered carefully, “are strongest when they incorporate both old and new elements. When they find ways to let different materials support each other.”

He studied the model before us, but I could tell his mind was elsewhere. “I used to think moving forward meant leaving things behind,” he said finally. “That healing meant... forgetting.”

“And now?”

His smile held new warmth as he met my eyes. “Now I think maybe it's more like this.” He gestured to the exhibition around us. “Finding ways to preserve what matters while creating space for something new.”

We continued through the galleries, but something had shifted in the air between us. Eli's comments became more personal, more engaged with the present moment rather than memories of the past. He asked questions about my development projects,

offering insights that bridged his medical training with surprising architectural intuition.

“It's like diagnosis,” he said, examining a particularly complex renovation plan. “Looking at the whole system, understanding how each part affects the others.”

“Finding ways to heal while maintaining structural integrity,” I agreed, loving how his mind made these connections.

We found ourselves in a quiet corner of the final gallery, surrounded by images of transformed spaces – buildings that had found new purpose while honoring their original character.

“Thank you,” Eli said suddenly. “For this. For...” he gestured vaguely, encompassing more than just the exhibition.

“For what?”

“For understanding that I needed to see this. To remember that change doesn't mean erasure.”

I wanted to reach for him, to bridge the physical distance between us the way we'd bridged the emotional one. But I knew better than to push. Some moments needed to unfold in their own time.

“There's one more place I'd like to show you,” I said as we left the restaurant, the evening stretching ahead with promise. “If you're not too tired?”

Eli's smile held new ease, warming something ancient in my soul. “Lead the way.”

My private elevator opened directly to the rooftop garden I'd spent weeks preparing.

String lights created intimate spaces between carefully arranged plantings, while the city spread below us like its own exhibition of light and shadow. But what caught my attention was Eli's expression as he took it all in – not comparing it to past memories, just appreciating it for what it was.

“This is...” he started, then stopped, wonder clear in his voice.

“Different?” I offered, understanding what he couldn't quite express.

“Yes.” His relief was palpable. “Not trying to be anything except what it is.”

I guided him to a small table I'd arranged – intimate without being overwhelming, casual enough to feel natural. Marcus had outdone himself with the setup, though his muttered complaints about 'romantic nonsense' had made me laugh.

“Did Marcus arrange all this?” Eli asked, noting the perfect placement of everything.

“After three failed attempts,” I laughed, pouring wine for both of us. “You should have seen his face when the first set of lights wouldn't cooperate. I thought he might declare war on modern electronics.”

Eli's answering laugh sounded free, unweighted by memory or destiny. It made my heart skip to hear it – this new sound that belonged entirely to our present.

“Tell me about Will as a kid,” he said suddenly, settling into his chair with natural grace. “I bet he was a handful.”

“Oh god, the stories I could tell you.” I grinned, loving how he'd asked for present-life memories. “Did I ever tell you about the time he decided to 'improve' our mother's prize rose garden?”

We traded stories as we ate – normal ones, current-life ones, creating space that belonged purely to now. I told him about Marcus's disaster with the coffee machine, about Will's corporate takeover of the family holiday party, about the simple joy of building something new in this lifetime.

“Tell me about Marcus,” Eli said suddenly, wine making him bolder with questions. “There's something different about him. Something old.”

I paused, considering how much I could safely share. Marcus's story wasn't mine to tell, but Eli deserved some truth about the man who'd watched over us through centuries.

“Marcus is... complicated,” I said carefully. “He's been with my family for as long as I can remember. And before that.” I smiled at memories too numerous to count. “He's been more than just an employee. A guardian, a friend, a keeper of secrets.”

“How long?” Eli's doctor's mind was working, I could see it in his eyes.

“Longer than should be possible,” I admitted. “Though I've never asked him exactly how. Some mysteries deserve their privacy.”

“But he remembers? Like you do?”

“Differently.” I swirled wine in my glass, watching city lights reflect off the surface. “His memories are... continuous. Unbroken. He's watched over us through every lifetime, though I think sometimes he wishes he couldn't remember them all.”

Eli absorbed this, his healer's instincts picking up on what I wasn't saying. “That sounds lonely.”

“It can be. But he chose this path. Or it chose him. I've never asked which.” I

remembered Marcus's face in Greece, the moment he'd made his decision. "He's carried our story through time, made sure we could find each other again when the time was right."

"And he never told you how?"

"Some gifts come with prices too heavy to discuss." I reached for a lighter tone. "Though his inability to master modern coffee machines suggests even guardians have their limits."

Eli laughed at that. He didn't push for more details, seeming to sense that Marcus's secrets weren't mine to share.

When Eli laughed again, it felt like victory. Like proof that hearts could heal while staying whole .

Later, we stood at the rooftop's edge, city lights reflecting in our wine glasses.

"You know what I've learned?" I said softly, watching starlight paint patterns on the city below. "Across all these lives, all these versions of us?"

Eli turned to face me, his wedding ring catching the light. But for once, the sight didn't ache. "What?"

His free hand found mine naturally, without hesitation. The contact sent warmth through my entire being, but it felt new rather than remembered.

"That every time is different," I said carefully. "Every love unique. What we had in Greece, in Florence, in Paris – they were all real, all precious. But they weren't this." I squeezed his fingers gently. "This is ours, just for this life."

Understanding dawned in his eyes – not just of what I was saying, but of what it meant. This wasn't about replacing Michael or recreating past lives. It was about building something new that honored all our stories while writing its own.

When he stepped closer, it felt like choice rather than fate. His free hand came up to touch my face with a surgeon's precision, and I let myself lean into the contact.

“I'm not ready to take off the ring,” he whispered, but the words held no apology.

“I know,” I replied simply. “It's part of who you are. Part of what makes you the person I'm falling in love with in this life.”

His smile bloomed slowly, like sunrise over ancient seas. When he kissed me, it tasted of wine and starlight and possibility – not a memory of past loves, but a promise of future ones.

Later, as we walked through nighttime streets, Eli talked about Michael's favorite buildings, about memories that had shaped him, about dreams for future projects. His wedding ring still caught streetlight, but now it felt like part of our story rather than a barrier to it.

“He would have loved the sustainable materials exhibit,” Eli said thoughtfully. “But not as much as I loved the integration of old and new elements.” The distinction felt important – honoring memory while claiming his own perspective.

I listened, understanding that love wasn't a fixed quantity but an expanding universe, always making room for more light. Each story Eli shared felt like a gift – trust given freely rather than extracted by fate.

“I don't know if I can do this again,” he whispered, but his hands reached for mine like they'd done in every lifetime. “I don't know if I'm strong enough to love and lose



again.”

My fingers intertwined with his, the gesture as natural as breathing. Even now, even with all his fears, his touch felt like coming home. “We don't have to know everything,” I said softly. “Some patterns are worth the risk.”

The city stretched below us, its lights reflecting stars that had watched us find and lose each other countless times. But this felt different – not fate or destiny, but choice. Real choice, with full knowledge of what it might cost.

Eli's eyes met mine, carrying centuries of love and loss, but also something new. Something uniquely his, uniquely now. His hand trembled slightly in mine, but he didn't pull away.

“May I kiss you?” I asked quietly, giving him the power to choose, to decide, to write this story his own way.

Time seemed to pause as he searched my face. I saw the moment his decision crystallized – not forgetting Michael, not ignoring our past lives, but choosing to make room for something new alongside all of it.

His nod was slow, deliberate. When I leaned in, he met me halfway – a choice made together, a new pattern beginning.

The kiss was soft at first – tentative, like two people who had known each other across lifetimes yet were still learning each other's rhythms. It held the weight of unspoken histories, of moments remembered and forgotten, of connections that transcended time. His lips were warm, familiar in a way that defied logic, yet entirely present – anchored in this moment, this breath, this singular connection. The cool metal of his wedding ring pressed against my cheek, a reminder of complexity, of layers – not a barrier, but a part of the intricate tapestry of who he was.

I expected hesitation. A moment of restraint. But Eli kissed me harder, deepening it before I had the chance to fully register what was happening. His body pressed against mine, the warmth of him seeping through our clothes, his fingers threading into my hair like he was relearning every strand, every forgotten detail of me.

I gasped against his lips when his teeth grazed my bottom lip, a quiet, desperate sound breaking from my throat. That sound undid something in him. He let out a soft curse, hands firm as they pulled me closer, molding me against him, chest to chest, heart to heart. It wasn't just passion—it was memory and longing and the unbearable weight of time collapsing between us.

The city stretched around us, an expanse of lights and movement, but here, on this rooftop, we existed in a quiet, suspended moment. The world below continued, oblivious, and the stars above burned with an indifference that should have made me feel small but instead made this feel monumental.

“Alex,” he whispered against my mouth, my name half a breath, half a prayer.

His hands moved, ghosting down my sides, hesitant yet determined. I knew the moment his fingers curled around my waist that we were moving past the point of no return. A quiet, slow-burning panic flickered inside me—not fear, not regret, but the gravity of what this meant. We had spent lifetimes missing each other, wanting but never reaching. Now, we were on the precipice of changing that.

I pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. They were impossibly dark, reflecting the night sky, filled with things I didn't dare name. “Are you sure?” I asked, voice raw.

He exhaled shakily, his forehead pressing against mine. “I'm tired of feeling this way,” he admitted. “Tired of wanting and never letting myself have. I need this, Alex. I need you.”

Something broke open inside me. Maybe it was the weight of the past, maybe it was the future stretching before us, full of unknowns and second chances. But in that moment, I knew what he meant. I knew what he was asking for—what he was offering.

Our mouths crashed together again, a little desperate now, a little reckless. My hands fumbled at his shirt, pushing it up, fingers tracing the bare skin beneath. He shivered at my touch, a sharp intake of breath making my stomach clench. He was here, he was real, he was mine—at least for tonight.

We sank onto the rooftop, the rough texture of concrete under my back barely registering. Eli was everywhere—his mouth at my throat, his hands mapping the planes of my body with a kind of reverence that made my breath hitch. Every touch, every brush of his lips against my skin, was a declaration. We had spent lifetimes apart, and now he was memorizing me all over again.

I reached between us, palming him through his jeans, feeling the hard length of him straining against the fabric. He let out a sharp, unguarded groan that went straight to my gut. My own cock ached, pressing against the confinement of my pants, and suddenly everything felt too tight, too much.

“Fuck,” he breathed against my neck. “Alex?—”

I sat up just enough to reach for my pocket, pulling out the small bottle of lube I kept there. I wasn’t anticipating this—not exactly—but some part of me had always been waiting for him, hoping for this moment, however impossible it had seemed before tonight.

Eli watched me, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his lips swollen and wet. His fingers trembled as he reached for his belt, unfastening it with an urgency that made heat pool low in my stomach. I pushed my jeans down, freeing my cock, the cool

night air a sharp contrast to the heat of his hands when they closed around me.

I bit back a moan, my fingers tightening on his hip. “Eli?—”

“Let me,” he whispered, eyes dark with intent.

I let him. I let him touch me, stroke me, his fingers wrapping around the base of my cock with a confidence that felt both familiar and brand new. He kissed me again, swallowing the sounds I made as his hand moved, slow and deliberate. My hips bucked, seeking more, but he was unhurried, savoring every reaction.

“You make the best noises,” he murmured, lips grazing my jaw.

I laughed breathlessly. “And you’re taking your damn time.”

He smirked but didn’t argue. Instead, he reached for the lube, slicking his fingers before pressing them between my legs, teasing at my entrance. I let out a shuddering breath as he circled my hole, the sensation making my thighs tense before I forced myself to relax into it.

“Still with me?” he asked, voice low, intimate.

I nodded. “Never left.”

He pressed in, just one finger at first, moving carefully, watching my face for any sign of discomfort. There was none. Just the slow stretch, the ache of anticipation, the undeniable rightness of this. Another finger joined the first, scissoring, opening me up. My cock throbbed against my stomach, my body alive with sensation, every nerve ending tuned to him .

“Eli,” I gasped, hips shifting, seeking more.

He understood. He always did.

He slicked himself quickly, positioning himself between my legs, his cock pressing insistently against me. I locked my legs around his waist, drawing him in, anchoring him to me. His forehead rested against mine as he pushed forward, the slow slide sending a shockwave through me.

I clenched around him, overwhelmed, overstimulated, utterly undone. He cursed softly, his breath ragged as he held still, giving me time.

“You okay?” he whispered, brushing damp hair from my forehead.

I laughed shakily. “Better than okay. Move.”

He did. Slow at first, letting me feel every inch of him, every pulse of him inside me. Then faster, deeper, our bodies moving together in a rhythm older than time. The rooftop faded, the world disappeared, until there was only this—only us.

His hands gripped my hips, his mouth finding mine in a kiss that tasted like forever. His cock drove into me with increasing urgency, the friction, the stretch, the intensity of it unraveling me completely. My own cock throbbed, aching for release, and then his hand was between us, stroking me in time with his thrusts.

I came first, pleasure crashing through me in waves, my back arching, my breath catching in my throat as I spilled between us. The tight clench of my body sent Eli over the edge, his hips stuttering, his breath a broken gasp against my lips as he found his own release.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Our bodies were tangled, our skin damp with sweat, the night air cooling the heat between us.

Then he laughed softly, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. “Well. That happened.”

I smiled, threading my fingers through his hair. “Yeah. It did.”

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his expression softer now, unguarded. “No regrets?”

“None,” I said. “You?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “No. Just... hope.”

I kissed him again, slow and deep. “This time, we have a choice. This time, we have knowledge. Maybe this time, we finally get it right.”

### CHAPTER 19

#### Old Friends

New York, 1850

I found William in our usual spot outside Presbyterian's surgical wing, his evening clothes rumpled from another long day at the bank. My brother had been spending more evenings here lately, drawn by something he couldn't quite explain.

“The Vanderbilt account giving you trouble again?” I asked, settling beside him.

“Hardly.” He managed a tired smile. “Though Father's convinced I've lost interest in banking entirely. Can't explain why I'm more interested in hospital renovations these days.”

Through the window, we could see Dr. Monroe working late as usual. Sarah appeared silently beside us, still in her head nurse's uniform despite the late hour.

“Your mysterious headaches again?” she asked William, noting how he pressed his fingers to his temples.

“Strange dreams,” he muttered. “Like memories that don't make sense.”

“At least the renovation plans are proceeding well,” I offered, steering the conversation to safer ground. “Dr. Monroe's suggestions about the surgical wing have been invaluable. ”

“Marcus thinks we're all mad,” William said with a short laugh. “Spending our evenings watching a hospital instead of attending the right parties.”

“Speaking of which...” Sarah nodded toward the corridor where Marcus approached, looking impeccable as always in his role as our family's head of security.

“I should have known I'd find you all here,” he said, though his fond exasperation carried hints of deeper understanding. “Lady Astor's ball started an hour ago.”

“Dreadfully dull affair,” William waved dismissively. “All those socialites trying to marry off their daughters. Besides, we're discussing important business matters.”

“Ah yes, the vital business of watching Dr. Monroe complete his paperwork.” Marcus's smile held secrets as he joined our vigil. “Though I must admit, his surgical techniques are rather... remarkable.”

Sarah leaned against the wall, her usual professional poise softening among friends. “Did you hear about his latest operation? Saved a child others had declared hopeless. His hands never shake, even during the most difficult procedures.”

“Like he's done it a thousand times before,” William murmured, then looked confused by his own words.

I watched them carefully, these souls on the edge of remembering. William rubbed his temples again while Sarah pressed her fingers to her forehead. Only Marcus seemed untroubled.

“The benefit dinner next week should help fund the new ward,” I said, drawing them back to present concerns. “Though convincing the board to approve Dr. Monroe's suggestions has been... interesting.”



“Especially with Dr. Vale's opposition,” Sarah added. “Though I can't understand why he's so against the renovations.”

Inside the office, Dr. Monroe gathered his things to leave. William straightened unconsciously, his protective instincts surfacing without context .

“We should go,” Sarah said, though she made no move to leave. “The night shift needs attending.”

“The new wing won't build itself,” Marcus agreed mildly. “Though I suspect we'll all find reasons to linger here regardless.”

William shot him a sharp look. “You sound like you know something we don't.”

Marcus's smile remained enigmatic. “Perhaps I simply understand the pull of certain places. Certain people.”

“Speaking of people,” Sarah interjected, “did you hear about Elizabeth's engagement? To that dreadful Thomson fellow?”

The conversation turned to safer topics - society gossip, hospital politics, William's latest attempts to avoid his father's matchmaking schemes. But underneath ran currents of something deeper, something none of them could quite grasp yet.

“Another late night solved nothing,” Marcus observed as Dr. Monroe finally left through the main entrance. “Shall we try again tomorrow?”

“As if we could stay away,” William replied, then looked startled by his own certainty.

Sarah squeezed my arm gently before leaving for her rounds. William lingered a

moment longer, watching the empty office with troubled eyes. Marcus waited patiently, eternally understanding what the others couldn't yet remember.

“Alexander,” William said suddenly, using my full name. “Sometimes I feel like... like we're missing something important. Something right in front of us.”

“Perhaps some mysteries solve themselves in their own time,” Marcus suggested, his hand steady on William's shoulder.

They dispersed into the hospital's nighttime rhythm, leaving me alone with Marcus and the weight of knowing what came next. My old friend's expression held centuries of watching these patterns repeat.

“They're beginning to remember,” he said quietly.

“I know.” The words tasted bitter as temple herbs. “Sarah's dreams are getting stronger. And William...”

“Will remember everything soon enough.” Marcus's voice carried gentle warning. “The question is, what will he do with that knowledge this time?”

“He's different in this life,” I said, watching the corridor where William had disappeared. “Kinder. More balanced. Maybe when he remembers...”

“Some souls remember too much,” Marcus interrupted gently. “Carry too much weight from past lives. Your brother's love has always burned dangerous bright.”

We moved through the quiet hospital, our footsteps echoing off walls that had seen countless nights like this. The gas lamps cast shadows that looked too much like temple fires.

“I've watched him in this life,” I continued, needing Marcus to understand. “The way he cares for family, how he protects what matters. Even without memories, his soul tries to make different choices.”

“And yet.” Marcus paused by a window, moonlight catching the ancient knowledge in his eyes. “Even now, without remembering, he's drawn here night after night. Watching. Planning. His soul recognizes patterns it doesn't yet understand.”

“The ritual was never about power,” I said softly. “Not really. He just wanted to keep everyone safe.”

“The most dangerous magic often comes from the purest intentions.” Marcus's hand found my shoulder, steady as it had been through centuries. “Love that burns too hot inevitably consumes what it tries to protect.”

We stood in silence, watching night settle over the city. Somewhere out there, William was probably already dreaming - fragments of lives he'd lived, choices he'd made, power he'd reached for with desperate hands.

“Sarah's remembering too,” I said finally. “I see it in the way she watches Eli. The way her hands sometimes move like she's preparing medicines that haven't existed for centuries.”

“She was always the strongest,” Marcus mused. “Even in that first life, she understood balance in ways the rest of us couldn't grasp.” His smile held ancient fondness. “Perhaps she'll help temper William's fire when he remembers fully.”

“And if she can't?” The question that had haunted me through lifetimes finally found voice. “If his love burns too bright again?”

Marcus was quiet for a long moment. “Then we make different choices this time,” he

said finally. “Find ways to let love heal instead of burn.”

The night deepened around us, modern city sounds mixing with memories of temple bells. Somewhere in the hospital, Sarah made her rounds while William dreamed of power he didn't yet understand. And Eli worked late again, his surgeon's hands remembering older healing with each life he saved.

“Watch him carefully,” Marcus warned as we prepared to leave. “Your brother's soul carries ancient fire. When he remembers fully...” He paused, choosing words with immortal care. “Love like his can reshape reality itself. Or destroy everything it touches.”

I touched the wall gently, feeling patterns shift beneath my fingers. Everything we'd been, everything we might become, waiting to see what choices we'd make this time. Whether love could learn to warm without burning. Whether souls could heal without breaking themselves in the attempt.

“Together then,” I said quietly. “Like always.”

Marcus's smile held centuries of friendship as he guided me toward the exit. “Together,” he agreed. “Though this time, perhaps we'll all choose differently.”

The hospital watched us leave with ancient eyes, modern walls remembering older healing. Soon William would remember everything. Soon choices would have to be made that couldn't be unmade.

Soon love would have to learn new ways to burn. Or finally learn to let go.

### CHAPTER 20

#### Healing Hands

My two weeks of leave was done. Time to face reality again. But first, my usual morning run with Sofia.

Central Park buzzed with its normal morning crowd – joggers, dog walkers, early commuters cutting through to save time. Sofia waited at our usual spot, two coffee cups in hand and concern clear in her eyes.

Three times I tried to tell her about last night. About how natural it had felt to follow Alex home, to let him love me in ways that felt both new and achingly familiar. About how the guilt I'd expected hadn't come – just a sense that Michael would have wanted this for me, would have understood about making room for new love alongside old.

“I need to tell you something,” I finally managed, “but I don't want you to think I'm having some kind of breakdown.”

Sofia's steps slowed, her expression shifting to something carefully neutral in a way that suddenly seemed practiced. “You're remembering things,” she said simply. “Lives you couldn't have lived.”

“How?” I asked, leaning forward. “How do you remember? When did this start?”

Sofia's fingers traced the rim of her own coffee cup, a gesture both familiar and

suddenly strange. “It's been... gradual. Fragments at first. A feeling of déjà vu that went beyond simple coincidence. Dreams that felt more like memories. Flashes of places I've never been, conversations I've never had.”

“And now?” I pressed.

“Now?” She let out a soft, incredulous laugh. “Now it's like pieces of a puzzle are suddenly clicking into place. I'll be in the middle of a surgery, and suddenly I'm remembering a healing ritual from somewhere – somewhen – completely different. Or I'll look at an instrument and know its history before I could possibly have learned it.”

“When did you first realize?”

“About a year ago,” Sofia said, her gaze distant. “A patient – an elderly woman. She looked at me and said something in a language I shouldn't know. And I understood. Not just the words, but the context, the history behind them.” She met my eyes again, that ancient wisdom swirling beneath her professional exterior. “I thought I was losing my mind at first. But then more memories came. Clearer. More certain.”

“And you're sure about this?” The skeptical surgeon in me couldn't help but ask.

Sofia's laugh was sharp, knowing. “About as sure as I am that I've spent decades saving lives in this hospital. Some things you just know.”

“You knew.” My voice came out sharper than intended, coffee nearly spilling as I turned to face her. “All this time, you knew?”

Sofia met my eyes steadily, the way she had through countless traumas and emergencies. But this time, I saw something ancient in her gaze, something that reminded me of temple steps and sacred wisdom I shouldn't remember.

“I can't tell you everything,” she said carefully. “We were... there are rules. Limitations. You need to ask Alex about the specifics.”

My hands clenched around my coffee cup, the warmth doing nothing to chase away the sudden chill. “We? Who's we? How long have you been keeping this from me?”

“Since the beginning.” Her honesty did nothing to soften the blow. “Some of us remember, some don't. But only you were affected by the...” she hesitated, choosing words carefully, “the memento to forget.”

I laughed, but the sound held no humor. “The memento to forget? That's what we're calling it?” Around us, the park continued its morning routine, oblivious to worlds shattering. “I trusted you. Through everything – Michael's death, Vale's accusations, all of it. And you've been what? Watching me stumble through memories like some kind of experiment?”

“It wasn't like that.” Sofia reached for me, but I stepped back. “We were trying to protect you. The memories... they can be overwhelming if they come too fast.”

“Protect me?” The betrayal felt like a physical thing, pressing against my ribs. “By lying? By watching me think I was going crazy?”

“You weren't ready.” Her voice held centuries of patience I didn't want to hear. “After Michael, after everything... you needed time.”

“Time for what? To be manipulated? To have everyone around me playing some cosmic game I didn't know the rules to?”

A jogger swerved around us, probably wondering why two adults were having an argument in the middle of the path at 7 AM. The normalcy of it – running shoes on gravel, dogs barking in the distance, the smell of morning coffee – felt obscene

against the weight of what I was learning.

“Did Vale know?” I demanded suddenly. “Is that what all this has been about? Everyone playing their assigned roles while I fumbled around in the dark?”

“Eli, please?—”

“No.” My hands shook as I backed away from her. “No more explanations. No more protection. No more lies.”

“Where are you going? ”

“To work.” I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice. “Since that's apparently the only real thing in my life right now.”

“Eli, wait?—”

But I was already walking away, my surgeon's hands shaking with betrayal rather than memory. Behind me, I heard Sofia call out once more, but I didn't turn. Couldn't turn.

Last night's joy felt tainted now. Had that been orchestrated too? Part of some grand plan I wasn't allowed to know about?

Who could I trust when everyone in my life had been keeping secrets? When even Sofia, who'd held me through the worst moments after Michael's death, had been playing some role I didn't understand?

The hospital loomed ahead – solid, real, understandable. At least there, in the emergency department, things made sense. Medicine followed rules I could trust, patterns I could verify.



But even as I thought it, I remembered other healing – herbs ground with sacred purpose, battlefield medicine under ancient skies, hands that had saved lives across centuries.

Two weeks of leave was done. Time to be Dr. Monroe again, to focus on the present rather than impossible pasts or betrayed trust.

Even if nothing felt real anymore.

Even if every memory now had to be questioned.

Even if the people I'd trusted most had been lying all along.

The emergency department's automatic doors opened, welcoming me back to the one place that still made sense. Or at least, I hoped it did.

Right now, that hope was all I had left.

The emergency department welcomed me back with its usual controlled chaos. I threw myself into work, grateful for the distraction of straightforward medical problems. Broken bones. Allergic reactions. Things that made sense, that followed logical patterns.

“Welcome back, Dr. Monroe,” the charge nurse said warmly. “We've saved all the exciting cases for you.”

Three hours into my shift, I'd treated two sprained ankles, one moderate concussion, and a nasty case of food poisoning. My hands stayed steady through it all, finding comfort in familiar routines. No one here asked about past lives or ancient memories. No one watched me with careful calculation, waiting to see what I'd remember next.

“Your sutures are neater than ever,” Vale observed, appearing beside me as I finished with a laceration patient. His tone held none of its usual edge. “The break seems to have done you good.”

I tensed, waiting for more probing questions or veiled implications. But Vale just studied the patient's chart with professional interest.

“The board will be pleased,” he continued. “Though between us, I never doubted your competence.”

“Really?” I couldn't keep the skepticism from my voice. “Could have fooled me with all those performance reviews.”

Vale's smile held surprising warmth. “Professional rivalry doesn't preclude professional respect, Dr. Monroe.”

Before I could respond, trauma alerts started blaring. Multiple casualties from a highway pileup, arriving in minutes. Vale and I moved in practiced synchronization, politics forgotten in the face of immediate need.

“I'll take trauma two,” he said, already gowning up. “Unless you'd prefer?—”

“No, that works.” The familiar dance of emergency medicine felt steady. “Sofia usually—” I stopped, the name catching in my throat.

Vale gave me a sharp look but didn't comment. Instead, he just nodded toward incoming paramedics. “Shall we?”

The next hours passed in focused blur. Vale and I worked parallel traumas, consulting each other when needed, our usual antagonism replaced by professional efficiency. It felt... normal. Real. No hidden agendas or ancient patterns, just two doctors doing

their jobs.

“Good catch on the subtle pneumothorax,” Vale said later, as we both caught our breath between cases. “Most would have missed it on initial assessment.”

“The patient's breathing pattern was off,” I explained, surprised to find myself having a normal conversation with him. “Something about the way he held his shoulder...”

“Instinct born of experience,” Vale nodded. “It's what makes you an excellent physician, regardless of... other complications.”

I tensed again, waiting for him to bring up my forced leave or Alex or any of the strangeness of recent months. But Vale just handed me a fresh coffee from the doctors' lounge.

“The board meets tomorrow,” he said casually. “I'll be recommending your full reinstatement, no restrictions.”

“Why?” I had to ask. “After everything...”

“Because you're a good doctor, Dr. Monroe. Whatever else is happening in your life, that hasn't changed.” He paused, something almost kind crossing his features. “And sometimes work is the best place to figure things out. Away from... external pressures.”

I studied him over my coffee cup, seeing him clearly for perhaps the first time. Not just the calculating administrator or professional rival, but a doctor who understood something about needing space to process complex truths.

“Thank you,” I said finally, meaning more than just the coffee.

Vale nodded once, then straightened his perfect suit. “Now, I believe you have patients waiting. Try not to let your excellent suture technique slow down department throughput too much.”

Just like that, we were back to normal. But something had shifted – some understanding reached without words or hidden meanings.

The rest of my shift passed in steady rhythm of patient care. My phone stayed silent in my locker, ignored messages piling up from Sofia, from Alex, from people whose secrets I couldn't face yet.

Here, in the emergency department, things made sense. Injuries needed healing. Patients needed care. My hands knew what to do without questioning why they knew it.

For now, that was enough.

It had to be.

Rachel's house glowed warm against the autumn evening, windows lit with the kind of welcome that made my chest ache. I'd been avoiding her calls for three days, knowing my sister would see right through whatever excuses I tried to make. David's firefighter boots were missing from their usual spot by the porch swing – night shift, which meant no buffer between me and Rachel's uncanny ability to read my soul.

The door opened before I could knock. Rachel stood with arms crossed, worry lines creasing her forehead in a way that made her look startlingly like our mother. “Three days, Elijah James Monroe,” she said, using my full name like she had when we were kids. “Three days of avoiding my calls.”

Her kitchen smelled like our mother's chicken soup – the recipe she only made when

one of us was sick or heartbroken. The familiar scent hit me like a physical thing, memories of childhood comfort wrapping around me as I sank into my usual chair at her table.

“You're stress-cooking Mom's soup,” I observed, watching her move around the kitchen with practiced grace. Her pregnant belly made the movements less fluid than usual, but no less determined.

“And you're avoiding my calls.” She set a bowl in front of me with more force than necessary. “After disappearing from Alex's party, after not answering Sofia's messages, after?—”

“I slept with Alex.”

The words burst out of me like something breaking. Rachel's spoon clattered against her bowl, the sound echoing in sudden silence. For a moment, all I could hear was the tick of the kitchen clock – the same one that had marked time in our parents' house, that had counted minutes in the hospital waiting room the night Michael died.

“Oh, Eli,” she said softly, and something in her gentle tone shattered what was left of my composure.

“I kept it on,” I whispered, touching the ring that hadn't left my finger in six years. “Even when we... I couldn't take it off. And Alex understood. But I still feel like I'm betraying him, Rach. Like I'm trying to replace him.”

Rachel was around the table before I could blink, pulling me into the fierce hug that only little sisters can give. “It's been six years,” she said against my hair, her own voice thick with tears. “Six years since Michael was taken from us. From all of us.”

She pulled back, holding my face between her hands like she had the night of the

accident. Her touch felt exactly the same – anchoring, grounding, full of the love that had helped put me back together when everything fell apart.

“I miss him every day,” she continued, thumbs brushing away tears I hadn't realized were falling. “You know that. The stupid jokes he made at family dinners. The way he'd spend hours explaining architecture to anyone who'd listen. How he made this house perfect for us because 'family deserves perfect sight lines.’” Her laugh held both grief and love. “But Eli... I think it's time for you to live again. Really live, not just exist.”

“What if I forget him?” The whispered fear felt childish, but Rachel's eyes held no judgment.

“Forget Michael?” She settled into the chair beside me, one hand still gripping mine. “The man who redesigned our entire kitchen because the workflow wasn't 'optimal for familial bonding'? Who spent three hours at my wedding explaining proper brick alignment to Dad's contractor friend?”

Despite everything, I found myself smiling at the memory. “Poor guy just wanted to enjoy the open bar. ”

“But Michael insisted he understand the historical significance of load-bearing techniques.” Rachel squeezed my fingers. “Those memories aren't going anywhere, big brother. Loving someone new doesn't erase what you had with Michael. It just... makes your heart bigger.”

“Alex makes me laugh,” I admitted quietly, remembering warm hands and gentle understanding. “Really laugh, not just the polite kind.”

“I know.” Rachel's smile held knowing warmth.

I stared into my cooling soup, remembering Alex's touch in the dark, careful with my heart even while making it race. "It feels like betrayal," I whispered. "Being happy with someone else."

"No." Rachel's voice held fierce certainty. "You know what would be betrayal? Locking your heart away forever. Michael loved life so much, loved you so much. He'd hate seeing you just... existing instead of living."

Fresh tears spilled as she pulled me close again, holding me while years of guilt and grief poured out. The kitchen clock kept steady time, marking moments between sobs until I could breathe normally again.

"Tell me about it," Rachel said finally, returning to her own chair. "About Alex. About that night."

"Rach—"

"Not the details," she clarified quickly. "Just... was it good? Did he make you feel safe?"

I thought about Alex's rooftop garden, about gentle hands and patient understanding. About how he'd known exactly when to push and when to wait. "Yeah," I admitted softly. "It was... right. Even with everything else going on, even with all the complications... being with him felt right."

Rachel's smile bloomed slow and sure. "Then maybe that's all you need to know right now."

She reheated our soup, adding extra crackers the way our mother always had. We talked about easier things – her pregnancy, David's latest firefighting stories, the way our father still couldn't work his new phone. But when I stood to leave, she caught

my arm.

“Love isn't a finite resource,” she said softly. “Your heart isn't betraying Michael by making room for someone new. It's honoring him by remembering how to live.”

“When did my little sister get so wise?” I asked, trying to lighten the moment.

“Probably around the time my big brother started being an idiot about his feelings.” She threw a dish towel at my head with perfect aim. “Besides, someone has to keep you functioning. It's a full-time job.”

“Says the woman who called me at 3 AM because she couldn't decide what color to paint the nursery.”

“That was a legitimate crisis!” She protested, hand resting on her growing belly. “And you're changing the subject. We were talking about you and Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Sophisticated.”

I groaned. “Please don't call him that.”

“Would you prefer 'Your Dreamy Developer'? 'Architecture Appreciation Society President'?”

“I'm leaving now.”

“Oh no you're not.” She blocked my path to the door with surprising agility for someone seven months pregnant. “Not until you promise to stop overthinking everything. And maybe answer your phone once in a while? Some of us worry when our surgeon brother goes mysteriously silent.”

“Fine,” I conceded, pulling her into a hug. “But only because I'm afraid you'll waddle



after me if I don't agree.”

“I do not waddle!” She smacked my arm. “I glide gracefully, thank you very much.”

“Whatever you say, duck.”

“Get out of my house,” she laughed, but pulled me in for one more fierce hug. “And Eli? Be happy. That's all any of us ever wanted for you.”

The front door opened before I could respond, bringing a blast of cool night air and David's familiar heavy footsteps. My brother-in-law looked exhausted but brightened when he saw us in the kitchen.

“Thank god you're here,” he said, dropping his gear bag by the door. “Maybe you can talk sense into your sister about the crib placement. She's been rearranging furniture at midnight again.”

“It's about optimal flow!” Rachel protested. “The feng shui?—”

“The feng shui was fine last week,” David interrupted, kissing her temple as he passed. “And the week before that. And the week before that.”

“Michael said—” She stopped, glancing at me apologetically, but I found myself smiling.

“Michael said the orientation of furniture affects the energy of a space,” I finished for her. “And that a baby's room needs perfect balance between practical function and spiritual harmony.”

“He spent three hours explaining it to me with diagrams,” David recalled, grinning as he pulled leftovers from the fridge. “Complete with historical references and

mathematical equations.”

“That's because you kept asking questions to wind him up,” Rachel accused, but her eyes were bright with happy memories.

“He was so passionate about it,” David shrugged, mouth full of cold chicken. “It was like watching one of those nature documentaries where the expert gets really excited about moss or something.”

The laughter bubbled up before I could stop it – real, unguarded, full of love for the man we'd lost and the memories we shared. Rachel beamed at me, and I knew she'd been right. Loving Alex didn't mean forgetting Michael. It meant having more stories to tell, more love to share.

“You staying for a beer?” David asked, already reaching for the fridge.

“I should go,” I said reluctantly. “Early shift tomorrow. ”

“Running away before I can make you move more furniture, you mean,” Rachel teased.

“Absolutely.” I hugged her again, then accepted David's one-armed embrace. “Take care of my sister.”

“Always do.” David's steady gaze held understanding beyond his words. “You take care of yourself too, yeah?”

The drive home felt different somehow, Rachel's words echoing in my mind. My phone showed missed calls from Sofia that I still wasn't ready to deal with, a text from Alex full of careful space and understanding. My hands were steady on the wheel, but my world felt shifted on its axis.

### CHAPTER 21

#### Jazz Nights

The balcony glowed in shades of gold and shadow, turning the city into something almost sacred. I'd been avoiding this space since Michael died – too many memories of shared evenings, of architectural plans spread across the small table while Manhattan glowed around us. But lately, I'd found myself drawn here during quiet moments, watching light paint new patterns across familiar views.

My phone buzzed just as the last rays caught the hospital's distant silhouette. Alex's message was simple: “Are you free?” followed by coordinates to somewhere in Manhattan.

I should say no. Should maintain the careful distance I'd been trying to keep since everything started shifting sideways. Instead, I found myself typing “yes” before I could think too hard about why.

The rational part of my mind immediately started listing reasons this was a bad idea. I wasn't ready. Wasn't sure what I felt about any of this. Wasn't even convinced I believed Alex's impossible stories about past lives and eternal love.

I watched night claim the city, each streetlight flickering to life like stars being born. Michael and I used to play a game on evenings like this – guessing which light would ignite next, making up stories about the lives happening behind each window. The memory should have hurt more than it did. Instead, it felt like something I could carry without breaking, a foundation I could build upon rather than a weight holding me

down.

My phone buzzed again – Rachel this time, her timing suspicious as always. “Wear the grey sweater,” she texted, somehow knowing about plans I hadn't shared. “The one that makes your eyes look greener.”

I smiled despite myself, imagining her teacher-voice delivering fashion advice. She'd been hovering less lately, her protective instincts softening as she watched me start to heal. Start to live again, not just exist.

The club wasn't what I expected. No neon signs or velvet ropes, just an unmarked door on a quiet street in Manhattan. Jazz notes spilled onto the sidewalk like liquid gold, making the autumn air feel warmer somehow. More alive.

Alex waited outside, and something in my chest tightened at the sight of him. Moonlight caught the grey at his temples, making him look timeless in a way. His smile held no pressure when he saw me, just quiet joy.

“Thank you for coming,” he said simply, holding the door.

The stairs leading down felt familiar though I knew I'd never walked them before. My hand found the railing automatically, muscle memory from a lifetime I shouldn't remember guiding my steps. But I pushed that thought aside, focusing instead on the music growing stronger with each step.

The space opened before us like a dream made real – all warm woods and subtle lighting, tables scattered around a small stage where a quartet played something slow and sweet. The music hit me like a physical force, not memory exactly but something deeper. My hands tingled with phantom sensations, fingers wanting to dance across keys that weren't there.

I must have made some small sound because Alex's attention sharpened. But he didn't comment, just led us to a corner table where the music wrapped around us like a private embrace. The server appeared with water I hadn't asked for but somehow needed, her movements precise as she navigated the intimate space.

“The pianist reminds me of someone,” Alex said carefully, not pushing but offering space to talk if I wanted it. “The way she holds her hands, like she's telling stories with every note.”

I watched her fingers move across the keys, recognizing something in her posture that felt impossibly familiar. “I never learned piano,” I said, but the words felt hollow even to me. “Never had time, with medical school and residency...”

“But your hands remember,” he finished softly. Not a question, just quiet understanding.

The music shifted into something bluer, older, full of wanting and hope. Around us, other patrons swayed slightly in their seats, caught in the spell being woven on stage. But I felt it differently – felt it in my bones, in muscles that shouldn't know these rhythms, in hands that ached to join the conversation happening in melody and harmony.

“I dream about places like this,” I admitted, the confession feeling safer in jazz-warmed shadows. “Smoky clubs in Paris, music that sounds like this but different. Sometimes I wake up with songs in my head that I've never heard before.”

Alex's smile held no triumph at my words, just warmth. “The past has its own music,” he said. “But so does the present.”

The server returned with drinks we hadn't ordered – his exactly right, mine perfect. I should have questioned how he knew, but somehow it felt natural. Like everything

about this evening, it walked the line between strange and familiar in ways I was learning not to overthink.

“Tell me about your day,” Alex said, shifting the conversation to safer ground. “How's the new trauma protocol working out?”

Gratitude washed through me at his gift of normalcy. We talked about hospital politics, about Sofia's uncanny ability to manage difficult board members, about the satisfaction of systems working exactly as designed. He listened with genuine interest, asking questions that showed he'd been paying attention to the things that mattered to me in this life, not just our supposed past ones.

The quartet took a break, and softer recorded jazz filled the comfortable silence between us. I found myself relaxing into the moment, into good company and better music and the strange peace of being exactly where I needed to be.

“Michael would have loved this place,” I said suddenly, surprising myself with how easily the words came. “He always said good jazz was like good architecture – all about the spaces between things.”

Alex's expression held no jealousy, just understanding. “He sounds like someone who understood the importance of negative space. Of letting silence speak as loudly as sound.”

“He did. He taught me to appreciate things I would have missed otherwise. To look for beauty in unexpected places.”

“Some loves do that,” Alex agreed softly. “Change how we see the world, make us better versions of ourselves.” His eyes met mine across the table. “All loves do that, if we let them.”

The quartet returned, and conversation settled into comfortable quiet as we listened. The pianist started something that made my fingers twitch with recognition, though I knew I'd never heard it before. Or had I? In another life, another time, another...

“Stop thinking so hard,” Alex murmured, gentle amusement in his voice. “Just listen. Just be here, now.”

So I did. I let the music wash over me without trying to catalog memories that might or might not be mine. Let myself exist in this moment – this space, this time, this version of myself that was still learning how to hold both past and present without breaking under their combined weight.

The first song ended, another began, and suddenly I wasn't there anymore.

The smoke hangs thick in Le Chat Noir, turning stage lights into halos as my fingers find their home on ivory keys. The piano is older than I am – this version of me anyway – its action worn smooth by countless hands before mine. But we understand each other, this instrument and I, speaking a language older than words.

The crowd tonight is typically Parisian, sophisticated ennui masking desperate hunger for beauty after the war's ugliness. They pretend not to listen too closely, but I feel their attention like a physical thing. It's 1924, and the world is trying to remember how to dream.

He's here again – the man with sea-blue eyes who watches from the shadows. Alexandre, though he hasn't told me that yet. Won't tell me for weeks, though we both feel the recognition humming between us like a forgotten melody. I play for him without admitting it, letting my fingers tell stories we're not ready to voice.

The song pours through me like warm honey, bittersweet and perfect. My hands know these rhythms, this dance of melody and harmony that speaks of lives we can't

quite remember. When I close my eyes, I see other places – sun-drenched temples, paint-stained studios – but those memories are still too fragile to examine closely.

So I play instead, letting music say what we can't. Alexandre listens from his usual table, understanding everything I'm not saying. His presence feels like anchor and wings both, holding me steady while letting me soar. We're both pretending we don't recognize souls older than this music, older than this city, older than these versions of ourselves.

The memory faded as gently as it had come, leaving me breathless in the present. Alex sat close enough to touch but didn't, letting me navigate the space between then and now. His eyes held the same warmth they had in Paris, but tempered now with hard-earned wisdom.

The quartet shifted into something slower, achingly familiar though I couldn't say why. Around us, other patrons swayed gently to the music, creating intimate spaces within the larger room.

“Dance with me?” Alex asked softly, his voice barely carrying over the music.

It should have felt too intimate, too soon. My wedding ring caught the dim light, reminding me of all the reasons to say no. But as I stood, letting him guide me to the small dance floor, it felt like coming home.

We moved together as if we'd never forgotten how, my hands finding their places without conscious thought. Other couples danced nearby, their presence creating a strange privacy in plain sight. Alex held me like I was something precious, something that might disappear if held too tight. His careful respect for my boundaries made them feel less like walls and more like bridges waiting to be crossed.

My hands remembered this too – the way we fit together, the gentle sway, the quiet



certainty of belonging. But it wasn't just memory. This was new too, different from Paris jazz clubs or Renaissance ballrooms or ancient temple celebrations. This was us now, learning each other again in this particular present.

Neither of us spoke about why this felt so natural, why our bodies knew each other's rhythms without learning them. The music wrapped around us like a living thing, creating a bubble where past and present blurred into something timeless. Somewhere between one song and the next, I noticed tears in Alex's eyes but pretended not to see them, understanding that some moments were too fragile for acknowledgment.

My own hands shook slightly where they rested on his shoulders, but for once it wasn't from remembered lives or suppressed grief. It was from now, from the overwhelming reality of this connection that felt both ancient and brand new.

“I remember the piano,” I said quietly, the confession feeling safer in our shared space. “Not just the memory of playing it, but how it felt. The weight of the keys, the way the action changed depending on the humidity. The scratch in the ivory on middle C.”

Alex's hand tightened slightly on my waist, but his voice stayed gentle. “You were magnificent. Are magnificent. Every life, every version of you – you find ways to create beauty, to heal, to make the world better just by being in it.”

“Even now?” I couldn't help asking. “Even when I'm still wearing another man's ring?”

“Especially now.” His smile held no jealousy, only understanding. “Because you're learning that love doesn't divide, it multiplies. That your heart is big enough for both memory and possibility.”

We danced in comfortable silence after that, letting the music say what words

couldn't. My head found its way to his shoulder without conscious decision, and his cheek rested against my hair like it had done a thousand times before. Like it was doing for the first time now.

The quartet played something that would have been at home in Le Chat Noir, and for a moment I felt that double-vision again – past and present overlapping like double-exposed film. But this time I didn't fight it. Let myself exist in both spaces, both times, both versions of this love that felt older than memory but new as morning.

“I used to watch you play,” Alex murmured, his voice carrying under the music. “Every night, pretending I was just another patron who appreciated good jazz. But we both knew better, didn't we? Even then, even when we were trying so hard not to remember.”

“Why didn't you ever say anything?” I asked, though I knew the answer even as the words left my mouth.

“For the same reason you never asked my name, though you wrote songs for me every night.” His hand moved in slow circles on my back, grounding me in this moment even as we talked about another.

The music shifted again, something slower and sweeter. Other couples had drifted away, leaving us alone on the small dance floor. My hands had stopped shaking, I realized distantly. For the first time in longer than I could remember, they felt completely steady.

The quartet started their final number – something slow and sweet that made time feel liquid, endless. Alex drew me closer without pushing, letting me set the pace. My head found its way to his shoulder naturally, our hearts beating in time with the music. It should have felt wrong. Should have felt like betraying Michael's memory. Instead, it felt like remembering how to breathe after holding my breath for years.

“Tell me something real,” I murmured against his collar. “Something from right now, not then.”

His chuckle vibrated through both our bodies. “Marcus tried to teach me to dance last week. Said if I was going to drag him into this romantic nonsense, I should at least not step on anyone's toes.”

“How did that go?”

“Three broken vases and one very indignant cat later, he declared me a lost cause.” Alex's hand moved in slow circles on my back. “Though I notice you haven't complained about my technique.”

“Maybe you just needed the right partner.”

The words slipped out before I could overthink them, but Alex's pleased hum made me glad I'd said them. We swayed together as the saxophone wove gold through the air around us, neither feeling the need to fill the silence with words.

I found myself noticing small details – the way his aftershave mixed with the leather of his jacket, how his thumb traced absent patterns where it rested on my waist, the steady thrum of his heartbeat under my cheek. Not memories, just moments. Just now.

After a while, the song drew to a close, but neither of us moved to separate. The quartet began packing up their instruments, the gentle chaos of ending another night at the club swirling around us. But in our corner of the dance floor, time felt softer somehow. More forgiving.

“We should probably go,” Alex said eventually, though he made no move to step away. “Before they start stacking chairs around us.”

“Probably,” I agreed, equally reluctant to break the moment .

Outside, the city hummed with late-night energy – cars passing, distant sirens, the eternal rhythm of Manhattan after dark. But we lingered in the club's doorway, neither wanting to let the evening end just yet. The autumn air felt crisp after the warmth inside, carrying hints of woodsmoke and possibility.

“Thank you,” I said softly, meaning more than the dance, more than the music. Meaning everything he'd given me tonight – space to just be, moments unmarked by memory or expectation, the chance to remember how joy felt.

Alex's smile held warmth that had nothing to do with past lives and everything to do with right now. Time stretched between us, heavy with things unsaid but not unfelt. The streetlight painted shadows across his face, making him look both familiar and new.

My rational mind – the part that had gotten me through medical school and surgical residency, through losing Michael and rebuilding some semblance of life after – knew all the reasons I shouldn't do what I was about to do.

I kissed him anyway.

The kiss was gentle, questioning, perfect. Alex's hands came up to cradle my face like he was holding something infinitely precious, infinitely breakable. I tasted salt and realized he was crying, though my own eyes were dry. When we broke apart, neither moved far – foreheads touching, sharing breath in the quiet street.

Neither of us spoke. There would be time for words later, time for complications and explanations and all the ways this could go wrong. For now, there was just this: the lingering taste of tears and hope, the echo of jazz in our blood, the sense that something important had shifted into place.

My hands hadn't shaken once all night, I realized. Not during the dancing, not during the kiss, not even now as they rested against Alex's chest, feeling his heartbeat steady and strong under my palms. Whatever this was, whatever we were becoming, it felt real in a way that had nothing to do with past lives and everything to do with present choices.

"I should go," I said finally, though I made no move to step away. "Early rounds tomorrow."

"I know." Alex's thumb traced my cheekbone gently. "This was worth every broken vase during those dance lessons."

The laughter bubbled up unexpected and free, making him smile in response. When he kissed me again, it felt like punctuation – not an ending, just a pause in a conversation we'd be continuing.

We parted without promises or plans.

The walk home felt different somehow, like the city itself had shifted slightly to make room for new possibilities. My wedding ring caught streetlight as I unlocked my door, but the sight didn't ache like it used to. Michael would always be part of me, would always be the love that taught me how to love. But maybe, just maybe, there was room in my heart for something new too.

Something that tasted like jazz and hope and the salt of joyful tears. Something that made my surgeon's hands steady and my heart remember how to beat in time with another's. Something that felt like coming home to a place I'd never been before.

I touched my lips gently, still feeling the echo of that kiss. Tomorrow would bring complications. But tonight? Tonight there was just this: the memory of dancing, the lingering warmth of Alex's hands, and the quiet certainty that whatever came next, it

would be worth facing.

Above the city, stars continued their eternal dance, watching as two souls found each other again – not because destiny demanded it, but because they chose it. One kiss at a time, one moment at a time, one beat of newly-steadied hearts at a time.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, I fell asleep without dreaming of past lives or ancient loves. Instead, I dreamed of jazz and autumn air and the taste of possibilities yet to come.

### CHAPTER 22

#### Breaking Point

The 47th floor of Rothschild Development felt different at midnight. Emptier, older somehow, like the modern veneer had worn thin enough to show the centuries beneath. I sat at my desk reviewing acquisition papers, but my mind kept drifting to last night – to jazz notes and gentle dancing and the perfect simplicity of Eli's kiss.

The memory made me smile despite the late hour and endless paperwork. My fingers touched my lips unconsciously, still feeling the echo of that moment outside the club. After centuries of searching, of finding and losing him, the tenderness of that kiss had felt like coming home.

Movement in my doorway snapped me back to the present. Will stood there, and something in my chest tightened at the sight of him. My brother's usually impeccable appearance was disheveled – tie loosened, hair wild like he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. But it was his eyes that made ancient warning signals fire in my mind. They held a manic energy I recognized from other lifetimes, other versions of this soul that had once been friend, then enemy, now brother.

“I've been having dreams,” Will said, stepping into my office without invitation. His movements were jerky, uncontrolled – nothing like his usual calculated grace. “Dreams about power. About immortality.” His voice cracked slightly. “About you.”

I rose slowly, recognizing the dangerous edge in his tone. This was what Marcus and I had feared – memories surfacing too fast, too violently, without context or

understanding to temper them.

“Will,” I said carefully, keeping my voice steady. “You should sit down. We can talk about whatever's troubling you.”

“Talk?” He laughed, but the sound held no humor. “Like you talked about the hospital project? About Dr. Monroe? About all the lives you've lived while the rest of us just die?”

His hands shook as he moved closer to my desk, and for the first time in centuries, I felt real fear of this soul that had been bound to mine through lifetimes. Not for myself – I'd faced his rage before, had survived his betrayal in that first life that started all this. But this version of him, this brother I'd grown to love in this particular present... I couldn't bear to see him torn apart by memories he wasn't ready to understand.

“How many times?” Will demanded, closer now. “How many lives have you collected? How many chances have you had while I...” He stumbled slightly, catching himself on my desk. “While I remember things that can't be real. Lives that aren't mine. Power that should be mine.”

Moonlight caught something in his hand – my antique letter opener, silver blade gleaming with deadly purpose. The sight sent memories crashing through my mind: other blades, other confrontations, other times this soul's jealousy had turned violent.

“Will, listen to me.” I kept my voice gentle despite the tension thrumming through my body. “What you're remembering – it's complicated. Dangerous. You need to let the memories come naturally, not force them.”

“Naturally?” His laugh held edges sharp enough to cut. “Like you? Perfect Alex, who gets to remember everything? Who gets to live again and again while the rest of us



stumble through one life at a time?”

He moved with unexpected speed, the letter opener slashing where my throat had been a second before. Training from countless lifetimes took over as I dodged, unwilling to hurt my brother but seeing no recognition in those familiar eyes.

“Why you?” Will screamed, grief and rage twisting his features into something ancient and terrible. “Why are you the one who gets to remember? Who gets to find him in every life while I...” His voice cracked on something between sob and snarl. “While I dream of power I can't reach, of knowledge that burns, of lives I should remember but can't?”

His next attack drove me back against the window, forty-seven floors of empty air at my back. The letter opener pressed against my throat, its blade colder than it should be, older than its apparent age.

“I should have this power,” Will growled, his free hand fisted in my shirt. “I should be the one who lives forever. In that first life, I was the one who found the scrolls, who understood what they meant. But you...” Tears tracked down his face, though he didn't seem to notice them. “You took it all.”

“No, brother.” I kept my voice soft, using the title deliberately. “I didn't take anything. The price was too high – is still too high. Every life, every memory... they're not gifts. They're punishment.”

“Liar!” The blade pressed harder, drawing a thin line of blood. “I see how you look at him. How you chase him through lifetimes. That's not punishment – that's power. Power that should be mine.”

Memory crashed over me – another blade, another confrontation, the moment in that first life when this soul's jealousy had destroyed everything. But this wasn't then. This

wasn't just another iteration of ancient patterns. This was my brother, the boy who'd followed me around with hero-worship in his eyes, the man who'd built his own success alongside mine.

“Will, please.” I didn't try to hide the tears in my own voice. “This isn't you. Not really. The memories are too much, too fast. Let me help you understand. ”

Something flickered in his eyes – recognition warring with rage. His hand shook where it held the blade, and for a moment I saw my brother through the centuries of tangled destiny.

“I dream of temples,” he whispered, his voice suddenly young and lost. “Of scrolls written in languages I shouldn't know. Of power that burns and burns and burns...” His grip tightened on my shirt. “Make it stop. Please, Alex. Make it stop.”

“I can't.” The truth hurt more than the blade at my throat. “But I can help you through it. Like I should have done in that first life, before everything went wrong.”

“Wrong?” Will's laugh held hysteria's edge. “What went wrong was you getting everything while I got nothing. Life after life, chance after chance, while I...” The blade pressed harder. “While I just die and die and die.”

The letter opener never reached its target. Will froze mid-strike, his body suddenly rigid as Marcus stepped into my office. His hand was raised in a gesture I hadn't seen in centuries, power rippling through the air like heat waves over summer asphalt.

“That's enough,” Marcus said, his usual corporate calm replaced by something older, more potent. The voice that had commanded armies, that had shaped destinies, that had watched over my family through generations.

Will struggled against invisible bonds, confusion replacing rage in his eyes. “What...

what's happening to me?" The letter opener clattered to the floor, silver catching moonlight as it spun. His voice sounded younger suddenly, almost like the boy who used to crawl into my bed during thunderstorms.

Marcus approached with measured steps, his other hand beginning to glow with subtle energy that looked wrong in this modern office of glass and steel. Power that belonged to temple walls and sacred groves, not quarterly reports and acquisition papers.

"His memories are breaking through faster than we anticipated," Marcus said, placing his glowing hand on Will's forehead. My brother's eyes rolled back, his body going slack as Marcus eased him into one of my visitor chairs. "The barrier I placed in his mind years ago is failing."

I watched my oldest friend work, ancient magic shimmering in the space between heartbeats. How many times had he done this? How many generations of my family had he watched over, protecting them from truths they weren't ready to face?

"How long have you known?" I asked quietly, though part of me already knew the answer. "About Will's memories?"

Marcus's smile was tired, worn smooth like river stones. "I've been protecting your family for generations, old friend. Since that first life, when everything went wrong." His hand stayed steady on Will's forehead, power flowing in gentle waves. "Will's soul... it remembers things it shouldn't. Things from before the curse. Before the binding that tied all of us together."

My brother slumped deeper into unconsciousness as Marcus worked, his face finally peaceful. I studied his features – so like mine in this life, when in others we'd been stranger, enemy, friend. Always connected, always reaching for something just beyond his grasp.

“The new barrier won't hold long,” Marcus warned, his voice heavy with centuries of keeping secrets. “A few days, maybe a week. His soul is too strong, too determined to remember.” He stepped back, power fading from his hands. “And growing stronger with each life.”

I knelt beside my brother, remembering summers in the Hamptons, board meetings where he'd had my back, family dinners full of inside jokes and shared understanding. “What triggered this?” I asked, though Marcus's expression suggested I already knew the answer.

“Eli.” Marcus settled into another chair, suddenly looking every one of his immortal years. “Seeing you two together, watching the pattern reassert itself... it's awakening something in him. Something dangerous.”

“He's my brother,” I said softly, brushing Will's hair back from his forehead. “Not just in this life. His soul has been bound to mine since the beginning.”

“Which makes him more vulnerable, not less.” Marcus leaned forward, his eyes holding weight of millennia. “Think, Alex. Why do you think I've stayed so close to your family through generations? Why I've watched over Will particularly?”

Understanding hit like physical pain. “Because he remembers the original binding. Not just what came after, but the moment itself. When everything changed.”

Marcus nodded slowly. “His soul carries echoes of power it wasn't meant to touch. Knowledge it wasn't meant to hold. Each life, the memories get stronger, harder to contain.”

“And seeing Eli and me together...”

“Accelerates the process. Reminds his soul of what it lost, what it tried to claim.”

Marcus gestured at the letter opener still lying on my office floor. “Tonight wasn't just jealousy or confusion. It was centuries of buried power trying to break free.”

I picked up the letter opener, its silver warm against my palm. “I should have seen it coming. The way he's been watching us, asking questions about the hospital project.”

“You've been focused on Eli.” Marcus's voice held no judgment, just understanding. “On helping him remember naturally, safely. But Will... his memories were never going to surface gently. There's too much power tangled in them, too much ancient knowledge trying to break through.”

Will stirred slightly in his chair, face twitching like he was dreaming. I wondered what he saw behind his eyes – temple fires and sacred scrolls, power that burned and burned and burned.

“How do we help him?” I asked, though I feared I knew the answer. “There has to be a way to ease him into remembering, like we're doing with Eli.”

“There isn't.” Marcus's bluntness was almost kind. “The barrier in his mind – it's not just containing memories. It's containing power that was never meant for mortal souls. Power that nearly destroyed everything in that first life.”

I remembered that moment in the temple, when Will had tried to claim immortality for himself. When jealousy and ambition had twisted something sacred into weapon. “But he's different now,” I argued. “He's my brother. He's grown beyond that first life's mistakes.”

“Has he?” Marcus's question hung in the air between us. “Or has he just been protected from making them again? The barrier doesn't just block memories, Alex. It blocks the very thing his soul keeps reaching for – the power to transcend death itself.”

The implications settled like lead in my chest. Every life, every iteration, Will's soul had been drawn to that same forbidden knowledge. And every life, Marcus had been there, placing barriers, protecting him from truth that would destroy him.

“Vale knows, doesn't he?” I asked suddenly, pieces clicking into place.

“Vale remembers more than he should, less than he needs to.” Marcus stood, moving to the window where Manhattan glittered below. “His own memories are fragmenting, distorting. He thinks he's protecting everyone, but he's only making things worse.”

“By pushing too hard, too fast.” I joined him at the window, city lights painting patterns like temple fires. “Like he did in that first life.”

“History repeats itself,” Marcus agreed quietly. “Until we learn to break the pattern.”

Will made a small sound in his sleep, almost like a child having nightmares. I turned back to him, this brother who had been so many things across so many lives.

“The barrier,” I said carefully. “How many times have you had to renew it?”

“Every life.” Marcus's voice carried weight of centuries. “Sometimes more than once, when the memories start breaking through. But it's getting harder. His soul grows stronger with each incarnation, more determined to remember.”

“And eventually?”

“Eventually the barrier will fail completely.” Marcus met my eyes steadily. “And when it does, all that ancient power, all that forbidden knowledge – it will either destroy him or transform him into something beyond mortal understanding.”

Together we moved Will to my office couch, arranging him carefully to make it look like he'd simply fallen asleep during late work. His face was peaceful now, showing no sign of the violent memories that had nearly torn him apart.

“He won't remember this episode,” Marcus explained, methodically cleaning up evidence of the struggle. The letter opener disappeared into his pocket, papers were straightened, everything returning to corporate normalcy. “But the memories are still there, building pressure. Next time might be worse.”

I touched the spot on my throat where the blade had nearly found its mark. Not the first time Will had tried to kill me, but somehow this felt different. More desperate. More primal.

“He talked about immortality,” I said quietly. “About collecting lives.”

Marcus's expression darkened as he adjusted Will's collar, erasing signs of our confrontation. “He's piecing it together wrong. Seeing the pattern but misunderstanding its nature. That makes him more dangerous than Vale ever was.”

“This shouldn't be possible,” I said, watching my brother breathe peacefully. In sleep, he looked like the boy who used to build pillow forts in our family library, who cried when I left for college, who stood beside me at every major milestone of this life. “The spell was supposed to prevent anyone else from remembering. That's why Vale cast it in the first place.”

Marcus shook his head, ancient power still shimmering faintly around his hands. “Will's different. His soul...” He paused, choosing words with immortal care. “It's older than the curse. Older than the pattern itself. I've suspected for years, but tonight confirms it.”

Cold settled in my chest as understanding dawned. “What are you saying?”

“He's not just remembering your past lives.” Marcus straightened, power fading from his hands but weight remaining in his voice. “He's remembering what came before. What caused all of this.”

The implications hit like physical force. “Before the temple? Before Vale's curse?”

“Before everything.” Marcus moved to the window where pre-dawn light was just beginning to paint the sky. “His soul carries echoes of knowledge that was old when I was young. Power that should have been lost when the first temples fell.”

I studied my brother's sleeping face, seeing him with new eyes. How many times had we played this pattern out? How many lives had his soul chased echoes of power it was never meant to touch?

“The dreams he mentioned,” I said slowly, pieces clicking into terrible place. “They're not just about our shared lives, are they?”

“No.” Marcus's reflection in the window looked ancient and tired. “He dreams of things that should be forgotten. Things that Vale's curse was meant to bury forever.”

Dawn approached as we finished making everything appear normal. My office returned to its usual corporate efficiency, all signs of ancient power and violent confrontation erased. But nothing could erase the nature of what I'd learned, the terrifying implications of Will's true nature.

“Protect Eli,” Marcus warned as we prepared to wake Will. “Your brother's obsession with immortality, his ability to remember what should be forgotten – it makes him unpredictable. Dangerous.”

I thought of Eli's steady hands, of last night's perfect kiss, of all the lives we'd lost to violence and fate. “How long do we have?”



Marcus's expression was grim as he began the spell to wake Will. "Not long enough. The pattern is accelerating. Everything's coming to a head, and this time..." He paused, ancient power shimmering around his hands one final time. "This time, Will might be strong enough to break more than just your curse."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it." Marcus's voice dropped lower, though Will showed no signs of stirring yet. "If his soul really does remember what came before – if he's accessing knowledge from before the temples, before the binding that created this pattern... He could unravel everything. Not just the curse that keeps you and Eli finding each other, but the very foundations of power that maintain balance between life and death."

The sun began to rise over Manhattan, painting my office in shades of gold and promise. But all I could see was Will's face twisted with desperate rage, his hands reaching for power he didn't understand.

Will stirred slightly, Marcus's awakening spell beginning to take effect. Soon he would open his eyes, innocent of the night's violence, unaware of the terrible knowledge building in his soul.

"What do we do?" I asked, though I feared I knew the answer.

"We watch. We wait. We try to protect him from himself." Marcus's hand hovered over Will's forehead one last time. "But most importantly – we prepare for what happens when the barriers finally fail. When all that ancient knowledge breaks free."

"And Eli?"

"Keep him close, but be careful." Marcus said. "The stronger your connection grows, the more Will's soul will fight to remember. To reclaim power it lost before recorded

history began.”

The sun rose fully, morning light transforming my office back into its usual corporate self. Will's eyelids flickered as Marcus's spell completed its work. Soon he would wake, return to being my brilliant, ambitious younger brother who built his own success alongside mine.

But I would remember. Would see the ancient soul beneath modern polish, the desperate reach for power that had shaped our pattern since before the first temples rose.

“Alex?” Will's voice was drowsy, confused. “Did I fall asleep during the merger review?”

“You've been working too hard,” I said, the lie tasting like protection. “Let me call you a car home. ”

He sat up slowly, rubbing his neck. “Weird dreams,” he muttered. “Something about temples and scrolls...”

Marcus and I exchanged glances over his head. “Work stress,” Marcus said smoothly. “You should take tomorrow off.”

Will nodded, gathering himself with his usual efficiency. But as he headed for the door, something made him pause. “Alex?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever feel like...” He hesitated, struggling with words that shouldn't mean anything. “Like you're remembering things that haven't happened yet? Or happened so long ago they couldn't be real?”

My heart ached at the lost note in his voice. “Get some rest, brother. Everything will make more sense after sleep.”

He smiled, the expression pure Will – my brother, my supporter, my friend in this life. “You're probably right. Goodnight, Alex. Marcus.”

We watched him go, waited until the elevator doors closed behind him. Only then did Marcus speak.

“The greatest threat to your love story has never been Vale's curse,” he said quietly. “It's always been Will. His soul remembering what it lost, what it never should have known in the first place.”

The sun painted Manhattan in shades of possibility, but all I could see was my brother's face twisted with ancient knowledge, his hands reaching for power that could destroy everything.

“Watch over him,” I said, though I didn't need to. Marcus had been doing exactly that for longer than either of us could remember.

“Always.”

I touched my throat where the letter opener had drawn blood, thinking of Eli's kiss and Will's rage and the pattern that bound us all together.

### CHAPTER 23

#### The Truth

Vale's brownstone caught me off guard. I'd expected something sleek and modern, cold as his hospital office. Instead, warmth radiated from every corner – ancient artifacts sharing space with medical texts, worn leather chairs that invited contemplation, walls lined with books in languages I shouldn't recognize but somehow did.

“Please, sit.” Vale gestured to the chairs with unexpected grace. His usual sharp edges seemed softer here, worn smooth like river stones. “Alex will be joining us shortly.”

“Why are we here, Vale?” I asked, unable to keep the wariness from my voice. After years of hospital politics and veiled threats, this sudden invitation to his home felt like another move in our endless game. “What's this about?”

He paused, considering his words with unusual care. “It's time for truth. All of it. But we should wait for Alex.”

“More cryptic answers?” My hands wanted to shake, but for once they stayed steady. “I've had enough of those lately.”

“I know.” Something in his expression made me look closer – a vulnerability I'd never seen before. “That's why I called you here. No more half-truths or careful dances. Just...” He gestured at the artifacts surrounding us. “Just reality, in all its

complicated glory.”

As if summoned by his words, a knock echoed through the house. Vale disappeared to answer it, leaving me alone with artifacts that pulled at memories I wasn't sure I wanted to face. A bronze bowl caught my eye – something about its patina, the precise angle of its rim, made my hands remember preparing medicines I'd never learned.

“Vale,” I called after him, my voice sounding strange in the artifact-filled space. “Whatever game this is...”

“No games,” he replied without turning. “Not anymore. We're well past that now.”

“I remember everything now. And it's time you did too.” Vale said.

Alex moved closer to my chair, protective without crowding. “Vale?—”

“I wasn't always your enemy.” Vale's words fell into the incense-laden air like stones into still water. “In Greece, I was your friend. Your protector. All of you – the whole circle.” His smile held ancient grief. “You were my finest student, Elias. The one who understood that healing could be both science and sacred art.”

He moved to a locked cabinet that seemed to hum with subtle energy. The key he produced looked too old for any modern lock, its bronze surface etched with symbols that made my eyes want to slide away.

“But watching you die, lifetime after lifetime...” His hands shook slightly as he removed an ornate box. “I thought I could save you. Break the cycle. Give you chances to find each other without this pressing down on you.”

The box itself looked ordinary enough – wood darkened with age, simple designs

carved along its edges. But something about it made the air feel thick, heavy with possibility and warning both.

“Instead,” Vale's laugh held no humor, “I created a worse one. Bound us all together in ways even the gods hadn't intended. ”

“The curse,” Alex said quietly. “The one that makes us remember.”

“Not a curse.” Vale's correction was gentle but firm. “A blessing, or meant to be. A way to ensure you'd always find each other, always have another chance at the happiness you deserved.” He set the box on his desk with infinite care. “But power has its own ideas about how it should be used. Its own way of twisting even the purest intentions.”

My hands moved without conscious thought, reaching for the box. Something about it called to the healer in me – not the modern surgeon, but something older. Something that remembered preparing medicines by moonlight, binding wounds with blessed herbs, speaking prayers over failing hearts.

“Careful,” Vale warned, but didn't stop me. “Some memories come with prices we're not ready to pay.”

The box opened with a sound like distant thunder. Inside, a vial of dark liquid caught what little light penetrated the study's heavy curtains. Beside it, something that looked like a scroll, its surface covered in writing that hurt my eyes to look at directly.

The moment Vale touched them, reality shifted.

Smoke and blood filled the air, turning Greek sunlight strange and terrible. My hands remembered everything.

We knelt in blood-soaked sand, surrounded by the dying. ,Alexandros lay still beneath my hands as I tried desperately to save him. Around us, other bodies cried out for healing I couldn't give fast enough.

Valerius knelt beside me, his priest's robes stained crimson. But his eyes... his eyes held something wild, desperate, more terrible than the battlefield chaos around us.

“I can save them,” he whispered, words echoing across centuries. “I can save all of them.”

The scroll in his hands glowed with sickly light, its surface crawling with symbols that shouldn't exist. Power radiated from it in waves that made my healer's senses scream in warning .

“This isn't right,” I heard myself say, though the voice felt both mine and not mine. “This isn't how healing should work.”

“They're dying!” Valerius's voice cracked with desperation. “All of them, everyone we love. I can stop it. I can give them – give you – another chance.”

“Some powers aren't meant for mortal hands.” The words came from memory and present both, carried understanding I shouldn't have.

But Valerius wasn't listening. The scroll's light grew stronger, terrible and beautiful, as he began to read words that hurt my ears. Power built around us like a storm about to break.

“Stop!” I tried to reach for him, but my hands were busy trying to keep Alexandros's blood inside his body. “You don't know what you're doing!”

“I know exactly what I'm doing.” Valerius's smile held madness born of too much

knowledge. “I’m saving you. All of you. Giving you chances to find each other again and again until you get it right.”

The memory crystallized, more vivid than any before. Through Elias's eyes, I watched Valerius pull a sacred scroll from his robes, its pages stained with blood and time. The text seemed to move on its own, symbols crawling across ancient parchment in ways that made my healer's senses scream in warning.

Alexandros lay wounded before us, his blood soaking into sand already dark with death. Around us, our friends – our family – scattered like broken dolls, all dying from a battle we couldn't win. The air tasted of copper and desperation, thick with smoke that turned Greek sunlight strange and terrible.

“There's a spell,” Valerius said, his voice catching on tears or smoke or both. “A way to give them another chance. All of them.” His hands shook as he opened the book to a page that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. “A way to ensure the souls we love are never truly lost.”

Ancient words began falling from his lips, each syllable cutting through battlefield chaos like knives. Power gathered around us, heavy as storm clouds, hungry as open graves. My hands – Elias's hands – never stopped working, trying to keep Alexandros's blood inside his body even as Valerius's spell reached for something that should have remained untouched.

“It came with a price,” Vale's present voice overlaid with Valerius's past, pulling me halfway back to his study. “One would remember, searching lifetimes to find their love. One would forget, protected from the pain of remembering. The others would live new lives, unknowing.”

His voice broke on the last word, centuries of regret bleeding through. “I thought I was saving you all. Giving you chances to find happiness in other lives. Instead...”



The memory shifted, fractal-like, showing me glimpses of lives I'd lived and forgotten. Renaissance Italy, where I painted masterpieces but never met Alexandros's eyes across crowded rooms. Paris in the 1920s, where our paths crossed too late, after he'd married another. London during the Blitz, where bombs fell before we could speak the truth we both felt.

Life after life, death after death, always finding each other just slightly wrong. Always reaching for connection that slipped through our fingers like smoke.

“The spell twisted,” Vale continued, his words pulling me fully back to his study. “Power like that – it has its own ideas about how it should be used. Its own way of ensuring the price is paid in full.”

My hands remembered everything now – not just the lives I'd lived, but the ones I'd missed. The almost-meetings, the near-misses, the moments when fate or circumstance or simple human fear had kept us apart.

“So you remember everything?” I asked, my voice rough with borrowed grief. “Every life, every death, every time we failed to get it right?”

“Every moment.” Vale's smile held edges sharp enough to cut. “That was my price, you see. To watch, to remember, to try to guide without interfering directly. To carry the weight of knowing while everyone else got to forget. ”

“What about Marcus?” Alex asked, his fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around mine. “Does he remember too?”

Vale's laugh was something between a chuckle and a knife's edge. “Marcus? He's not like the rest of us. He's... older. More complicated.” A distant look came into his eyes, something between reverence and caution. “Marcus doesn't just remember. He's been the architect of more cycles than any of us could comprehend.”

“What does that mean?” I pressed, the surgeon in me demanding precision.

“Some of us remember,” Vale explained, “some of us guide. Marcus? He observes. He calculates. Sometimes I think he's been playing a game so long that even he's forgotten the original rules.” He leaned forward, his intensity burning through the room. “Marcus has seen civilizations rise and fall. He's watched us repeat our patterns, our mistakes, our moments of desperate love. He doesn't just remember – he understands the fundamental rhythms of our existence in a way none of us can.”

Alex's hand found mine, warm and solid in this moment that felt both ancient and new. “But something's changed,” he said quietly. “The pattern is shifting.”

“Because of Will.” Vale moved to a cabinet I hadn't noticed before, its wood so dark it seemed to swallow light. “His soul... it remembers things from before the spell. Before the temples. Before civilization itself.”

He removed something that made the air feel thick with possibility – a small vial filled with liquid too dark to be natural. “My blood,” he explained, holding it up to catch lamplight. “Part of the original spell. The key to breaking it.”

The vial seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat, ancient power calling to the healer in me – not the modern surgeon, but something older. Something that remembered preparing medicines by moonlight and binding wounds with blessed herbs.

“With this,” Vale continued, his hands steady as he offered it to us, “you can end the cycle. Choose to remember or forget, live one life or many. I've carried this burden long enough. Watched you suffer long enough.”

“Why now?” I asked, though part of me already knew the answer.

“Because Will's memories are surfacing too fast, too violently.” Vale set the vial on

his desk with infinite care. “He's remembering power that should have died when the first temples fell. Knowledge that could unravel more than just my spell.”

Alex's grip on my hand tightened slightly. “The night in my office,” he said quietly. “When he attacked me. He was remembering, wasn't he?”

“Fragments.” Vale's correction was gentle but firm. “Pieces of truth his soul shouldn't be able to access. But each time he sees you together, each time the pattern tries to reassert itself...” He gestured at the artifacts surrounding us. “It gets harder to contain. Harder to protect him from knowledge that could destroy him – destroy everything.”

The vial caught lamplight like captured stars, its contents moving in ways that defied physics. My hands itched to touch it, to understand its mysteries with healer's senses that remembered preparing medicines in ancient temples.

“What's the catch?” I asked, medical training making me look for complications, for hidden costs.

Vale's smile held no humor, only ancient understanding. “The catch is choice. Real choice, for the first time since I cast the spell. You could choose to remember everything – every life, every love, every moment of finding and losing each other. Or...”

“Or we could choose to forget,” Alex finished softly. “Live one normal life, free from all of this”

“But Will would still remember,” I said, pieces clicking into terrible place. “Still have access to knowledge that could destroy him.”

“Yes.” Vale's single word carried centuries of regret. “His soul is beyond my power to contain now. The choice I'm offering... it's not just about your love story anymore.

It's about what happens when ancient power breaks free in a world that's forgotten how to handle it.”

“What really happened in 1893?” Alex's question cut through the study's hushed atmosphere. “You erased those memories, but you never told us why.”

Vale's hands trembled slightly as he poured another drink. “Some things were better forgotten,” he said quietly. “Even by me.”

“Not anymore.” Alex moved closer, power crackling beneath his careful control. “If Will's remembering everything, we need to know what happened. What was so terrible you had to erase an entire year?”

The study seemed to hold its breath as Vale considered, artifacts watching with ancient understanding.

“William started remembering too fast,” he said, staring into his glass. “Not gradually like this time - all at once. The memories hit him like a flood, and he couldn't... he couldn't handle the weight of them.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked, though his expression suggested he already knew.

“Imagine remembering every death, every loss, every moment of grief - all at once.” Vale's voice roughened. “He broke. Started reaching for power he wasn't ready for, trying to stop anyone else from dying. Trying to make everyone remember so he wouldn't have to carry the burden alone.”

The room felt colder as understanding dawned. I watched Alex sink into a chair, the implications hitting him hard.

“How bad did it get?” he asked softly.

“Bad enough that reality started to crack.” Vale closed his eyes, remembering horrors from a timeline that no longer existed. “His power was too raw, too desperate. People around him started remembering lives they hadn't lived yet. Started dying from memories their minds couldn't contain.”

“It spread,” he continued, voice heavy with ancient regret. “Like ripples in a pond. The more people who remembered, the more the fabric of reality strained. William couldn't stop it - didn't want to stop it. Said if everyone remembered, no one would have to die alone anymore.”

“So you erased it,” Alex said. “Erased everything.”

“I had no choice.” Vale's words fell like stones. “The damage was spreading. More people dying from forced remembering. Reality itself starting to fragment under the strain.” He met our eyes steadily. “So I reached for the darkest magic I knew. Bound time itself to make that year never happen.”

The implications settled like lead in my chest. An entire timeline erased. Lives rewritten. Memories sealed away so completely that even Will - who remembered everything - couldn't access them.

“William fought me,” Vale continued, his voice rough. “Tried to stop me from erasing what had happened. Said he'd rather reality break than lose his family again.” His hands shook as he reached for his drink. “I had to... I had to bind him first. Make him forget not just that timeline, but the very power he'd touched when everything started unraveling.”

“And now he's remembering.” Alex's words carried terrible understanding. “Not just regular memories, but the power he accessed when reality cracked. The knowledge that broke through when time itself started breaking apart.”

Vale nodded slowly. “That's why his remembering is so dangerous now. He's not just accessing past lives - he's remembering power that should never have existed in our world. Power that almost destroyed everything once before.”

The study watched with ancient eyes as we absorbed the implications. Artifacts hummed with sympathetic energy, recognizing the weight of what Vale described. This wasn't just about our love story anymore. This was about what happened when grief and love twisted into something that could break reality itself.

“So when you say his soul is beyond your power to contain...” Alex's voice trailed off as understanding hit.

“Yes.” Vale's single word carried centuries of regret. “His soul is beyond my power to contain now. The choice I'm offering... it's not just about your love story anymore. It's about what happens when ancient power breaks free in a world that's forgotten how to handle it.”

The study watched us with ancient eyes as we absorbed the implications. Everything I thought I knew about myself, about Alex, about the strange connection between us – it all shifted sideways, revealing patterns I hadn't known to look for.

“When do we have to decide?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“Soon. The pattern is accelerating. Will's memories are surfacing faster than I can contain them. And the power...” Vale gestured at the vial, at the artifacts surrounding us. “It wants to be used. To finish what it started all those lives ago.”

Alex's thumb traced patterns on my palm, grounding me in this particular present. “Together,” he said quietly. “Whatever we choose, we choose together.”

Vale nodded slowly, his usual sharp edges softened by candlelight and memory.

“Together,” he agreed. “The way it always should have been.”

The study door burst open before either could respond, wood cracking against wall with supernatural force. Will stood in the doorway, but not the Will I'd seen at hospital board meetings. Power radiated from him in waves that felt ancient and wrong.

“Finally,” he said, smile sharp. “The truth comes out.” His gaze fixed on the vial in Vale's hands with predatory intensity. “Though you've misunderstood one crucial detail.”

The air grew heavy with potential violence, making it hard to breathe. Alex moved closer to me, protective instincts from a thousand lifetimes taking over. But Will's next words froze us all in place.

“I wasn't just another soul in your circle, Valerius. I was there before. Are you forgetting that I was the one who taught you that spell.” Will said .

Vale's face went pale, ancient understanding dawning in his eyes. But Will wasn't finished. He moved into the room with terrible grace, each step radiating power that felt wrong in ways I couldn't quite explain.

“I've remembered everything for months,” he continued, his gaze never leaving the vial. “And that wall you put in my head didn't really work, brother.” The last word carried mockery sharp as broken glass. “Watching you all stumble toward understanding, watching my dear brother search lifetime after lifetime...”

His laugh held darkness older than the artifacts surrounding us. “Vale's curse was elegant, I'll give him that. But it was built on principles I created, magic I perfected long before your little circle formed.”

Alex tried to step between Will and the vial, but his brother's next words stopped him cold. "I'm the reason the pattern existed in the first place. I'm the one who made your souls bind to each other, lifetime after lifetime."

My hands began to shake as understanding crashed through me. All those lives, all those memories of finding and losing each other – they weren't just Vale's desperate attempt to save us. They were part of something older. Something darker.

"You wanted immortality," Vale breathed, his hands tightening on the vial as comprehension dawned. "Even then. You used us... used our love as fuel for your ritual."

Will's smile widened, showing too many teeth. "Love is power, old friend. And your circle's love was particularly potent. Still is." His eyes fixed on the vial with hungry intensity. "Vale's curse simply built on what I'd already created. But now..." He raised his hand, power gathering around him like storm clouds. "Now it's time to claim what's always been mine."

"All these lives," Alex said quietly, heartbreak clear in his voice. "All these searches, all these almost-meetings. You orchestrated all of it?"

"Not all," Will admitted, power crackling around his raised hand. "Vale's intervention was... unexpected. Adding his own layer to my original working. Making you remember while Eli forgot – that was a nice touch." His laugh held no warmth. "But the foundation? The way your souls reach for each other across lifetimes? That was all me."

"You were my teacher," Vale whispered, ancient grief clear in his voice. "In the temple. You taught me the healing arts, showed me how to bridge science and sacred power."



“I taught you what you were ready to learn.” Will's correction held centuries of condescension. “But the real magic, the true power... that I kept for myself. Watching you fumble toward understanding, generation after generation, never quite grasping what was really happening.”

“Why do this to us?” Alex asked.

“Because love like yours comes along once in eons,” Will replied, his voice almost gentle. “The kind of love that transcends death, that refuses to be forgotten. Do you have any idea how rare that is? How much power it generates?”

He moved closer, each step radiating authority that felt wrong in our modern setting. “Your souls were perfect – so perfectly matched, so desperately in love. The ideal fuel for a working that would grant true immortality.”

Understanding hit like physical pain. “The pattern,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt. “The way we keep finding each other, keep almost getting it right but never quite managing...”

“Generates more power with each iteration. Each near-miss, each tragic ending, each moment of almost-perfect love – it all feeds the working. Keeps me young. Keeps me strong. Keeps me remembering while the rest of humanity fumbles through their brief little lives.”

“And Vale's spell?” Alex asked, though I could tell from his expression that he already knew the answer.

“Added an interesting twist.” Will gestured at the vial, still glowing in Vale's grip. “Making you remember while Eli forgot – it created a wonderful imbalance. More fuel for the fire, more power for the working.” His laugh echoed with ancient darkness. “Though I don't think that was quite what you intended, was it, old friend?”

Vale's expression held centuries of regret. "I thought I was saving them. Giving them chances to find happiness..."

"You were playing with forces you didn't understand," Will cut him off. "Building on foundations you couldn't see. But now..." Power gathered around him like a cloak. "Now it's time to claim what's always been mine."

"Will, please," Alex said softly, and for a moment I saw the boy he must have been in this life – looking up to his older sibling, trusting him completely.

"Oh, Alex," he said, almost fondly. "Always so willing to believe the best of everyone. But I'm not really your brother. Not in any way that matters." Power crackled around his raised hands. "I'm something much, much older. Something that was ancient when the first temples rose."

### CHAPTER 24

#### Blood and Time

The Rothschild estate's library still smelled exactly like it had when we were kids – leather and wood polish and the particular dust of old money. Every corner held memories: Will helping me with calculus homework at that table by the window, sharing whispered secrets about girls behind those shelves, planning our futures in front of the fireplace that hadn't changed in three generations.

Now those same oak-paneled walls witnessed a very different scene. Will stood by our father's desk, power radiating from him in waves that felt ancient and wrong. Eli lay unconscious nearby. My own blood dripped onto imported carpet from a wound I never saw coming, copper taste in my mouth bitter as betrayal.

“You knew,” I said quietly. “All those times you helped me search through history, through family records looking for traces of past lives... you were just playing along.”

Will's smile held genuine pain. “Not at first,” he replied, fingers trailing over leather-bound volumes of Rothschild history. “Those early years, I really was just your kid brother, following you around, wanting to be like you. But then the dreams started.” His hands began to glow with power I never knew he possessed, magic that felt older than the books surrounding us. “Memories of what I was, of what I could be again.”

“Will—” I started, but he cut me off with a gesture that crackled with ancient energy.

“Do you know what it's like?” he asked softly, his voice carrying centuries of grief.

“To remember being something more than human, but being trapped in mortality? To watch everyone you love die, over and over, while you remember every single death?”

I tried to reach for him. But the power surrounding him felt wrong somehow, like something that shouldn't exist in our modern world of corporate mergers and quarterly reports.

“We can figure this out,” I offered, though blood still dripped from where his first attack had caught me off guard.

His laugh held no humor. “Like all those lifetimes when you abandoned me to chase after him?” He gestured at Eli's unconscious form. “Do you have any idea how many times I've watched you die for love? How many times I've had to stand by, pretending not to remember, while you threw your life away?”

The magical attack came without warning, sending me crashing into shelves that had witnessed our childhood study sessions. Volumes of family history rained down around me .

“I loved you,” Will said, tears streaming down his face even as power gathered around his hands again. “In every lifetime, you were my brother, my best friend. And in every lifetime, I had to watch you die.”

Another blast of power, this one barely deflected by whatever protection Marcus had woven around me centuries ago. More books fell, pages fluttering like broken wings.

“Do you know why I helped you search for Eli?” Will's voice cracked slightly. “Because at least when you found him, I got to keep you a little longer before fate took you away again.”

I pushed myself up, ignoring the way my body protested. “Will, please. This isn't you. This power – it's doing something to you.”

“This is exactly me!” The windows rattled with force of his shout. “This is what I've always been, what I was before temples rose or civilizations formed. I'm not just your brother, Alex. I'm something older. Something that remembers when magic ran wild and gods walked among mortals.”

“The dreams you told me about,” I said carefully, trying to reach my brother through whatever ancient power had claimed him. “The ones about temples and scrolls...”

“Were memories.” He moved closer, magic crackling around him like dark lightning. “Memories of teaching Vale the spells he used to bind your souls. Memories of power that existed before recorded history.” His smile held edges sharp enough to cut. “Memories of what I really am.”

My back hit another bookshelf, family photos watching our confrontation with frozen smiles. A picture of us at my college graduation caught my eye – Will beaming with pride as he adjusted my tie, both of us innocent of the tragedy already written in our souls.

“You're my brother,” I insisted, though blood still dripped from my wound. “In this life and all the others. Whatever else you were, whatever power you held – that doesn't change what we are to each other.”

“Doesn't it?” Will's voice gentled suddenly, becoming almost kind. “You don't understand, Alex. I'm not just remembering past lives like you do. I'm remembering what came before lives were even counted. Before souls learned to die and be reborn.”

The containment circle around Eli pulsed with ancient power. Will's magic had

grown stronger than I'd realized, strong enough to hold a soul that had defied death for centuries.

“Let him go,” I tried, though I knew it was useless. “Whatever you're planning, whatever you think this power will give you – it's not worth destroying everything we've built.”

“It wasn't about power,” Will's voice cracked on the words, magic still crackling around him like dark lightning. “Not really. It was about not losing you. Any of you.”

For a moment, I saw past the ancient power to the brother I'd known in this life – the little boy who used to crawl into my bed during thunderstorms, who followed me everywhere with hero-worship in his eyes. Tears streaked his face, and his hands shook even as they wielded forces that shouldn't exist in our modern world.

“In that first life, before Vale's curse, before everything – I found that immortality ritual because I couldn't bear the thought of death taking everyone I loved.”

Blood dripped steadily from my wound as understanding finally dawned. “The temple,” I breathed. “The original binding. It wasn't about gaining power for yourself.”

“I wanted to save you!” The windows rattled with force of his pain. “All of you. Our whole circle. We were happy, we were family, and then that stupid war...” His magic pulsed with each word. “I couldn't just watch everyone die. Not when I knew there was a way to keep us together.”

“But it went wrong,” I said softly, pieces clicking into terrible place. “The ritual bound our souls together instead of making us immortal.”

Will's laugh held no humor, only centuries of grief. "It worked too well. Bound you all so tightly to each other that you kept finding each other, lifetime after lifetime." Power gathered around his hands again, but now I recognized the patterns in it – magic he'd learned from watching me across centuries. "But I was left outside the circle, remembering everything, watching you all live and die and love and lose."

His next attack felt personal, intimate. I barely managed to deflect it, my own blood making the floor treacherous.

"Vale's curse just added another layer to what I'd already done." Will's voice gentled suddenly, becoming almost academic. "Made it so only one of you would remember at a time. Created this beautiful tragedy where you'd search and search, lifetime after lifetime." His smile held edges sharp as broken glass. "He thought he was saving everyone, but he was just making my ritual stronger."

"Will, please." I tried to reach for him again, ignoring how my body protested the movement. "We can find another way. Whatever you're trying to fix?—"

"Fix?" His laugh echoed with power older than civilization. "I'm not trying to fix anything, brother. I'm trying to finish what I started all those lives ago." His gaze shifted to Eli's unconscious form. "The ritual was never about immortality, not really. It was about keeping us together. All of us."

I managed to dodge another blast, but my movements were slowing. Blood marked my path across centuries-old carpet as I tried one last time to reach my brother through whatever ancient power had claimed him.

"We're together now," I offered desperately. "You and me, this life. We're family. Real family."

"Are we?" Will's eyes held too much pain, too many lifetimes of watching from the

sidelines. “How many times have I lost you to him?” He gestured at Eli. “How many times have I had to pretend not to know what was coming, had to watch you throw everything away for love?”

“That's not fair?—”

“Fair? Was it fair to be the only one who remembered? To carry the weight of every death, every loss, every moment of watching my family tear itself apart over and over?”

“There is no other way,” he said softly, ancient knowledge bleeding through modern pain. “The ritual needs the blood of bound souls at the moment of remembering. Needs the power of love that transcends death.” His gaze fixed on Eli again, calculation replacing grief. “And thanks to Vale's blood, thanks to you two finally remembering together... I can finally make it work.”

“You really loved us,” I whispered, the truth finally clear. “In that first life. Enough to reach for power that shouldn't exist. Enough to bind our souls together forever.”

“Love is the strongest magic there is. Strong enough to transcend death, to bind souls across lifetimes, to fuel rituals that shouldn't be possible. Your love for Eli, his for you – it's been feeding my working since before the first temples rose.” Will said.

Blood loss made the room spin slightly, but I forced myself to focus. “And now?”

“Now I have everything I need.” Will's smile held genuine affection beneath ancient purpose. “Vale's blood, carrying the power of his original curse. You and Eli, finally remembering together, generating more energy than ever before.” He gestured at the containment circle. “All that love, all that power, all those lifetimes of finding and losing each other – it's perfect fuel for what comes next.”



“Which is what?”

“Completion.” The word fell like stone into still water. “The ritual was never supposed to just bind souls together. It was supposed to transcend death itself. To keep us all together, forever, without need for rebirth or reincarnation.”

“At what cost?”

His smile held centuries of secrets. “Everything,” he admitted softly. “But isn't that what love is? Being willing to sacrifice everything to keep those you care about safe? To keep them together?”

I had to try one last time. Had to reach for the brother I knew was still in there somewhere, beneath all that ancient power and impossible knowledge.

“You were happy once,” I said, desperation making my voice crack. “In this life, before the memories started. We were happy.”

I saw Will flinch, saw a flash of the little brother who used to crawl into my bed during thunderstorms. Who cried when I left for college, who stood beside me at every major milestone of this particular life.

“I can't do it again,” he whispered, magic flickering around his hands like dying stars. “I can't watch you die knowing I'll remember every detail for centuries.”

“Then let us help you,” I pleaded, taking a careful step forward despite how my wounds protested. “You're not alone in this, Will. You never were.”

For one heartbeat that felt eternal, I saw hope flicker in his eyes. Saw the boy who'd followed me everywhere, who'd wanted nothing more than his big brother's approval. Who'd loved our family enough to break reality itself, just trying to keep us together.

Then Eli stirred in the containment circle, and something hardened in Will's expression. Ancient power overwhelmed modern grief, centuries of pain crushing that brief moment of connection.

“I'm sorry,” he said, raising his hands as magic gathered like storm clouds. “But I can't lose you again. I won't.”

The blast caught me square in the chest, sending me crashing into our father's prized Monet. Canvas ripped beneath my weight as I fell, blood staining priceless art while childhood memories rained down around me in shattered frames.

“I love you, brother,” Will said softly, and I heard truth beneath the power. “That's why I have to do this.”

Darkness crept in at the edges of my vision as I watched him lift Eli with magical bonds. His hands dangled limply, still beautiful even unconscious. Will cradled him with terrible gentleness, as if he understood exactly how precious this soul was – not just to me, but to the pattern he'd created so long ago.

“Sometimes love means making impossible choices,” Will's voice seemed to come from very far away as he opened a portal of pure magic. Light that shouldn't exist bent around him like reality giving up its claim. “You taught me that, across every lifetime.”

His tears fell like centuries of rain as he stepped toward the portal. Each drop carried weight of every death he'd witnessed, every loss he'd been forced to remember while the rest of us got to forget.

I tried to move, to speak, to reach for him one last time. But blood loss and magical damage won out, pulling me toward unconsciousness that felt like giving up.

The last thing I saw before darkness took me completely was Will's face – ancient and young, powerful and broken, my brother and something so much older. The portal closed behind them with a sound like reality surrendering, leaving me bleeding among scattered memories of happier days.

Understanding came too late: sometimes the greatest monsters are born from the deepest love. Sometimes the worst damage comes from hearts that feel too much, that refuse to let go even when they should.

My brother, who had loved us enough to break the world.

My protector, who had carried the weight of remembering through countless lifetimes.

My betrayer, who couldn't bear to lose us one more time.

Darkness finally claimed me completely, but not before one last thought crystallized with perfect clarity – Will had never wanted power for its own sake. He had only ever wanted what all of us wanted:

To keep his family together.

To stop death from taking those he loved.

To find a way to make love last forever, no matter the cost.

The library of our childhood watched in silence as I fell unconscious among broken frames and scattered memories. Each photo, each leather-bound book, each artifact of this particular life bore witness to a truth I hadn't understood until it was too late.

Consciousness faded completely as Will's portal closed, taking with it everything I'd

ever loved. The last sound I heard was his voice, carrying across centuries:

“I’m sorry, Alex. But love means sacrifice. You taught me that.”

Then there was only darkness.

### CHAPTER 25

#### Reason

Consciousness returned with the careful precision of post-operative awakening. My surgeon's mind cataloged symptoms automatically: slight disorientation (possible mild concussion), stiffness in major muscle groups (involuntary unconsciousness, duration unknown), lingering metallic taste (magical sedation, if such things existed).

The scent hit me next – ancient herbs and burning candles, but not the commercial kind. These smelled older, more sacred.

When I opened my eyes, the space around me felt heavy with age. Stone walls held centuries of secrets, perhaps part of the Rothschild estate's foundations. An intricate circle surrounded me, its symbols pulsing with soft light that made my medical training want to argue about impossible things.

Will knelt nearby, and something in my chest ached at the sight of him. His usual corporate polish had cracked completely, revealing something ancient and terrible beneath. But his movements remained gentle, almost tender as he arranged items that looked centuries old: a bronze bowl that pulled at healer's memories, Vale's vial of blood, a knife that seemed to drink in candlelight.

“I'm sorry about the restraints. But we both know you'd try to stop this, and I can't...”  
His voice cracked slightly. “I can't let that happen.”

Even now, even bound in this ancient space with power humming around us, I

couldn't help wanting to heal whatever was broken in him.

“Alex is alive,” Will added, answering the question I hadn't asked but needed desperately to know. Relief flooded through me, making the symbols beneath me pulse brighter. “I couldn't...” He touched a family photo he'd brought down here, propped against the bronze bowl like an altar offering. “Even now, I couldn't kill my brother.”

“Will,” I started, but he shook his head, ancient grief clear in his expression.

“You don't understand yet,” he said, hands shaking slightly as he uncorked Vale's vial. The contents moved in ways that defied physics, making my scientific mind want to shut down. “In every lifetime, I've watched you both find each other. Watched you love and lose and die, over and over.”

His laugh held centuries of pain as he began arranging candles in a pattern that felt older than civilization. “Do you know what it's like to remember every death while pretending to be just another person in your story?”

“The pattern was beautiful, really,” Will continued, movements precise despite the tremors. “The way your souls reach for each other across lifetimes, generating more power with each tragic ending.” He touched the vial again, almost reverently.

“You sound almost proud,” I said, keeping my voice steady despite how the magic made my skin crawl. “Like an artist admiring his work.”

His smile held edges sharp as surgical blades. “Aren't you proud when a particularly difficult surgery succeeds? When all your skill and knowledge come together perfectly?” He gestured at the circle surrounding me. “This is my masterpiece. My greatest working. The spell that bound souls across death itself.”

I watched him work, this man who had been Alex's brother in this life but something much older in others. His movements carried the same careful precision I used in surgery, each item placed with exact purpose.

“You're shaking,” I noted, medical training making me catalog symptoms even now. “The magic – it's hurting you.”

Will paused, something almost gentle crossing his features. “Still trying to heal, even now? That's why it had to be you, you know. Your soul's dedication to mending what's broken... it made the pattern stronger. More pure.”

He began to chant in a language that felt older than time, each word making the symbols around me pulse brighter. Power built in the air, heavy as storm clouds, hungry as open graves.

“Your love for Alex, his for you – it's been the foundation of everything,” Will explained between verses. “Pure enough to transcend death, strong enough to fuel magic that shouldn't be possible.” His hands steadied as he worked, ancient power overwhelming mortal exhaustion. “But it was never just about you two. It was about all of us. About keeping our family together, no matter what.”

The bronze bowl began to glow as he added ingredients my healer's senses recognized: herbs blessed under full moons, water from sacred springs, things that shouldn't exist in our modern world but somehow did.

“Why tell me this?” I asked, though part of me already knew the answer. “Why explain anything?”

“Because you're a healer.” Will's smile held genuine warmth. “In every life, every incarnation – you try to understand what's broken. Try to fix what's damaged.” He touched my restraints again, checking for any signs of harm. “Even now, bound and

helpless, you're trying to diagnose what's wrong with me. Trying to find a way to heal whatever made me this way.”

He wasn't wrong. Even as he prepared what was clearly a ritual of enormous power, my doctor's mind kept noting symptoms: the way fatigue dragged at his movements, how using magic seemed to age him slightly, the tremors that suggested he was pushing himself beyond safe limits.

“There's nothing wrong with me,” Will continued softly.

“Let me help you,” I offered, meaning it despite everything. “Whatever you're trying to fix, whatever pain you're carrying – there are other ways.”

Will's smile held centuries of secrets as he lifted Vale's vial. “That's exactly what I'm doing,” he said gently. “Fixing everything. Making it so we never have to lose each other again.”

The symbols beneath me flared as he began the ritual in earnest, power building in ways that made my medical mind want to shut down completely. But my hands... my hands remembered other magics, other healings, other ways of mending what was broken.

The ritual halted abruptly as Vale appeared in the doorway, looking ancient and tired in ways that had nothing to do with physical age. Alex stood beside him, bloodied but alive, his eyes finding mine immediately across the candlelit space.

“I wondered when you'd find us,” Will said, sounding almost relieved. His hands never stopped moving through ritual preparations, but something in his posture shifted. “You always were the protector.”

Vale moved into the room with careful steps, his doctor's hands steady despite



everything. Even now, even here, I recognized his surgeon's grace – the same precise movements I'd watched in countless operations.

“You're right about the pain,” he told Will, voice gentle as delivering difficult news to a patient's family. “That's why I tried to stop it, all those centuries ago.”

Alex tried to move forward, but ancient power held him back.

“But this isn't the answer,” Vale continued, moving closer to my containment circle. His eyes met mine with centuries of regret, healer recognizing healer across time. “I thought I could save them too, once. Thought I could break the cycle of loss.”

Will's magic crackled in warning, making the candles flicker, but Vale didn't stop. “All I did was change the pattern, make it more complex. The same thing you're trying to do now.”

“You don't understand,” Will's voice held equal parts anger and pain. “Your curse just made everything more beautiful, more perfect. The power it generates...” His hands glowed with ancient energy. “It's almost enough. Almost ready.”

“Will, please,” Alex tried again, straining against magical bonds. “This isn't you. This isn't what you wanted.”

“Isn't it?” Will's laugh held no humor. “Haven't I always wanted to keep us together? To stop death from taking everyone I love?”

The air grew thick with power as Will raised his hands, ancient magic gathering like storm clouds. Vale moved closer still, ignoring the danger with a doctor's focus on what needed to be done.

“I understand better than you think,” he said softly. “But this...” He gestured at the

ritual circle, at the symbols pulsing beneath me. “This will only make it worse.”

Everything happened too fast after that. Will's spell launched, deadly and precise – magic learned from watching Alex across centuries. Vale moved with unexpected speed, placing himself between the power and my containment circle.

The impact threw him across the room, but his sacrifice did something unexpected – it broke the containment circle, shattering the symbols with a burst of light that made my medical mind want to argue about impossible things.

“I'm sorry,” Vale gasped as I rushed to his side, doctor's instincts taking over despite everything. Blood stained his lips as I checked his vitals, my hands remembering battlefield medicine from lives I shouldn't recall. “For everything. For all of it.”

Alex knelt beside us, his own bonds broken by whatever Vale's sacrifice had done. Will stood frozen, power still crackling around his hands but expression shattered as he watched him bleed.

“Stay still,” I ordered, trying to assess the damage. But this wasn't physical injury – this was magic older than medicine, power that shouldn't exist in our world of surgical steel and evidence-based treatment.

“Remember,” Vale whispered. And with that single word, everything changed.

“No,” Will's voice cracked as he watched understanding dawn in my eyes. “No, it's too soon. The ritual isn't ready.”

But Vale wasn't finished. His hand found Alex's, completing some circuit of power none of us had known to look for. “Remember,” he said again, and Alex's gasp told me he was experiencing the same flood of memory.

“What have you done?” Will's magic flared dangerously, making reality feel thin around us. “The pattern – it's breaking.”

“No,” Vale managed, though blood stained his teeth. “It's healing. The way it always should have.” His eyes found Will's, carrying understanding that transcended anger. “You were right about one thing – love is the strongest magic. But not when it's bound and caged. Only when it's freely given.”

“Brother,” Alex said softly, and something in his voice made Will's power falter. “Let us help you. Let us all help you.”

Will's hands shook as he looked at the tableau before him – his ancient teacher bleeding, his eternal brother reaching out, the healer he'd bound through lifetimes finally remembering everything.

“I can't,” he whispered, but his magic dimmed slightly. “I can't watch you die again. Any of you.”

“Then don't,” Vale gasped, his voice growing weaker. “Choose differently. Choose to let love heal instead of bind.”

The candles flickered as Will fought some internal battle, ancient power warring with modern love. I kept working on Vale, trying to stabilize him with everything I'd ever known about healing – modern medicine and sacred arts combining in ways that shouldn't be possible.

“Remember,” Vale whispered one final time, his eyes closing as centuries of carrying everyone's pain finally overwhelmed him. “Remember that love isn't about holding on. It's about letting go.”

The room held its breath as Vale's words hung in the air, heavy with possibility and

power. Everything balanced on this moment – Will's choice, Vale's sacrifice, the pattern that had bound us all through lifetimes.

Vale's death shattered whatever barrier had held back my memories. It was centuries of lives demanding attention all at once. My mind tried to categorize, to organize, to make sense of the flood, but there was too much. Too many lives. Too many loves. Too many losses.

The memories brought me to my knees, centuries of emotion threatening to tear me apart. My hands – healer's hands, artist's hands, surgeon's hands – pressed against cool stone as I tried to steady myself against the onslaught of remembering.

“Partial,” Will gasped as the ritual took hold, energy crackling around him like dark lightning. “Not complete immortality, but enough. Enough to keep my memories, my magic. Enough to protect what's mine.”

The ritual's completion shook the foundation, stone walls cracking with released power. I crawled to Vale's body, my healer's hands finding no pulse despite centuries of medical knowledge. Modern training merged with ancient arts as I tried everything I knew, but some deaths transcend healing.

“I never wanted to hurt anyone,” he whispered, and for a moment I saw the boy he must have been before remembering everything. “I just couldn't bear to lose you all again.”

The door burst open as Will vanished in a swirl of ancient power, leaving me kneeling beside Vale's body.

Alex reached me just as my strength gave out completely. His arms caught me as I fell, steady as they had been through countless lives. The memories crashed through me again as he held me – every version of us finding each other, loving each other,

losing each other while Will watched and remembered and tried to change fate itself .

“I remember everything,” I whispered against his chest, my voice raw with lifetimes of emotion.

“I know,” he said softly, his hand finding mine with practiced ease.

Vale's body lay still beside us, his sacrifice finally giving us the truth he'd tried to protect us from. I saw him now – not just the hospital administrator who'd been my antagonist, but a teacher who had loved us enough to try breaking the pattern, even knowing the cost.

“Will,” Alex's voice cracked on his brother's name. “All this time, he was trying to...”

“To save us,” I finished quietly. “To keep us together. To stop death from winning.” My hands shook as understanding settled deeper. “He loved us so much he broke reality itself, just trying to keep his family safe.”

The foundations continued cracking around us as ancient power dissipated. Modern emergency lights flickered on, harsh fluorescents replacing ritual candlelight. The contrast felt wrong somehow – scientific reality trying to assert itself over older magics.

“We have to find him,” Alex said, but we both knew it was too late. Will had what he wanted – enough power to keep his memories, to continue watching over us through lifetimes. Not true immortality, but something close enough to maintain his eternal vigil.

My eyes caught the empty vial on the floor – the one that had held Vale's blood before Will used it in his ritual. Without really knowing why, my surgeon's hands reached for it. Vale's fresh blood still stained the stone floor where he'd fallen. Acting

on instinct older than medicine, I carefully collected what I could.

“Just in case we need it,” Alex said quietly, understanding without needing explanation.

### CHAPTER 26

#### Sacred Ground

“Anything on Will?” Alex asked Marcus on the phone while helping Eli walk.

“Will's been spotted at Presbyterian,” he said without preamble. “In the historic wing.”

My hands clenched at those words. The historic wing - where everything had shattered in 1893. Where Vale had been forced to erase an entire year to save reality itself. The place where Will had first broken under the weight of remembering too much, too fast.

“Alex?” Eli's voice pulled me back. “What's significant about the historic wing?”

“It's where Will first remembered everything,” I explained, memories crashing through me. “The original operating theater there - it was built on foundations older than the hospital itself. Something about that space amplifies memories, makes the past feel more... present.”

“That's why Vale tried to keep the renovation plans away from that wing,” Eli realized. “Why he fought so hard against any changes to the original structure.”

“He was trying to contain the power that still lingers there.” My voice roughened as understanding deepened. “Will's memories first surfaced in that operating theater. Something about watching you perform surgery there, seeing your hands move with

knowledge from other lives... it triggered everything.”

I helped Eli navigate a dark corridor as I continued. “The space remembers too - holds echoes of every life, every healing, every moment when past and present blurred together. That's why Will kept coming back there in this life, why he was so obsessed with the hospital's history. His soul recognized it as the place where reality first cracked.”

“And now he's gone back.” Eli's hands were steady despite everything. “With Vale's blood and all that stolen power.”

“Of course he has.” The words tasted bitter. “Where else would my brother go, now that he had the power he'd spent lifetimes reaching for? The hospital where everything had converged in 1893, where patterns older than time itself had begun to repeat.”

The historic wing of Presbyterian felt different at midnight – older somehow, like the modern veneer had worn thin enough to show the centuries beneath. Every step echoed with memory as I tracked Will through empty corridors, following the trail of disturbed energy. His new power pulsed like a wound in reality, drawing us inevitably toward the original operating theater.

Eli moved silently beside me, his surgeon's grace making him at home in these halls even at this strange hour. We didn't need words to understand that this had to end where it started – in the room where a doctor with his face had once tried to save a patient with mine, while Will watched and remembered and reached for power that shouldn't exist.

The operating theater stood preserved like a museum piece, its antique equipment catching moonlight through high windows. Will waited in the center, magic crackling around him like dark lightning. The partial immortality he'd claimed using Vale's



blood had changed him – his eyes glowed with ancient power, his movements too fluid to be human.

“I wondered when you'd find me,” he said, his voice echoing strangely off century-old tiles. “You always do, don't you? Find what you're looking for?” The words carried double meaning, making my heart ache for the brother I'd already lost. His gaze shifted between Eli and me, centuries of watching us find each other visible in his expression.

“Will, please,” I started, but his laugh cut me off – not the warm sound I remembered from family dinners, but something older and more terrible.

“Still trying to save me, big brother?” Power crackled around his hands as he moved closer. “Some things can't be saved. Some choices can't be undone.” His smile held edges sharp enough to cut. “But that's the point, isn't it? Why I had to become this. So I never have to watch you die again.”

His attack came without warning, magic tearing through the air with killing intent. I barely managed to push Eli clear, taking the blast across my shoulder. The pain was extraordinary – not just physical damage, but something deeper. Soul-deep. Like Will's power was trying to unmake me across all my lifetimes.

“I'm stronger now,” Will said, advancing with terrible purpose. Ancient tiles cracked beneath his feet as power continued building around him. “Strong enough to keep you this time. To keep you both.”

His next strike brought me to my knees, centuries of memories flickering like dying stars behind my eyes. I saw him as he'd been in every life – the loyal brother, the watching guardian, the soul that loved us enough to break reality itself just trying to keep us safe.

“Will,” I gasped through pain that transcended physical limits, “this isn't you. This power – it's changing you.”

“This is exactly me!” The windows rattled with force of his shout. “This is what I've always been, what I was meant to become. Strong enough to protect what's mine. Strong enough to stop death from winning.”

Eli moved with healer's grace, trying to reach me, but Will's magic held him back. “You can't save him,” my brother said, almost gently. “That's the point of all this. No more saving, no more healing, no more watching everyone die while I remember everything.”

“The remembering was your choice,” I reminded him, struggling to my feet despite how reality itself seemed to waver around us. “In that first life, before the temples. You chose to carry that burden.”

“Because someone had to!” Power flared brighter around his hands. “Someone had to remember, had to keep the pattern strong. Had to watch over everyone since none of you could be trusted to stay alive!”

The last word cracked with pain older than civilization, and for a moment I saw my brother clearly through the ancient power that had claimed him. Saw the soul that had loved us too much, that had reached for impossible things just trying to keep his family safe.

“Let us help you,” I tried again, though blood dripped from where his first attack had landed. “Whatever this power is doing to you, however it's twisting you – we can face it together. Like we always have.”

“Together?” His laugh held centuries of watching from the sidelines. “Like all those lives where you chose him over me? Where I had to stand back and watch you throw

everything away for love?”

Another blast of power, this one catching me square in the chest. More memories flickered and died – lives where Will had been my brother, my friend, my guardian through time. Lives where he'd helped me search for Eli, knowing exactly where to look but pretending not to understand why it mattered.

“Do you know what it's like? To love someone that much and still have to watch them die? Over and over and over again?”

“Yes,” I said quietly, making him flinch. “I do know. Because I remember everything now too. Every death, every loss, every time fate or circumstance kept us apart.” I managed another step forward despite how his power tried to hold me back. “But that's the point, isn't it? Love means accepting that loss is part of the pattern. That holding on too tight just breaks what we're trying to protect.”

Then his gaze fell on Eli again, and something hardened in his expression. “No,” he said softly, raising his hands as power gathered like storm clouds. “Love means sacrifice. Means becoming strong enough to keep what's precious safe.” His smile held centuries of secrets as magic crackled around him. “Even if that means becoming something terrible in the process.”

The operating theater watched with century-old eyes as Will's power built to impossible levels. Everything we'd been to each other in this life – brothers, friends, protectors – it cracked like the tiles beneath his feet, revealing something ancient and hungry beneath.

My brother. My betrayer. My eternal guardian.

The operating theater doors burst open with enough force to crack century-old wood. Marcus entered first, power gathering around his hands like storm clouds. But before

anyone could move, Will's voice cracked with recognition.

"The circle," he said. "Our circle. That's what this was always about, wasn't it?"

"You remember," Sofia said softly. "The temple, the healing circle we formed. Before the wars, before the rituals. When we were just... family."

I felt Eli tense beside me as Will's laugh edged toward madness. "Family. Yes. That's what we were, weren't we? Healers and guardians, bound by something stronger than blood. Until death started taking us one by one."

"We were more than that," Sofia corrected, her voice carrying temple authority. "We were balance. Each of us playing our part - Eli with his healing gifts, Alex with his protective strength, Marcus grounding us all. You, Will, with your brilliant mind and endless love for us. And me..."

"The High Priestess," Will finished. "Keeping us in check. Maintaining the balance between mortal and divine." His hands trembled slightly. "Until the plague came. Until we started losing everyone."

The operating theater hummed with ancient power as understanding crashed through me. In that first life, we hadn't just been individuals - we'd been a sacred circle. Healers and protectors working together, becoming family through choice rather than blood. Will's desperate love made terrible sense now - he wasn't just trying to save a brother, but an entire family that death had torn apart.

"You were the first to break," Sofia said gently. "Watching us die one by one. You couldn't bear it, couldn't accept that even our combined power couldn't stop death itself."

"So I found a way!" Will's voice cracked with desperate triumph. "Found texts older

than our temples, magic that could bind souls together forever. Make it so we'd never lose each other again."

"But the price," Sofia's words carried ancient grief. "The price was too high. The ritual twisted everything - made us find and lose each other endlessly instead of resting naturally between lives. And you..." Her voice softened with compassion. "You had to remember every death, every loss, while watching from the shadows."

"Better than forgetting," Will snarled, though tears streaked his face. "Better than letting my family scatter to the winds. We were everything together - healing and protection, wisdom and love. I couldn't... I couldn't let that end."

Understanding hit me like physical force. Will's insanity wasn't just from loving his brother too much - it was from watching his entire family die lifetime after lifetime. The circle that had once channeled healing magic torn apart by death, only to find each other too late in every subsequent life.

"That's why you've been watching," I said to Sofia, pieces clicking into place. "Not just for Alex and me, but for all of us. Trying to maintain what's left of the original balance."

She nodded slowly. "Someone had to remember why the circle formed in the first place. Why we chose each other as family, why our combined power was meant for healing rather than immortality."

"And now you're trying to stop me?" Will's laugh held centuries of pain. "When I'm finally strong enough to make the circle whole again? To keep our family together forever?"

"Oh, Will." Sofia's voice carried infinite sadness. "That was always your tragedy - loving us so much you forgot why we came together in the first place. The circle was

never about staying together forever. It was about choosing each other every lifetime, letting love grow naturally instead of forcing it with magic.”

The operating theater thrummed with competing energies as Will gathered his stolen power. But now I understood the madness in his eyes - the desperation of someone who'd watched his chosen family die too many times, who'd twisted sacred bonds into something darker in his attempt to keep everyone together.

“That's enough,” Sofia said and Will actually stumbled back, his new power flickering as fuller recognition crossed his face.

“You,” he breathed, and for the first time since claiming partial immortality, he looked truly shaken. “It was always you, wasn't it? Watching, lifetime after lifetime.”

Sofia moved with grace that belonged to temple halls rather than hospital corridors. The power surrounding her felt different from Will's – cleaner somehow, more natural. Like the difference between spring water and wine turned to vinegar.

The battle that followed defied description. Will's dark immortality clashed with Sofia's ancient power, reality itself buckling under the strain. Marcus wove protective spells between them, his immortal grace making even combat look like carefully choreographed dance.

I found myself moving without conscious thought, centuries of muscle memory guiding my actions. Power I didn't know I possessed responded to the heat of battle, adding my strength to Sofia's assault. The old operating theater became a war zone of competing energies, marble floors cracking under supernatural strain.

“You don't understand,” Will snarled as he deflected another of Sofia's attacks. “I'm trying to save them! To keep them safe!”

“By breaking the very foundations of reality?” Sofia's power flared brighter, making the ancient equipment rattle in their glass cases. “By stealing immortality that was never meant for mortal souls?”

Will's next strike caught Marcus full in the chest, sending him crashing through antique cabinets. My old friend's immortal grace couldn't completely protect him from power that transcended natural law.

“You're one to talk about mortality,” Will sneered, pressing his advantage. “How many lives have you lived, Priestess? How many times have you watched and waited and done nothing while they died?”

“I maintained balance,” Sofia replied, her shields cracking under Will's sustained assault but her voice remaining steady. “The pattern exists for a reason, Will. Some powers aren't meant to be claimed by force.”

I tried to reach her, to add my strength to her defense, but Will's magic caught me mid-motion. Pain exploded through my body as he brought me to my knees, memories of other lives flickering like dying stars behind my eyes.

“Brother,” I gasped through agony that transcended physical limits. “Please. This isn't what you wanted.”

“You don't know what I wanted!” Will's power flared dangerously, making reality feel thin around us. “None of you ever understood. I didn't want power – I wanted to keep my family safe! To stop death from taking everyone I loved!”

Sofia's next attack actually staggered him, her ancient magic cutting through his stolen immortality like summer lightning. “And what about their choices?” she demanded. “Their right to live and love and yes, even die as they choose?”

“Choice?” Will's laugh held centuries of pain. “What choice is there in watching everyone you love die while you remember every detail? Every death, every loss, every moment of grief?”

His magic lashed out wildly, catching both Sofia and me in its backlash. I felt my connection to other lives wavering as he pressed his advantage, centuries of memories threatening to slip away under the assault.

“I watched too,” Sofia said softly, her voice carrying despite the magical chaos. “Every life, every death, every time they found each other. But I understood what you never did – love isn't about holding on. It's about letting go when we must.”

“Never,” Will snarled, power gathering around him like storm clouds. “I'll never let them go. Never watch them die again. Never?—”

His hand raised for a final strike, magic crackling with deadly purpose. But he hesitated, eyes meeting mine across the destroyed operating theater. For just a moment, I saw my little brother beneath the immortal force he'd become – the boy who'd followed me everywhere, who'd just wanted to protect what he loved.

That moment of hesitation was all Sofia needed.

Her spell caught Will from behind, ancient words of unbinding wrapped in a priestess's authority. Marcus moved instantly to join her, their combined power forming chains of pure light that wrapped around my brother like divine judgment.

Eli struggled to his feet despite his injuries, his healer's instincts warring with the reality of what needed to be done. Blood stained his shirt where Will's earlier attack had landed, but his hands remained steady as he reached for magic older than medicine.



“No,” Will gasped as the immortality began stripping away. His stolen power fought against Sofia's binding, making reality shiver around us. “Please, I can't... I can't lose them again.”

I caught him as he fell, gathering my brother close as the power tore free. His body shook with sobs against my chest, feeling smaller somehow – more human, more vulnerable. More like the boy who used to crawl into my bed during thunderstorms.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered into his hair, feeling him tremble as centuries of memory began slipping away. “I'm so sorry I didn't see your pain sooner.”

Marcus and Sofia maintained their spell, ancient magic pulling stolen immortality from my brother's flesh like poison from a wound. Eli knelt beside us, his surgeon's hands finding Will's pulse even as his older knowledge guided Sofia's working.

The immortality left Will like smoke in wind, taking lifetimes of memory with it. Each lost life aged him slightly, returning him to natural mortality with brutal efficiency. Blood trickled from his nose as power continued draining away, marking the cost of his desperate choices.

In his final moments, Will looked up at me with clear eyes. His hand found mine with fading strength, fingers cold but grip still sure.

“I loved you,” he managed, voice barely above whisper. “In every life, I loved you all so much.” His other hand reached for Eli, trying to bridge the distance one last time. “Take care of him, healer. In every life... take care...”

Eli's hands glowed with gentle light as he tried to ease Will's passing, ancient medicines mixing with modern knowledge in one final act of mercy. But we all knew it was too late. Sofia's spell ensured no resurrection this time, no more cycles of pain and remembering.

“Maybe... maybe next time...” Will's voice faded as the last of his stolen power tore free. His eyes met mine one final time, carrying a lifetime of love unburdened by immortal memory. Then he was gone, dying in my arms while broken marble recorded our grief in century-old silence.

Marcus lowered his hands slowly, ancient power settling like dust around us. Sofia's spell ensured there would be no coming back – not for Will, not anymore. Her eyes held centuries of watching as she began the words that would seal his passing permanently.

Eli's hands never stopped moving, trying everything he knew from every life he'd lived. But even the greatest healer couldn't fix what immortal power had broken. Couldn't mend a soul torn apart by its own desperate love.

I held my brother's cooling body and wept for all the lives we might have had, all the pain that love can cause when it turns desperate and dark. Eli's arms wrapped around me from behind, offering silent support as tears soaked Will's shirt.

The destroyed operating theater stood witness as my brother's body grew cold. Every broken tile, every shattered cabinet, every crack in century-old marble recorded the cost of loving too much, of trying to hold on when the greatest gift is sometimes letting go.

“He just wanted to keep everyone safe,” I managed through tears. “To stop death from winning.”

“I know,” Eli whispered, his own voice rough with grief. His hands found mine where they clutched Will's shirt, steady despite his injuries. “He loved us enough to break the world. To become something terrible, just trying to protect what mattered.”

Sofia knelt beside us, her ancient power gentled now that the deed was done. “He'll

rest now,” she said softly. “No more remembering, no more watching from the shadows. Just peace, at last.”

Marcus began the cleanup with practiced efficiency, centuries of experience handling supernatural aftermath guiding his movements.

### CHAPTER 27

#### Breaking Cycles

Dawn broke over the private cemetery on the Rothschild estate, painting everything in shades of gold and forgiveness. The morning light caught on generations of family headstones – great-grandparents who had built our empire, cousins who had expanded it, all the normal lives that Will had watched over through his endless vigil.

We lowered two caskets into carefully prepared graves. My brother lay beside the family he had tried so desperately to protect, while Vale rested nearby – not an enemy after all, but a guardian who had lost his way trying to save us all. The official story called it a tragic accident, something about structural failure in the historic wing. Only we knew the truth of what had happened in that operating theater.

My hand found Eli's as Sofia began the ancient burial rites, her priestess's voice carrying power even then. The words she spoke were older than Vale's curse, older than our cycles of love and loss. They spoke of rest and peace, of souls finally freed from the weight of remembering.

Marcus stood beside her. He held traditional offerings in hands that had helped bury too many friends – blessed herbs for Vale, acknowledging his role as healer and teacher, and a childhood photo for Will. I had chosen it carefully: Will and me building sandcastles in the Hamptons, both of us laughing at some forgotten joke. Before memories and magic had complicated everything.

“He loved too much,” I said softly, watching Will's headstone catch morning light.

The dates seemed wrong somehow – too few years to contain all he'd been, all he'd carried through lifetimes. “In the end, that was his tragedy.”

“May they find peace,” Sofia intoned, her voice carrying ancient authority. “Free from the cycles that bound them.” Power shimmered in the air as she spoke, ensuring this really was the end – no more resurrections, no more watching from shadows.

We placed roses on both graves with careful reverence. Red for love that transcended death, white for peace finally granted, purple for healing yet to come. The flowers looked almost alive in the strengthening sunlight, like they were reaching for something only they could see.

“Vale tried to protect us too,” Eli said quietly, his hand still steady in mine. “In his own way. Even when it went wrong, even when the curse twisted everything... he was trying to save us from exactly this pain.”

Marcus set his offerings with practiced grace – the herbs releasing subtle fragrance as they touched consecrated ground, the photo propped carefully against Will's headstone.

“They both wanted the same thing,” he said, voice rough with grief. “To keep death from winning. To stop love from ending.” His smile held ancient understanding. “They just forgot that endings are what make love precious in the first place.”

The morning light strengthened as we stood there, each mourning different aspects of the same loss. I saw Will as he had been in this life – my little brother, my biggest supporter, the boy who had followed me everywhere with hero-worship in his eyes. Eli remembered him as the eternal watcher, the soul that had bound us all together with desperate love. Marcus grieved the student who had reached too far, while Sofia mourned the pattern she couldn't prevent from breaking.

As we turned to leave, I felt something shift in the air. Like the earth itself was accepting this ending, making space for whatever came next. Vale's vial of blood rested heavy in my pocket, reminding me of our final task. The blood we had collected from the operating theater floor, mixed with what was left in his original vial – our last chance to break the cycles completely.

The mansion's historic wing waited ahead of us, its architecture somehow both intimidating and welcoming. This was where everything had begun in 1893, where patterns older than time itself had started to repeat. Now it would witness one last working, one final attempt to set things right.

“Are you ready?” Eli asked softly as we walked away from the fresh graves. His medical mind probably catalogued my grief like symptoms, but his healer's heart understood deeper truths.

“No,” I admitted, watching how morning light painted everything in shades of possibility. “But it had to be done. For them, if nothing else.”

Sofia and Marcus fell into step behind us, their power interweaving with practiced ease. The priestess and the immortal guardian, preparing for one last ritual to break the cycles that had bound us all.

The vial seemed to pulse in my pocket, responding to ancient magics still lingering in the air. Vale's blood mixed with his own from the operating theater floor – power and sacrifice combined, waiting to be used one final time.

But this time we would use it differently. This time we would choose to let go instead of holding on too tight. This time we would trust that love itself was enough, without trying to make it eternal.

Behind us, two fresh graves marked the end of one cycle. Ahead, the mansion's

historic wing awaited the breaking of another. Morning light guided our steps as we walked away from death toward whatever came next .

Will and Vale rested in consecrated ground. Finally at peace after centuries of trying to protect what they had loved.

Now it was our turn to choose differently. To trust that love could survive without magic binding it, that souls could find each other without spells forcing the pattern.

The roses looked almost alive on their graves as we left them behind. Red for love that transcended death but accepted its reality. White for peace finally granted after too many lifetimes of watching and waiting. Purple for healing that came only when we learned to let go.

As we walked away, I felt Will's presence one last time – not the immortal force he had become, but my brother who had loved us enough to break reality trying to keep us safe. I hoped he had found peace at last. Hoped he was finally free from the burden of remembering everything.

The vial grew warmer in my pocket as we approached the mansion, like it knew what came next. One last ritual. One final choice.

One chance to prove that love itself was enough, without trying to make it eternal.

The sacred room in the mansion's historic wing felt older than the building itself – like the walls remembered their original purpose despite centuries of paint and plaster trying to hide it. Walking through the doorway felt like stepping back in time, though whether we were reaching toward 1893 or something much older, I couldn't quite tell.

Sofia and Marcus worked in practiced tandem. They prepared the circle where everything would end – or begin again, differently this time. Their power interwove

with natural grace, her ancient authority complementing his immortal protection.

Eli moved through the space with quiet certainty, his healer's hands steady as they helped arrange items both ancient and modern. Medical precision guided his movements as he placed candles at exact angles, measured sacred herbs with surgeon's care. Something about watching him work made my heart ache – all those lives of healing, all those times his hands had mended what was broken, coming together in this final act.

“Vale's blood carries the original curse,” Sofia explained as she drew symbols that hurt my eyes to look at directly. Her power hummed beneath practical words, making reality feel thin around us. “But it also carries his regret, his desire to set things right.”

Marcus added layers of protective magic that felt like sanctuary, like coming home to a place we'd never been. “The ritual isn't about magic,” he said, watching Eli and me with careful attention. “Not really. It's about choice. About choosing love despite knowing loss is possible. About being brave enough to live one life fully instead of chasing immortality through many.”

The room seemed to hold its breath as final preparations came together. Every object carried double meaning – modern candles in ancient holders, hospital gauze beside blessed bandages, Will's childhood photo propped against a bronze bowl older than civilization.

“Some patterns need to be broken,” Sofia continued, her priestess's voice carrying truth that transcended time. “Some cycles need to end naturally, not be forced to continue past their time.”

I removed Vale's vial from my pocket, the dark liquid catching candlelight like captured memory. Everything we'd been, everything we'd lived through, distilled into



this moment of choice.

“Are you sure?” I asked Eli quietly, watching how the blood moved in ways that defied physics. “Once we break the cycle, all those lives, all those memories...”

His smile held understanding older than time as he stepped closer. “Those lives brought us here,” he said, his hand covering mine on the vial. “But this life is the one that matters now.”

I studied his face in the ritual light – this man I'd loved through centuries, who I was choosing to love now without magic binding us together. His surgeon's steadiness met my endless searching, creating something new from the ashes of what we'd been.

Above us, the mansion creaked with ancient secrets. Around us, Sofia and Marcus continued their preparations, power building like storm clouds. Ahead, the ritual circle waited to unmake what desperate love had once created.

“Will would have hated this,” I said softly, feeling my brother's absence like physical pain. “Letting go, choosing uncertainty over eternal connection.”

“He loved too much to let go,” Eli agreed, his fingers steady against mine. “But maybe that's the point. Maybe real love means accepting that nothing lasts forever – and choosing it anyway.”

The vial grew warmer between our joined hands, responding to truth older than magic. Vale's blood carried centuries of watching, of trying to protect us all, of regret for choices made in desperate times.

“There will be no going back,” Marcus warned as he completed the final ward. “Once the cycle breaks, these memories – all these lives you've lived – they'll fade like dreams upon waking.”

“Good,” Eli said with quiet certainty. “Some dreams need to fade so new ones can begin.”

Sofia's power filled the room like summer lightning as she took her position. “Are you ready?” she asked, though we all knew it was more ritual than question. “To choose one life, lived fully, over endless cycles of finding and losing each other?”

I looked at Eli – really looked at him, seeing past all the lives we'd shared to this moment, this choice, this particular present. His hands remained steady on mine, surgeon's precision meeting endless love.

“Together?” I asked, meaning more than just the ritual.

His smile held promises that needed no magic to bind them. “Always,” he replied. “In this life and this life only – until its natural end, whenever that comes. ”

The last drops of Vale's blood seeped into the ritual circle just as dawn broke through ancient windows. The curse dissolved not with dramatic flourish or supernatural display, but with the quiet certainty of a long-held breath finally released. Like the moment after surgery when you knew the patient would live, when everything settled into rightness without fanfare.

I felt the weight of centuries lift from my shoulders, watching the same liberation dawn in Eli's eyes. The memories remained, but they were different now – like beloved books read long ago rather than lives demanding to be relived. I remembered Greece and Florence and Paris, but the remembering felt gentle, natural. Not the desperate reaching of a soul bound by magic, but the quiet appreciation of paths that had led us here.

Sofia and Marcus stepped back from the circle, their work complete. Their power settled into peaceful watchfulness as morning light painted everything in shades of

possibility. The sacred room felt lighter somehow, its ancient purpose finally fulfilled after generations of waiting.

“It's done,” Sofia said softly, her priestess's authority gentled by completion. “The cycles are broken. The patterns released.”

Marcus nodded. “Choose wisely,” he told us. “This one life is all you get now. Make it count.”

I looked at Eli across the fading circle – this man I'd loved through centuries, who I was choosing to love now without magic or destiny compelling us. His surgeon's hands were perfectly steady as morning light caught his wedding ring. Michael's ring, which didn't feel like betrayal anymore. Just part of the story that had brought us here, part of the life he had lived fully before finding me again.

“The memories will continue fading,” Sofia explained gently. “Not vanishing completely, but settling into proper perspective. Like dreams that leave impressions without demanding attention.”

I already felt it happening – the urgent press of other lives softening into background texture. I remembered being Alexandros, watching Elias heal on ancient battlefields. Remembered being Alessandro, studying Elia's art in Renaissance studios. Remembered every version of us finding each other across time. But the memories felt like treasured photographs now, not lives trying to overlap with the present.

Sofia and Marcus gathered their tools with practiced efficiency, ancient implements disappearing into modern bags. Their power lingered in the air like incense, protective and blessing both.

“We'll watch over the pattern's dissolution,” Marcus assured us. “Make sure nothing unexpected emerges as the magic fades.”

Sofia's smile held centuries of wisdom. "Live well," she said simply. "That's the greatest magic of all."

They left us alone in the sacred space, morning light growing stronger through ancient windows. The room felt both older and newer somehow – like it too was ready for whatever came next.

"Ready?" I asked, offering my hand one final time. Not the eternal searching of bound souls, but the simple choice of two people facing tomorrow together.

Eli took it without hesitation, his smile holding all the promise of this one precious life ahead of us. "Ready."

We left the sacred room together, walking into a future unburdened by cycles and curses. Behind us, the ancient space settled into peaceful silence, its centuries of purpose finally complete. The morning sun painted the corridor ahead in colors that reminded us of temple light, of studio windows, of all the lives that had led us here.

But for the first time in centuries, we were walking toward tomorrow instead of looking back at yesterday. The memories continued settling into gentler forms as we moved through the mansion's historic wing. I remembered everything – every life, every love, every moment of finding each other. But the remembering felt like appreciation now, not desperation.

"What happens next?" Eli asked as we reached the main floor, modern reality reasserting itself around us.

"Everything," I replied, meaning it completely. "One day at a time, one moment at a time. No destiny, no pattern. Just us choosing each other every morning until we can't anymore."

His hand squeezed mine, surgeon's strength meeting corporate power. "I like those odds."

I thought of Will as he had been in this life – my brother, my supporter, the boy who had loved us all so much he broke reality trying to keep us safe. Thought of Vale, who had tried to protect us even when his methods went wrong. Their graves would remind us that love itself was enough, without trying to make it eternal.

"We should get breakfast," Eli said pragmatically, making me laugh at the beautiful normality of it. "I have surgery at noon, and you probably have an empire to run."

"Breakfast sounds perfect," I agreed, loving him for this gift of ordinary moments. "There's a place near the hospital that makes excellent coffee."

We stepped out into full morning, leaving the mansion's historic wing behind. The memories continued settling into their new, gentler forms as we walked away from ancient magic toward modern life. I remembered everything that had brought us here, but the remembering felt like gratitude now. Like appreciation for paths that had led us to this particular present.

One life, one love, and all the courage it took to choose the present over the pull of the past. No more cycles, no more patterns, no more desperate attempts to make love eternal.

Just this: morning light and warm hands and the promise of coffee before work. Just the simple magic of choosing each other every day, knowing that nothing lasted forever and loving anyway.

Just the quiet miracle of being fully, completely, wonderfully mortal.

Together.

### One Year Later

I woke to sunlight and the unmistakable aroma of Alex's coffee-making ritual. He'd become something of an expert over the past year, determined to master the perfect brew. Our new brownstone filled with morning sounds that felt both ordinary and miraculous – water running in the kitchen, the coffee grinder's precise burr, his quiet humming as he worked.

My hands were perfectly steady as I removed Michael's ring, placing it carefully in the carved box on my dresser. It sat beside our wedding photo and a small sketch that somehow survived time. Today Michael's ring would be joined by my engagement ring from Alex, making space for the wedding band that would take its place in a few hours.

The morning light caught the architectural plans spread across my desk – final approvals for the hospital expansion that had brought us together in the first place. The Vale Wing had been completely renovated, its new trauma center already saving lives with an efficiency that would have made him proud. Will's name graced the new research facility, its modern design somehow complementing the historic architecture he'd loved so much.

Alex had handled everything perfectly, merging past and present in ways that honored both. The original operating theater had been preserved as a medical history exhibit, while the new emergency department expansion gave us twice the space and the most advanced equipment available. Even Sofia had approved of the final designs, particularly the meditation garden where the old courtyard had been – a space for healing that needed no magic to feel sacred.

The project that had started everything was finally complete. Tomorrow would be the official opening ceremony, but today... today was about us, about choosing each other in this one precious life.

There was also the issue of Will's passing and telling their father about it.

We'd stood in his study, surrounded by generations of Rothschild success, trying to explain an unexplainable loss.

"An accident," Alex had said, his voice steady despite everything. "In the hospital's historic wing."

William Rothschild III had sat very still behind his massive desk, his eyes fixed on the space where Will used to stand during family meetings. "My son," he'd said finally, "was many things. But careless was never one of them."

"Dad—" Alex had started, but his father raised a hand.

"Our family," he'd continued carefully, "has always had... unusual qualities. Patterns that repeat. Connections that defy explanation." His gaze had shifted between Alex and me, seeing more than we'd said. "Will used to talk about dreams. About memories that couldn't be his. About watching people he loved die over and over."

The silence that followed felt heavy with unspoken understanding. "I never understood what he meant," William had admitted. "But I watched him follow you through life, Alex. Watched him try to protect you from something I couldn't see." His hands trembled slightly as he opened a drawer, removing an old journal. "He left this for me. Said if anything happened to him, I should read it."

"Father, we can explain ? —"

"Can you?" Will's father's smile held grief and knowledge both. "Can you explain

why my son's journal contains detailed accounts of lives he couldn't possibly have lived? Why he wrote about ancient temples and Renaissance courts and watching his brother die lifetime after lifetime?"

Alex's hand had found mine, steady despite everything. "Would you believe us if we tried?"

"I believe," William had said quietly, "that love makes impossible things possible. That my sons were always meant for unusual fates." His eyes met mine directly. "And that sometimes the greatest gift we can give those we love is letting them go."

The memory faded as Alex called from downstairs, something about Rachel arriving early. I finished dressing quickly, hearing my sister's voice mixing with the morning sounds. Her daughter's happy gurgle brought an immediate smile to my face.

"There's my favorite niece," I said, coming downstairs to find Alex already cradling baby Sarah with practiced ease. The sight made my heart do something complicated and wonderful.

"She's your only niece," Rachel laughed, but her eyes were soft watching Alex with her daughter. "And she's already got her uncle wrapped around her tiny fingers."

The morning dew still clung to grass as we made our way through the cemetery. Rachel had taken Sarah home to nap, promising to return for the ceremony. The quiet moment with Michael's grave felt right – including one love while celebrating another.

Sofia arrived as we returned, bringing coffee and her usual energy. Emma - their wedding planner - followed with arms full of flowers, immediately starting to arrange them with artistic precision. Their easy acceptance of our unusual family still felt like a gift.



“Marcus is bringing Alex's suit,” Sofia said, but something in her voice made me look closer. She seemed... lighter somehow, more present than I'd ever seen her .

“You've made your choice,” I realized, watching her expertly fix my tie. “About the immortality.”

Her smile held both sadness and relief. “Time for someone else to watch over the patterns.” she said softly.

Alex moved closer, concern clear in his expression. “You're sure? After all these centuries?”

“That's exactly why.” Sofia's hands stilled on my tie. “I've watched and waited through so many lifetimes. Kept the balance, maintained the patterns. But now...” She looked between us with genuine warmth. “Now it's time for me to live one life fully, to experience love and loss like everyone else.”

“And Marcus?” Alex asked, though his tone suggested he already knew.

“Made a different choice,” Marcus said, appearing in the doorway with Alex's suit. “Some of us are meant to remember, to carry the stories forward. My immortality wasn't from Will's ritual or Vale's curse. It was a choice I made long before either - to witness, to protect, to remember so others could forget.”

“But how?” I couldn't help asking. “How did you become... what you are?”

Marcus's smile held secrets older than time. “Some souls are born knowing their purpose. Mine was to watch, to guard, to keep the balance through ages. Not because of magic or ritual, but because that's what I am.” He straightened his perfect suit with practiced ease. “Someone needs to remember the whole story, to guide new souls when old patterns repeat.”

“While some of us need rest,” Sofia added, squeezing my shoulder gently. “One lifetime, lived fully and freely. No more watching from the shadows, no more maintaining ancient balances.” Her eyes met Emma's across the room, carrying promises that needed no magic to bind them. “Just love, chosen every day until its natural end.”

“Which is why,” Marcus said with fond exasperation, “we need to finish getting you ready. Alex's father will be here soon with that ridiculous champagne he special ordered. ”

Alex's smile held warmth at the mention of his father. Since reading Will's journal, William had become their strongest supporter. His understanding of family patterns made accepting us easier somehow – as if Will's written testimony had explained things he'd always sensed but never understood.

The morning passed in comfortable chaos. Marcus appeared with Alex's suit and a small box that made Sofia roll her eyes fondly. “Just tradition,” he said with a wink, but there was only joy in his gaze now.

Our circle had shifted, reformed, but remained strong. Better for being chosen rather than fated. Baby Sarah's presence felt like proof of life continuing, of love creating new patterns untainted by ancient magic.

“Need help with that?” Alex asked, catching me struggling with my tie again. His hands were warm as he adjusted the silk. “Though I have to say, for a surgeon, your tie skills are questionable.”

“That's why I have you,” I replied, leaning into his touch. “For all the important things in life.”

The doorbell announced more arrivals – William with his champagne, my parents bringing enough food to feed an army, friends and family filling our home with

voices and laughter. This was what Will never understood, what Vale learned too late – that love didn't need to be bound by magic to last. That one life, lived fully and chosen freely, could hold more joy than centuries of fated meetings.

Sofia caught my eye across the room, her smile holding simple happiness rather than ancient knowing. Emma arranged flowers while discussing kindergarten plans with Rachel, both of them cooing over Sarah's attempts to reach the blooms. Marcus chatted with William about vintage wines, their conversation comfortably normal.

“Ready for this?” Rachel appeared at my elbow after putting Sarah down for a quick nap upstairs. “Getting married again?”

“More than ready,” I replied, watching Alex laugh at something David had said. “This is better, isn't it? Just being happy, being together because we choose to be?”

Looking around our home filled with people we loved, at the life we were building that needed no magic to feel miraculous, I had to agree. This was what love should be: chosen freely, lived fully, precious because it was finite rather than eternal.

Alex caught my eye across the room, his smile holding all the promise I needed. No past lives pressing for attention, no ancient patterns demanding to be maintained. Just this: morning light and warm hands and the simple miracle of choosing each other every day.

Just the quiet joy of being perfectly, wonderfully mortal.

The ceremony space in the Rothschild estate's conservatory felt sacred without being ancient. Emma and Sofia had transformed it with flowers and herbs that spoke of healing and protection – lavender for peace, rosemary for memory, white roses for new beginnings. Sunlight streamed through glass walls, painting everything in colors that made my surgeon's hands finally feel uncertain.

Until Alex took them in his own.

Rachel stood beside me as my “best sister,” baby Sarah sleeping peacefully in David's arms in the front row. Sofia took her place before us, carrying both legal and ancient authority in her simple white dress. The gathered guests – family and friends, chosen and blood – created a circle of love that needed no magic to feel powerful.

Two empty seats in the front row held white roses – one for Will, one for Michael. Not ghosts haunting us, but honored absences, part of the story that brought us here. William's eyes lingered on his son's rose before finding mine with quiet understanding.

Alex squeezed my hands gently as Sofia began the ceremony. We'd written our own vows, words that acknowledged everything while choosing this present moment above all others. When it was time, Alex's voice carried to the farthest corners of the conservatory:

“Eli,” he began, his eyes never leaving mine, “I've been practicing this speech for weeks, trying to find the perfect words. But standing here now, looking at you, I realize that perfection isn't what matters. What matters is truth. And the truth is, I choose you. Not because of fate or destiny or any power greater than ourselves. I choose you because of who you are in this moment – the surgeon who saves lives, the man who makes me laugh at three AM, the soul who understands that love isn't about holding on too tight but about choosing each other every single day.”

His voice roughened slightly as he continued: “I choose you with all your beautiful complexities – the way you can spend hours organizing your medical journals but can't make coffee to save your life. The way you honor your past while building our future. The way you've taught me that the greatest courage isn't in never letting go, but in being brave enough to love again knowing that all precious things are temporary.”

Tears slid down my face as he went on, his hands steady in mine: “I promise to be your partner in all things – in morning coffee runs and midnight emergencies, in hospital politics and family dinners, in all the ordinary moments that make up an extraordinary life. I promise to respect the loves that shaped you, to honor the heart that's big enough to hold both memory and possibility. I promise to choose you, every morning, every moment, for all the days we're given in this one precious life.”

When my turn came, my voice shook but my hands were perfectly steady: “Alex, you found me when I thought I was done with love. When I believed my heart could only hold memories, you showed me it could grow to contain new joy. You never asked me to forget or let go – you just made space for yourself beside everything that came before.”

Taking a deep breath, I continued: “I choose you with everything I am – the broken pieces and the healed ones, the surgeon's precision and the messy humanity, the past that shaped me and the future we'll build together. I choose your morning coffee experiments and midnight work sessions, your passionate rants about historical preservation and your terrible attempts at cooking. I choose the way you love your family, the way you've helped me rebuild mine, the way you understand that hearts only grow bigger when we let them.”

Rachel sniffled beside me as I went on: “I promise to be your safe harbor and your adventure, your best friend and your biggest challenge. I promise to honor your griefs as you've honored mine, to help shoulder your burdens as you've carried me through mine. I promise to choose you every day – not because we're destined, but because we decide to. Because love isn't about fate or magic or eternal bindings. It's about waking up each morning and choosing each other again, knowing that what makes it precious is exactly how fleeting it is.”

By the time I finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the conservatory. Sofia's voice carried both joy and gravity as she led us through the ring exchange. The simple bands held no magic except what we gave them – symbols of choice rather than binding.

William stepped forward then, his voice rough with emotion as he performed the traditional Rothschild family blessing. “May your love be as enduring as stone,” he began, then paused, amending slightly: “And as alive as gardens in spring. May you find joy in choosing each other anew each day, and peace in building one extraordinary life together.”

When Sofia pronounced us married, our kiss tasted of future rather than memory. Of promises made freely rather than bound by fate. Of love chosen every day rather than destined across time.

The conservatory erupted in cheers as we turned to face our family and friends. Sarah woke just then, her happy gurgle making everyone laugh through their tears. This was what we'd chosen – not eternal repetition but one perfect, precious life surrounded by people we loved.

Alex's hands were warm in mine as we walked back down the aisle together. Sunlight painted everything in colors that needed no ancient magic to feel miraculous. This was better than fate, better than destiny, better than any pattern written in stars or blood.

This was love chosen freely, lived fully, precious because it would end someday but magnificent because we'd choose it every day until then.

This was everything Will had never understood, everything Vale had died helping us remember: that the greatest magic isn't in binding souls together, but in letting them choose each other every morning despite knowing loss is possible.

This was us, writing our own story instead of repeating ancient ones.

This was love, pure and simple and mortal and perfect.

This was enough.

The estate's ballroom filled with light and laughter, modern joy in an ancient space. David spun Rachel across the dance floor, her dress flowing as she moved. Sarah, secure in Emma's arms, delighted the guests by throwing flower petals at Marcus whenever he passed. His immortal dignity didn't stop him from playing along, pretending to dodge while making the baby giggle.

Sofia and Emma shared secret smiles across the room, their own renewal ceremony planned for spring. After twenty years together, they'd decided to celebrate their love properly, with all the recognition they'd once been denied. The way Emma's hand found Sofia's, the quiet certainty in their touches – it made my heart full to see love that had grown stronger through ordinary time.

William held court near the cake, telling stories about Will's childhood pranks with the kind of laughter that honored grief rather than denied it. “He once replaced all my business papers with crayon drawings,” he said, eyes bright with memory. “Perfect forgeries, down to my signature. He was seven.” The gathered guests laughed, letting themselves remember the brother and son Will had been before tragedy twisted his love.

“He sounds like a handful,” my mother said warmly, and William's smile held both pain and joy.

“The best kind of handful,” he agreed. “Always trying to take care of everyone, even then.”

They'd learned what I was still learning – that joy and grief could dance together without diminishing either. That remembering what was lost didn't mean giving up what was found.

During a quiet moment between dances, Alex's hand found mine. No words were needed as we slipped away to the small family chapel where two graves rested side by side. Our wedding flowers joined the herbs growing wild around Vale's headstone,

life continuing in its own way.

“Thank you,” Alex whispered – to Vale for his sacrifice, to Will for loving too much, to all the paths that led us here. My hand found his, steady and sure as any surgeon's grip.

We left pinecones on Will's grave, a childhood joke turned memorial. Alex had told me the story – how little Will would collect pinecones, convinced they were nature's secret messages. He'd leave them in Alex's shoes, on his desk, anywhere they might be found, each one carrying brotherly love in its simple form.

The reception welcomed us back with warmth and music. Sofia caught my eye, her smile knowing but gentle as she danced with Emma. Rachel had reclaimed Sarah, swaying with her sleeping daughter while David watched them both with undisguised adoration.

Our first dance as husbands felt both new and eternal. The string quartet played something that might have been many things before becoming simply ours. William watched with damp eyes while Rachel hugged Sofia, both of them pretending not to cry. The moment held everything – past and present, joy and grief, memory and possibility.

“Happy?” Alex asked softly as we moved together.

“More than,” I replied, meaning it completely. “This is better than destiny.”

Sarah woke just then, her happy burble making everyone laugh. She reached for Marcus as he passed, tiny fingers grasping his perfectly pressed suit. The sight of an immortal guardian melting under baby charm felt like proof that life moved forward in the best ways.

“Will would have loved being an uncle,” Alex said quietly, but his voice held more



joy than pain. “He would have spoiled her rotten.”

“He still is, in a way,” I offered. “She’ll grow up hearing stories about him. About how much he loved his family, how far he’d go to protect them.”

The dance continued around us, guests sharing in our happiness without needing to understand its deeper currents. Emma and Sofia snuck kisses between songs while Rachel and David took turns dancing with Sarah. William told more stories about his sons, letting love heal what grief had wounded.

Later, under stars that had watched our story through centuries, we shared a quiet moment on the estate’s terrace. No ancient magic, no cursed cycles, just two people choosing each other in this one precious life. My hand found Alex’s in the darkness as fireworks began – Marcus’s small gift of light and celebration.

The display painted the night in colors that needed no magic to feel miraculous. Each burst of light showed me something new to love: the way Alex’s eyes crinkled when he smiled, how his hand fit perfectly in mine, the simple joy of standing beside him without destiny demanding anything.

Inside, the reception continued its gentle celebration. Through the windows, we could see our family and friends sharing in our happiness. Sarah had finally fallen asleep in Rachel’s arms while David swayed with them both. Sofia and Emma danced closer than was strictly proper, lost in their own world. Marcus and William shared drinks and quiet conversation, mortal and immortal finding common ground in love of family.

This was what we’d chosen – not eternal repetition but one perfect, precious life surrounded by people we loved. Each moment felt more valuable for being finite, more beautiful for being chosen rather than fated.

“Ready?” Alex asked, eyes reflecting starlight and future.

“Ready,” I answered, my surgeon's hands steady as we turned toward tomorrow. Ready to write our own story one ordinary, extraordinary day at a time. Ready to love without magic binding us, to face whatever came next together.

The fireworks painted the sky with ephemeral beauty, each burst a reminder that the most precious things don't last forever. And that's what makes them precious – the knowledge that this moment, this love, this life is ours to cherish for exactly as long as we're given.

This was better than destiny. Better than eternal cycles. Better than any pattern written in stars or blood.