

Renata W Müller

7 Years Later Series

Book 1

Just GONE

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ISBN 978-963-12-7323-6

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*There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a young woman.
Proverbs 30:18-19*

Tartalom

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Chapter 1

Hayden Ravensdale had been casually propping up the wall with his shoulder and staring at the crowd with a poker face. With a sigh, he looked at his watch for about the hundredth time that night, remarking with boredom that time was moving slower than a snail. Participating in charity functions was an essential part of the life of a successful businessman, but since Hayden loathed these kind of face-time social events, he usually sent one of his employees to represent the company. Forcing a smile in the direction of a familiar face, he imagined banging his head against the wall for making an exception this time, and coming in person to show face at the event.

Even his slouched posture did not hide Hayden's athletic height, yet the appreciative glances sent to him by the ladies left the young businessman perfectly cold. His distinctively masculine features, straight nose, square jaw and full lips gave him the appearance of a handsome man. There was, however, something odd, some disturbingly bitter feature on his perfectly shaven face that seemed to have deliberately wanted to destroy the positive impression evoked by the first glance. Although he was barely thirty, his attitude suggested a drained nonchalance. His auburn eyes glided through the crowd sluggishly and coldly, without the slightest sign of interest. Some lighter wisps were mixed into his dark brown hair, but it was clearly an act of nature rather than expert handiwork. Hayden Ravensdale was otherwise not the type who would unnecessarily spend much time in front of a mirror. As in almost everything, his appearance advocated his affection for practicality. His hair was cut firmly short at the neck, but as the evening progressed, his longer locks took on a life of their own, and by now they were hanging loosely over his forehead. Hayden's complexion was fair, yet his British chill mixed sensually with a Mediterranean influence. This was not surprising, as his mother, Victoria Alvarado was a beautiful Catalan woman, who had grown up in England, though carried many traditional Spanish qualities – and not only in her appearance. The Alvarados were an ancient noble family in Catalonia who amassed their wealth during the previous century through growing tobacco. Although most of their capital was now lost, they still possessed considerable business interests.

Hayden flinched and looked around with embarrassment as a rumble of claps erupted in the twilight. The renowned soul singer, wearing a close fitting sequined evening dress, exited the stage and disappeared behind the curtains. Once again, the enormous ballroom of the castle was filled with a sudden flash of light as John Blake, President of the International Help in Need Foundation stepped to the podium and started to speak.

'Ladies and gentleman, highly respected guests! It is a great honour for me to welcome you, on behalf of my colleagues, to the annual charity ball for our foundation. Believe it or not, 21 years have already passed since our first assembly, where we presented our initial report within the framework of a large-scale charity event...', the elderly man started his speech in a rough voice. Hayden heaved a painful sigh and began to look for Christian with his eyes. He was sure his mate was hitting on some hot little starlet or trying to impress the Victoria's Secret models, whom he had spotted the moment they arrived at the scene.

John Blake, the president of the foundation was a wealthy man himself, and when it came to the annual event, he never liked the idea of being on a shoestring budget. This exclusive night of the year could be characterized by two words: unbounded generosity. There was no shortage of prominent guests, and several TV and movie stars graced the event as well. Women sparkled in dresses covered with sequins, and anyone at least a little familiar with the world of fashion, could recognize pieces from the most renowned designers.

‘It has been a tough year for us. A year that was indeed difficult, full of obstacles and challenges. But thanks to your generous support...,’ Blake continued, although his voice only reached Hayden’s ears in the form of a distant roar. He didn’t feel affected by the restoration works after the floods in Nepal, or the achievements of sex education amongst young girls in the Middle East. His mind was already on the emails he needed to reply to, and on his chores for the next day. He was constantly thinking about how to get out of the hall without being noticed, and as soon as possible.

It was already around 11pm when the official part of the night concluded, and the programme continued with music and dance. The band started to play louder. The large area in the middle of the room, left intentionally unoccupied, made for a casual dance floor. Hayden stood motionless, with his legs crossed, the half-empty glass balanced between his thumb and ring finger, seemingly watching the crowd. Graceful eyes were flashed at him, smiles and flickering eye-lashes were silently inviting him closer, but Hayden seemed to be impervious to such feminine charms. In the course of the night, he counted about a dozen women whom he could have taken home with him if he had felt like it, but he didn’t. With irritation, he began to turn his head around, getting more and more upset with Christian who must have left without a word. He decided not to give a shit about the issue, just leave, and kick his mate’s arse in the office on Monday.

Mouthing a few curse words under his nose, he pushed himself away from the wall and was about to leave when he spotted his business partner, Christian Mitchell, who’d just cut through the crowd progressing towards Hayden, holding two fresh glasses in his hand. With theatrical suffering on his face, he handed a full glass of champagne to his friend.

‘If you had the faintest idea of what I’ve gone through for these drinks, you’d at least crack a grateful smile.’

‘Shut up, Mitchell! We came here to do some work.’

The man looked back at him as if he had two heads.

‘Work? I don’t have the foggiest what you’re talking about, mate. This is a party, in case you haven’t noticed. We’ve come to mingle, to cultivate friendships and to establish new ones,’ he winked dubiously.

‘Have you talked to Vincent?’

‘Yeah,’ Chris nodded without interest and took a big sip from his drink. ‘And when you hear what I’ve arranged for tonight for both of us, you’ll be obliged to me for life!’

Hayden followed his friend’s gaze to the counter of the bar, and at once got the picture.

‘Are you talking about the Swedish birds at the bar?’ he asked with raised eyebrows, pointing with his chin towards the model-looking bleach blonde women.

Christian giggled loudly and sent him a quick look.

‘Right, so this small detail hasn’t escaped your notice. This somewhat puts me at ease. I was just getting worried about your...’

‘Cut it out, Chris!’ Hayden waved him away, looking bored. He glanced at his watch idly, taking a deep breath. ‘I’ll pass. There’s so much I need to get done before Monday. We’ve done our duty by showing ourselves. I see no problem in leaving this do behind. I’m fed up with this shit. I’ll call a cab, and we can...’

He couldn’t finish his sentence, as the other one interrupted him in amazement.

‘Have you gone completely off your trolley? I... I don’t get your drift, honestly. This is just the beginning. At last we’re through the boring part. I sense something brewing tonight,’ he said, rubbing his palms together, glancing in the direction of the Swedish beauties. ‘The one on the left is called Cecilia, but she’s mine. I’ve meant the other one for you. Of course, if you insist, you can talk me into a swap,’ the man said, lifting his champagne glass high in the air, cheerfully motioning a toast towards the bar.

Hayden knew Christian too well to take his previous remark too seriously. He just shook his head absently.

‘I want to reply to some urgent mails before the weekend numbness,’ Hayden remarked, addressing it rather to himself than his mate. Christian’s attention was apparently much more absorbed by the two models and his own plans regarding the night, but Hayden wasn’t angry with him. If he had been honest to himself, he had to admit he actually envied Chris’ relaxed nature, the kind of nonchalant attitude he had towards his relationships and his whole life. The kind of negligence he had not known for a long time. Not that he didn’t have a quick fling every now and then, but there was nothing worth of mentioning. There was nobody he didn’t desperately try to get rid of the morning after. His latest affair with that black-haired hottie he had picked up in a bar was also over two months before. It was a one-night stand, which ended quickly and without pain, exactly as Hayden willed it. Although sexual frustration tortured him at times, looking at these two blondies right now, he didn’t feel the slightest excitement. Should he have worried about that? Was everything all right with him? No. As a matter of fact, nothing was all right with him, but that was a completely different issue not worth getting into. While listening to Christian’s horny banter about the two women, he thought the term ‘friendship’, in its true sense, did not fully apply to their relationship, as they weren’t mutually confidential to one another when it came to personal matters. Christian talked about his rather eventful love life quite freely, but since Hayden barely shared any information with people regarding his privacy, this part of their relationship had developed unilaterally. Chris Mitchell was his close colleague in administering company affairs, and through the years he had become an essential companion. He had the reputation of a hard-core professional and had proved his aptitude in sticky situations more than once. Due to business matters they spent a lot of time together unintentionally, which then automatically evolved into a sort of friendship between the two of them. However, they were more associates than intimate friends and Hayden did not mind that. Christian’s soft spot was his interest in the pursuit of women. More specifically, the pursuit of several women simultaneously. It had been more than once that he got in trouble because of jealous husbands, protective brothers or fathers, when he showed interest for more than one woman at the same time. Hayden had, so far, overlooked his less fatal mistakes, as they had no effect on his professional achievements. Although his excesses sometimes annoyed Hayden, he never interfered with his private life. What mattered to him was Chris’ performance in work and his undivided loyalty to the company.

‘Are you saying that you’re not game for my offer? Are you leaving me with the ladies?’ Chris asked, turning to Hayden, whose only reply was an irritated rolling of the eyes. ‘Seriously, Den. Loosen up!’ he continued, seeing his friend’s lethargic expression. For a moment he turned his back on the buzz to give Hayden his full attention. ‘Let go of yourself. This is not about the company, and we’re not on a business trip. I get the boss can’t rub elbows with just anybody. But dammit, man, it’s the weekend!’ he rested his hand on Hayden’s shoulder. ‘We’ve worked hard; we deserve to play hard. Look around you!’ he waved his hand. ‘Take a deep breath and ease off at least for a little while! Live!’

‘I do live,’ Hayden said dryly.

‘I’m not talking about business. Take one of these birds home,’ he motioned towards the bar, ‘and you’ll be guaranteed to feel better.’

Hayden opened his mouth, then apparently thought better of it and just shook his head. He had tried this method before. Not just once. And it never helped him get better.

‘Everything is fine,’ he said and clapped his friend on the shoulder. ‘Don’t worry about me. Everything’s cool, I’m just a little tired. You go on, have fun! I’ll find you on Monday after my first meeting with the Yanks. I’ll just call a taxi and I’m out of here.’

Christian shook his head in disbelief when they shook hands. He couldn't get why Hayden was such a loner and couldn't enjoy life, wasn't able to relax even for one night. *He can't move on*, he thought with a mixture of pity and perplexity.

Christian knew Hayden even before he became the manager of Ravensdale Publications. At the time, Chris's father also worked at the company, back in the old days of Edward Ravensdale, albeit not in such a high position as he was now. Hayden was a successful businessman. Since he took over, the well-run company began to flourish. The achievements of the 21st century, from which the old man abstained, the young and brave entrepreneur used for the benefit of the company, and the significant investments in modernization began to show results. Hayden was a great media specialist in his own field, and professional recognition did not take long. He had recently been awarded the *Entrepreneur of the Year* title. The business was prospering. Revenues were never higher. Of course, Christian knew commercial success did not appear from scratch. The countless overtime and weekends Hayden had spent in the office, the masses of energy invested, the research and the trips were finally worth it. He paid dearly for it, but the immense amount of work brought success and fame. Where company matters were concerned, the air was hot around him. It was a great experience to participate in negotiations with him. To see how much he felt alive, how he was in his element when implementing a new idea. This was what made him feel alive and vibrant, and he dedicated all his energy and interest to Ravensdale Publications. However, as soon as his office door closed and his private life took over, he changed completely. He met his private agenda with a zombie's automatism. The position he occupied required his regular attendance at various social gatherings, which duties he met. In fact, sometimes he was even persuaded to have fun by one of the few friends with whom he still kept in touch, yet he still did it with no real interest. Christian knew about his occasional affairs and knew that he was, for some reason, unable to let anyone get too close. He deliberately handled his relationships on a superficial level, which Chris found rather strange. He had the feeling this wasn't really what Hayden needed in his life, but who was he to interfere with such personal matters? Hayden never behaved unethically, quite the contrary; he was regarded as *friendly* and *gallant* when it came to women. However, there was never any real enthusiasm or devotion from him beyond work. A number of times people had tried to put him in touch with a variety of fine and less fine women, but no lasting relationship evolved from these attempts. Christian thought maybe Hayden was wary regarding the sincerity of women. Somebody in his social position could never truly know whether the interest was in his own personality, or in his social status and material prosperity. He himself was never bothered by such minor qualities in a relationship, as long as sex was great. He thought, however, that Hayden could be one of those people who, beneath the hard exterior, actually had a sensitive soul and needed everything to be in order before he hooked up with a girl. Of course, he knew a thing or two about his boss's past and also had a few suspicions which came from rumours. Some facts he knew first-hand, but when he tried to dig deeper and find answers to questions, it was as if he had run into a brick wall. About past prejudices, if any, Hayden refused to talk, even with him. When the 'interrogation' took place after a glass or two, he usually diverted the topic with a joke. When the issue came up soberly, he firmly ended the conversation and changed the subject. A dark mist trailed about his past, of which he talked to nobody. Still, this negative impact on his presence and character could be sensed clearly.

Christian knew that pressing the subject would do no good, ergo he decided to hand his friend over to a lonely contemplation of self-pity. They shook hands, and he turned to leave for the bar.

Chapter 2

Hayden kept an eye on his friend for a while as he determinedly made his way to the bar. Sociably waving a greeting with his glass whenever he saw a familiar face from the business world, he was thinking about which exit would create the smallest stir should he effect his escape. Giving his jacket a quick fix, he was thinking about when he would get back to the City of London from this godforsaken place. His gaze wandered through the mob for one last time, when something, out of the blue... At first he thought his vision had betrayed him; rather, he was sure he had lost his marbles. What he was seeing there, could not have been real. *It must have been a play of his senses. How could it be possible, after such a long time, among so many people? Surely it must have been the drink causing him to hallucinate, after all, he had been drinking on an empty stomach, and he had had quite a few* – the thoughts flickered wildly in his head.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was sure when he opened them again, this vision, like so many times before, would vanish and everything would go back to normal. He opened his eyes slowly, almost sheepishly. Contrary to his expectations, the phenomenon stayed, stubbornly and more vividly than ever. He felt a sudden pain piercing his whole body. An overwhelming, bolt-like agony travelled through him. Like a wave, weakness came upon him with such force that he had to lean against the wall. He quickly touched his moist forehead as his sight suddenly began to blur. His ears were buzzing and sweat trickled down his temples. ‘What the hell? Have I lost my mind?’ he squeezed out the words from his tightly clenched lips.

He took a deep breath and told himself that it all was nothing but a delusion. *It can't be her. It must be someone who looks like her.* With a face distorted by pain, he forced himself to turn again, but the moment he saw her, he was convinced of the reality. Dizziness and nausea came over him and he needed to leave quickly. He wanted to get some fresh air as soon as possible.

The strong, healthy man, who seemed so confident just a moment ago, now looked hunched and broken, as he staggered out of the ballroom, with his hand against the wall, to the huge patio.

The beautiful terrace was decorated with palm trees and similar exotic plants, not suited to the climate at all. Far enough away from each other, little conversation corners were placed, formed from sofas and cushions. Small buffet tables were scattered around with colourful refreshments to please the guests. Hayden approached one of these tables and rapidly emptied two glasses of the bluish liquid, whatever it had been. He tottered to the end of the terrace like a sleep-walker. Clenching the stone parapet, he was waiting for life to return to his limbs. The night air was pleasantly warm and pure, and he took deep breaths of it as he slowly collapsed to a sitting position, burying his head in his hands. He desperately tried to fight the manifestation of a well-known, pervasive pain, bursting from within.

Some guests idling on the terrace were watching the suspiciously behaving man. Most of them thought it would be better if they didn't meddle in someone else's business, and their intuition was undoubtedly correct. A wise guy cracked aloud, wanting to impress the ladies: ‘Let the poor bloke be! He's just a bit leathered... the air'll fix him!’

All these remarks reached Hayden only as a remote murmur. Apart from overcoming the roaring chaos in his mind, he paid no attention to anything. For years, he had been trying to convince himself that what happened in the past, had been locked away deep beyond conscious thought. So deep, from where they couldn't hurt him. He wanted to believe they had no effect on him whatsoever, that he was free of the past. Now the fact that one second, one look, was enough for these wounds and feelings to

erupt, pushed him into a kind of shock. *Who was the bloody idiot who said time heals all wounds?* – He thought bitterly. What he expected to have vanished in the darkness of oblivion – which might not have even been true – voila, it was lurking right below the surface, waiting to erupt! A spark was enough to ignite an inferno, destroying his insides.

Although his forehead was still burning with fever and his limbs were shaking, he pulled himself together. Gripping the banister, he stood up and encouragingly, half out loud, said to himself, ‘I’ve got to go back and face her! This time she can’t just disappear. She can’t just vanish into thin air. I won’t do her that favour. She’s got to see I survived! That she couldn’t destroy me completely.’

The last sentence left a wry smile on his face. He straightened his back, lifted his head, and as someone who’s prepared for battle, he headed back to the lively ballroom.

The moment he entered, the roiling, sweltering air punched him in the chest. Couples, both old and young were dancing in the centre, obviously enjoying themselves. Round the sides of the room, smaller and larger numbers of guests formed groups and were drinking and chatting. Apparently, nothing had changed since Hayden left the room. Only he knew about the raging storm, waiting to erupt. He stopped not far from the door, from where he could see through the crowd relatively well. People’s features converged before his eyes, but he was only searching for one. After nervously scanning the many unknown faces, he suddenly took sight of *her*. Not where she was some minutes ago but slightly farther away, by one of the foundation exhibition tables, talking to an elderly gentleman. Every now and then she tilted her head slightly to the side to look over her companion’s shoulder, as if the feeling of being gazed at, yet is also trying to dismiss the feeling of discomfort.

The pureness streaming from the young woman’s appearance lent her a guileless charm. She was a real, stunning beauty, the kind who needed to do nothing to achieve this state. She was one of the lucky few who was as vividly delightful in the morning when opening her eyes as when she was dressed to kill. Her long brown hair was now pinned up in a loose bun, to match the style of her evening dress. No primness, no theatricality. Although she was not petite, her appearance implied fragility and her whole being radiated warmth. Long, thick, dark eyelashes cast a shadow over her eyes, which were deep emerald green in natural light; now, however, they glistened a rather greyish-green shade. She was the kind of beauty who had everything to captivate, break and mend the hearts of men. Though she often smiled, her gaze was always permeated with a strange seriousness. It was as though her soul was older than her youthful look.

She wore a straight-cut, ivory coloured gown decorated with a few small silk flowers of the very same material. The form-fitting dress emphasized the young woman’s slim figure perfectly. With respect to attractiveness, the young lady was as lovely as any of the prominent women present. She was, however, not invited as a gala guest. As a part-time employee of IHIN, it was her duty to represent the foundation at social gatherings. She was a striking phenomenon, so the men couldn’t help leaving their longing eyes on her. When the formal part of the evening was finished and the beginning of the dance was announced, there were plenty who asked her for a spin, and in most cases she accepted the invitation.

The delightful exterior, however, harboured much more than one would have thought on the face of it. Lana came from a well-situated family of intellectuals. Her mother was a teacher and her father, an architect. Her childhood was idyllic, with loving parents and a great home to support her. They expressed their love and affection towards their only daughter, as well as their son; supporting them whenever they needed it most. The parents tried their best to give the kids as much freedom of choice as possible, when they found they were mature enough. This almost unreal state of happiness lasted until university, where Lana came to know love for the first time, and was met with the bitter side of life as well, which pulled the ground out from under her feet and taught her lessons for life. When she decided to give charity work a try after completing law school, they still supported her. After

volunteering in various public companies, she found IHIN and thanks to her degree, they took her on as a legal representative.

An international organization often finds legal and bureaucratic impediments to attend to. It was only natural they welcomed the efforts of this young, enthusiastic and skilled professional. In addition to office work, Lana participated in other concurrent projects. Sometimes she plunged into a school building mission somewhere in Africa, or travelled to the Arab world with a group to organize some kind of educational presentation for women. In the course of these assignments, neither her parents nor her brother heard from her for some time. This was especially typical if they worked in a country, where, for security reasons, it was wiser to avoid the attention of political or religious forces.

Nevertheless, Lana soon realized the money she got from the foundation brought her to the breadline and she couldn't make ends meet. It was also clear that she wasn't going to take advantage of her parents' goodwill forever, and it was high time she had earned some income. After trying her luck with some companies, she eventually got a job at one of the country's most respected law firms, and all her major financial concerns were settled. In her spare time she handled the foundation's affairs. With time, she even convinced the office's CEO, the celebrity lawyer Thom Masters to join the group of IHIN supporters. Since she was of a young age, besides her serious work, she was very happy to participate at fun events like this one. At such occasions she could finally unwind and forget about her slightly complicated private life as well. Currently, she was talking to a friendly elderly man, who happened to be the owner of a pharmaceutical company and belonged to the foundation's loyal enthusiasts.

Hayden Ravensdale fixed his eyes on her, and while standing still as if petrified, everything ceased to exist around him. The room, the people, the music, simply didn't reach him. Reality was receding until the present melted completely. It was sucked in by the past. Although his body was visible and perceptible to others, his spirit slipped into a different world where events seemed like a time-lapse, like scenes of an old movie. He perceived this time-travel experience realistically and truthfully, as if everything he saw in his mind's eye was the actual present. *Seven years*, he thought.

Seven years had passed since he last saw her leave that bloody restaurant. Hayden had carefully planned every detail well in advance. He had wanted everything to be deeply romantic and unforgettable. He was blinded with love and wore his heart on his sleeve, never for a moment thinking it would be trampled into the mud. In his mind's eye, he could see again as she stood up suddenly, slowly approached him and gently stroked his face. Strangely, he even remembered leaning his head to one side, kissing her palm. Yes, he saw it clearly, how Lana had bent down, her hair touching his face and her eyes closed, kissing him lingeringly. This was their last kiss... and its taste endured. *I need to go now* – Lana whispered into his ear then, barely audibly.

Hayden looked after her unsuspectingly, lovingly. She also looked back briefly and then swiftly averted her eyes. Then she left. Back then, he wouldn't have guessed it was forever. Ice cold sweat appeared on his forehead. Just like then.

Seven years of despair, pain, anger, hatred and finally, only emptiness. How much had happened since! How many things he'd experienced! But the feeling of helplessness, the deep pain was still there, whether he wanted it or not. The wound that the terrible disappointment caused was still bleeding secretly in his soul. *Why?* – The question tearing his insides apart was the same as seven years ago. *Why did she do this to me? How could she? Everything seemed so perfect, like in a fairy tale* – the words squeezed through his teeth with contempt. *A nightmare* – he hissed.

Unstoppable images of his life began to flash in front of him.

He saw himself as a twenty-something university student, visiting Cambridge with friends. They were still untroubled, free from worries and liabilities. Carelessly, perhaps a little louder than they should have, the group was enjoying the beautiful day. As young men so often do, they were drinking and joking on the terrace of a pleasant little street café, when a group of protesters appeared on the street. They could have been around 20 to 25 young people who marched with signs and placards, while one advocate was shouting through a megaphone to the people. Some of them, holding papers in their hands, even went up to people and tried to convince them of their cause. To make it more serious, they also collected signatures for their petition.

Their purpose? Hayden couldn't remember exactly what the aim of the demonstration was, as his attention was drawn to something else. He recollected it had something to do with saving the rainforests. *Maybe it was about adopting a part of a rainforest*, he recalled. He was sure though when the green-eyed brunette came up to him and asked for his support, there was no document in the world he wouldn't have signed. He gaped at her as she enthusiastically presented their cause, and became immediately smitten with her. He was enchanted by her naïve, almost childish dedication, and the commitment with which Miss Bell asserted the truth of the matter.

His mates made fun of him, and even Lana considered this handsome boy's oafish nodding a little comical. She told him she was a law student and the demonstration would end with a lecture in the university building which she planned to attend. The presentation was going to be about the crisis of the Amazon jungle and visitors were welcome.

The rest of the group was slowly moving away from them, so she quickly said goodbye and took off after them. Hayden was stunned at first and just stared after her as if he'd witnessed a heavenly revelation. When he came to his senses, he turned to his friends.

'Did you see that? Damn. I... I've... never seen anything so...'

'Looky look,' Liam interrupted with a giggle. 'Mr Ravensdale's back.'

'And he can talk again! What a miracle!'

'Using such refined language,' Harry joked as they clapped him on the back and patted his shoulder.

Yes, he must have been a dumbfounding sight, mainly because he was usually unabashed, especially when it came to women. It came home to Hayden Ravensdale quite early, when he was only a youngster that he was popular with girls, and to conquer those he liked, he barely needed to put in any effort. Later on there was a period when he was less choosy, and since there were plenty of volunteers, he made the most of his popularity and handled girls emerging in his circle of friends with a shallow macho confidence. Since this behaviour was basically against his conservative, introvert nature, after a while he didn't find joy in it any more. Later, this role of Don Juan even began to annoy him, so he put an end to the aimless flirting.

Doing so had quite probably something to do with realizing that his personal appeal, so magnetizing to women, was often far overshadowed by his social status and wealth. When he first became aware it wasn't only he using the girls but they were also benefitting from him and the Ravensdale name, he was raging and loathed all women. After some time his wild hatred subsided into a quiet cynicism which assimilated into his nature and defined it. He was usually condescending and distant with those trying to get close to him. This odd behaviour and attractive appearance, whether he wanted it or not, put him in the role of a cold-hearted macho once again. He carried this out in the witty and high-flying way of a born gentleman.

Thus, with this in mind, it was obvious how his friends had a good time watching as the hunter finally fell into a trap.

‘What are you laughing at, anyway? I couldn’t have been that lame!’ he cut back after a while, when he had had enough of their jesting.

‘Mate, I’d call someone lame who says the wrong things in the wrong place at the wrong time. But you, your nodding face was so bonkers, I’m sure she thought you were ‘round the bend’.’

The others laughingly joined in and continued joshing him.

‘Seriously, mate, getting your signature was the easiest one in her career.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that!’ winked Ian, Hayden’s roommate with ambiguity, and took a long sip from his bottle. ‘Do you even know what you signed?’ he asked. ‘Who knows? Maybe she’s on the game and the fuzz will be knocking on your door soon. The catch is, fuck it, that it’s my door as well,’ he started scratching his head, troubled, at which the others laughed loudly.

‘Man, how you were gawking at her! I mean, yeah, she *was* a knockout, but you made a complete fool of yourself, Ravensdale.’

‘Shut it!’ barked Hayden, irritated. He wasn’t really mad at his friends, because he felt the picture he’d shown wasn’t as convincing as he’d have liked. This blunder was past help. The chick had knocked him off his feet and switched off his brain, it would have been in vain to deny that. Wanting to distract attention from his gaffe, he asked, ‘Better tell me where the presentation’s going to be. What time? Which building...?’

From that moment on, Hayden was done for. He couldn’t think of anything else. Only the brunette was on his mind. The conversation washed around him, he was simply unable to focus on anything else. He recalled her face, the sound of her voice, the smell of her perfume. It was some sort of... airy ... fruit. He wanted to smell it again.

Once or twice he tried to take part in the conversation, but it was pointless. His mind was all over the place. Then he suddenly got up and started talking perplexedly about something important that he’d just remembered and needed to be dealt with at once; and assured them they’d meet in the evening. So, he threw some money on the table, and leaving the stunned company behind, hastily started in the direction the group of demonstrators had marched.

Hayden ran for a while, and finally caught up with the group a few streets away. Due to the crowd thickening around them, he couldn’t get near the girl. He only saw her back as she was talking to somebody. Next, the group turned into a narrow street, then another. He had to give up or else the others would have noticed his desperate behaviour. And that was the last thing he wanted; he already felt like he had made quite a big fool of himself for the day. He didn’t want to come across as some hysterical stalker, so with a heavy heart he decided to abandon the demonstrators and go in search of the law school building.

Yes, that’s how it all started with Lana. And that sunny afternoon, there, in the precinct, was followed by a moonlit night in the University garden where a group of young people was sitting on the lawn, arguing about the presentation. There and then Hayden could only suspect this encounter would leave an indelible mark on his life and would define his whole future.

The weekend passed and Hayden had no choice but to leave the city. He needed to return to the seat of his studies, which meant a two-hour drive. As the heir to the family company, he studied Trade, Marketing and Communication.

The thing between them evolved slowly; too slowly for his hopes and expectations. At first he had to make do with occasional weekend visits. When the revolutionary-minded university students organized programmes, he always took part in them. This was the ‘official’ reason for his visits; and since he was already in the city, he stayed for the whole weekend. These red herrings were mainly needed because Lana did not encourage him very much. Of course, after a while, it started to occur to her that his stays had little to do with the Amazon jungle and other university engagements. Since he wasn’t her only admirer, she didn’t take him more seriously than any other voluntary Romeo. The

boy's attraction gradually became obvious, not only to her, but her friends also began to take notice of this special devotion. Although she had acted coolly for a while, deep inside Lana found Hayden very handsome and his gallant courtship was intriguing. There was some conservative quality in him that Lana found interesting; something from the chivalry of the old gentlemen she missed from the courtship of other devotees. However, she promised herself that she would be exceedingly careful not to let passion carry her away blindly and she would always remain level-headed. Any information she came by about Hayden's family, only reassured her in this resolve. He told her about his home and parents, and a bit about the pressure he felt as the only heir. Lana listened to these details wonderingly and often had the feeling as if a familiar fairy tale was unfolding before her eyes. As she grew more interested, she did a little research, and found out all that Hayden hadn't told her. She got to know the Ravensdales were blue-blood aristocrats, who owned properties and estates from Nottinghamshire to London and as far south as the shores of Brighton. Lana found out Hayden's great-grandfather had a strange addiction. He collected various newspapers obsessively. He also practiced journalism. At first, he wrote anonymous articles as a hobby. Later, he became more interested and published his own weekly, 'The Albion Express'. Of course, they used the simple tools of the time back then, but the publisher continued to develop year in year out and printed further issues. Hayden's grandfather took the business in hand and he appeared to have a magic touch in the emerging field of media. Everything turned to gold in his hands. With an awe-inspiring business spirit, he always knew which struggling businesses he should buy, revive and add to his growing company. Later on, the company was inherited by the eldest son, Edward – Hayden's father. Under his lead, the already successful company evolved into a flourishing media empire. Dozens of newspapers, magazines and other publications were part of the company, and it shone in the field of advertising as well.

Knowing all this, Lana had decided not to fall prey to the crown prince. No matter how likeable Hayden was – and oh, yes, he was – she wanted to show to herself and her peers, that she had principles. She had a firm opinion on fortune and wealthy people, which in time had become more refined, and as her personality developed, her views had gained depth. She was convinced that although someone may be raised in the privileged financial circumstances of the upper class, it was no reason for them to feel exempt from certain rules. She and her feelings could not be bought – that was definitely out of the question, even though her fresh feelings for the wealthy heir now fought a constant war with her convictions.

As their friendship became deeper, Lana learned Hayden had a brother who'd tragically died in a motorcycle accident at the age of 12. Hayden himself was present at the tragedy; in fact, he was the only eyewitness. His brother, Jacob was 4 years older than him. The age difference was just enough to make him follow his older brother blindly into every madness. They rebuilt the motorcycle alone, refurbished and cleaned it piece by piece. It was bought from the local junkyard for pennies. An older employee helped them in their attempt, as most practicalities were new to them. The old man was hardly even an employee; but an old bloke whose father had worked for Hayden's grandfather. The old fellow, whose face still wore the traits of his Pakistani ancestors, was liable to mysticism. He was good to the boys and they regarded him as a kind of grandfather. He was a father figure to them, who was not ashamed to spend quality time with the two and tell mysterious stories by the campfire at night.

Finally, they seized the completed motorbike enthusiastically and all went well for some time. Until one cloudy afternoon the tragedy happened. They couldn't tell who was at fault. Probably no one. The ground was still wet from the previous day's rain. The boy, testing his limits, rode faster than he should have and the rock on the side of the road was in the worst possible place. In a moment it was all over. Tyres screeching, the runaway engine spun in the air; the boy's body was ejected from his seat weightlessly, like a feather, and his head found the sharp rock. Hayden, who was only 8 at the

time, was sitting in the grass by the road, watching his brother showing off. He didn't even realize what had happened. For a moment he stared at the bike that had crashed into the bush, and its single rotating wheel, pointed towards the sky. Then he ran to the motionless body lying on the ground. Shouting his brother's name, he knelt down by him, and, reaching under his head, slightly raised it for him to regain consciousness. As soon as he touched the back of the head, however, he felt it was crushed. The base of the skull was barely attached to the rest. At that moment he realized Jacob, his brother, was dead. He knew very well there was no point in trying to do anything to save him.

His conclusion was confirmed by the medical examiner as well, when he found the boy had suffered immediate death upon hitting the rock. It's strange how a little boy can see things so maturely in a time of crisis. In retrospect, he didn't know how he got back home. In a state of delirium, he calmly reported to his mother that Jacob was dead, and where his body could be found. The sobbing phase of shock occurred only after this and it took long years to process the loss. The old Pakistani went missing the next day and was never heard of again. Hayden felt as if his parents never really got over it. He wasn't sure whether a parent could ever overcome such a trauma.

They all grieved in their own ways. His father never talked about it. It seemed as if, as a defence against the pain, his brain had filtered out all the memories related to his older son. The only thing that was visible to the outside world was on Jacob's birthday. On this day, every year, he locked himself in his study and didn't come out. They heard nothing of the usual telephoning, pacing and dictating to his secretary. It was silent all day. Then, in the evening, he came out, like nothing had happened. He didn't say a word, though everyone knew he was suffering.

Although the Ravensdale couple's relationship appeared normal, it was obvious to Victoria that she couldn't turn to her husband for solace. She tried to cope with the loss in her own way. She was more and more addicted to her only son, and mollycoddled him. She tried to direct Hayden's life onto the track she had imagined to be right. To Hayden this meant that his parents weren't only mourning but trying to put all their hopes and dreams onto him. They constantly increased his awareness of being the only heir to the family company and traditions, and they expected him to take his role seriously. These expectations laid a heavy burden on his shoulders, and as a teenager he regularly rebelled against them. Until, when he became more self-aware, he realized it wasn't taking over of the company he was unhappy with, but rather the parental influence in his life. Actually, the media profession was not against his will at all, and he even had quite a few ideas about reforming the company when he takes over.

As they got to know one another better, and more and more intimate details came to light about their backgrounds, Lana's defensive walls slowly began to crumble, and her prejudices against the rich aristocratic boy melted away.

She came from a well-heeled, middle-class family, and although they never had financial problems, the degree of wealth and luxury she learned from Hayden was all new to her. In the person of the young man, she initially saw nothing but an affluent heir, the future sole owner of a business empire. She couldn't shake the feeling that during his college years, far from the influence of his home, Hayden only wanted to feel free and have his fling with girls. By no means did she want to become a trophy, so she insisted there could be only friendship between them. As time passed, though, Lana's resistance started to lessen. His sincere kindness and his openly demonstrated enthusiasm were slowly bringing down her fortress of mistrust brick by brick. There was something remarkable and simultaneously exciting in this perfectly behaved gentleman, as he was desperately trying to contain the mad passion that was building up inside him.

Hayden Ravensdale was still supporting the ballroom wall with his shoulder, perfectly oblivious to his surroundings. His petrified look still rested on the young woman, while the thoughts in his head were racing around.

I was dumb. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for her.

He actually remembered a course of action which was inspired by blind love, and which evoked perplexity and astonishment from his family and friends.

As the occasional weekend visits did not satisfy his desire to spend the most time possible with Lana, he decided to take a radical step. In the last year of his sales and marketing studies he enrolled in international financial law at the law school. He continued his previous studies as a correspondence student so he could spend most of his time with the girl, thus saving a lot of travelling. His parents weren't fully convinced that law studies were absolutely essential for his future managerial position in the company because it had its own lawyers who dealt with legal matters. Fundamentally, however, they did not oppose it, as it would do no harm to broaden the boy's range of knowledge. They suspected the involvement of a woman but they didn't pay too much attention to it yet. They were sure, without a doubt, that as soon as Hayden had disported himself during his student years, he would bow before his duties and follow his father's footsteps; albeit the situation was now far from just sport.

Even back then, his intent with Lana was serious, and her stubborn resistance only intensified his interest. Miss Bell's behaviour was quite the opposite of what other girls showed in his direction. He wasn't used to being, so to speak, ignored this long and so persistently. Day by day, he felt more and more attracted to her, and decided that whatever it took, he would break her stubborn resistance. He had become captivated by her person, his thoughts were with her all the time. He wanted to possess her, make her his, body and soul.

His eyes had opened to new things in her closeness. For the first time in his life he was starting to get the picture of there being two sides to the coin; that not everybody was born rich, like he was. It cannot be said that he was completely insensitive in this respect, of course. He simply lived the carefree life of a young person, who, due to his social situation, never met people in need. The charitable work of his parents went under absolute discretion, and he never felt the urge to inquire about it. He now started to support beneficial programmes in which Lana had already actively participated. One of these programmes was related to orphanages. The students regularly organized interesting and funny programs for the resident children. After some time, losing interest in his passive role, Hayden started to get involved in practical activities. At first, he escorted children to a variety of programmes as a driver, and to his amazement, noticed how much he enjoyed it. What he was even more astonished to find out, was that the little ones were drawn to his personality and liked him. He had the opportunity to give, and generosity filled him with a feeling so far unknown to him.

On a warm spring afternoon, together with two other university students, Lana and Hayden took the children to an exceptionally promising programme. The day was a turning point in their relationship, he recalled.

The archaic panelled doors creaked open as the bus drove up to the park. The huge property was actually a wildlife park where you could study various animals in their natural habitat. There were little forested areas, there was a fish pond, an ostrich farm and the adventurous ones could try to ride ponies. On the lower floor of the castle, standing in the middle of it all, a buffet was set out for customers. In addition, the building also served as a location for temporary exhibitions. Upstairs, in the countless ziggy-zaggy rooms ancient furniture and utensils were displayed, and it was possible to try them out. The children were delighted and spent hours running around in the open air. The adults could hardly keep up with the sprogs, and they needed most of their persuasive power to lure them away from the place. Hayden's fooling around with the boys provoked a smile on Lana's face, the

way they sat on his back and egged him on like a mule, how they fought with sticks and played football with a deflated ball found under some bushes. For a time Hayden returned to his childhood and forgot all about his adult self which made Lana watch him in amazement. From time to time she shook her head with false disapproval when the boys did something seemingly dangerous, but to tell the truth, she was just happy to make the kids' life joyful, even if only for a couple of hours. She could no longer keep a cool attitude towards Hayden's charms when he and the children gave her a bouquet of flowers they'd picked. He was so ruddy attractive when he leaned over and asked her something with a flagrant look in his eyes, that Lana felt she wouldn't be able to resist him much longer. And as time passed and they got closer, the arguments she so carefully constructed at the beginning of their relationship began to lose their weight.

After lunch, began the discovery of the castle. Having wandered all over the premises, tried all the ancient artefacts and moved every movable object, a small girl was pleading with the others to play hide and seek. Although the female group leaders expressed their concerns regarding the integrity of the house, the boys assured them that there wasn't much harm they hadn't already done to the building. In the end, they didn't have the heart to refuse little Emmy's request, who'd always been so shy and quiet and almost never said anything out loud. They presented these arguments to the castle caretaker, who didn't seem too convinced by the idea initially. Hayden put his arm around the man's shoulder and asked him to join him for a short conversation, after which they finally got permission to use the entire top floor for an hour. Hayden had actually given money to the caretaker, but he handled the matter so discreetly that the others didn't notice anything of the agreement. Lana could suspect what was going on however this time she didn't intend to protest. She was simply grateful to him.

The countless rooms, hidden corners and the antique fitted cupboards provided the ideal venue, and the children flang themselves happily into the game. The loud and cheerful laughter made their young adult companions happy as well. There was no quibbling; everyone had to play, so Lana was looking for a proper bolthole for the third time. However, time was short and she heard David, who was *it*, counting backwards from 10. She only had seconds left to hide but she found no suitable place. All the good places had already been taken in the room she quickly ran into. Her gaze finally settled on a narrow little door near the window. She thought about passing through it to a neighbouring room without going out into the hallway, where the boy had already been looking for his victims. She hurried to the door, turned the creaky handle and her heart almost stopped in surprise. Hayden peeked out from the darkness, putting his finger over his mouth with feigned anger.

'Sssssh!!!' Hayden hushed her.

She also put her hand in front of her mouth, only to try and hold back her laughter. Footsteps were getting louder and louder, meaning that David was getting closer. Driven by sudden determination, Hayden grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside the narrow cabinet with a single pull. The hideaway, which Lana thought to be a passage, was actually a fairly tall closet. Lana, perceiving the comedy of the situation, could hardly hold in her laughter. Hayden tried to gesture her to calm down but the space was so tight he kept bumping his head and elbows. Then they heard someone opening the hall door and taking a few uncertain, echoing steps on the marble floor. As a last attempt, Hayden, trying to avoid being caught, softly put his hand on the girl's mouth. So they stood, motionless, glaring with large, round eyes in the dark and waiting for the risk of discovery to pass. They heard a door open, then close again squeakily. The sound of footsteps was fading. Hayden sighed with relief, but his ease was quickly replaced by apprehension as he began to understand the situation in which they ended up. His hand slowly slid off the girl's mouth, while she still didn't dare to move. Their bodies were close, his lips almost touching her forehead. His eyes were getting used to the darkness, and he saw her fixing her gaze on him.

As he realized that they'd never been so close to each other, his heart began to beat twice as fast, and his breathing became uneven. A pulsing heat started spreading from his crotch and covered his

whole body. To put it bluntly, he was in deep shit, and by now he suspected that he was lost. For months he'd behaved as a perfect gentleman and quite frankly, he was pretty pleased with himself. He had never concealed his attraction and was sure Lana knew how he felt about her; yet at no time had he shown any provocative or pushy gestures towards her. Not once did he try to approach her physically. Up to that day. But there, in that narrow, confined space, in that closeness created between them by chance, he could no longer resist the desire he had oppressed in himself for months. His hand moved slowly to Lana's cheek, sensually smoothing her soft skin without haste. He lived through the beauty of the first touch completely.

Inch by inch, his hand glided to the her hair, which had got a bit ruffled in the heat of the game. He'd been dreaming about twisting her beautiful hair around his finger and kissing it, but had never dared to cross the invisible line Lana guarded desperately. Now, he just had a gut feeling it was the right time and the symbolic gate, which had been locked and bolted so far, cracked open.

He wanted to take the first step now. He was dying to move ahead, that they would have something more than friendship between them. He felt a kiss could be the start of something extraordinary and eagerly awaited. And if Lana rejected him – if she'd still be able to – he would get the message, however bitter it would be.

His lips approached slowly, all his senses scouting to receive the other's vibrations. Gently, as if made from porcelain, he took her precious face in his hands and lightly ran his own lips along her mouth. He groaned with pleasure when he finally tasted her, gently sucking in her lips, taking them in slowly, like someone needing encouragement.

Lana was standing stock-still, eyes closed, allowing Hayden to caress her lips. Her fit of laughter had long passed, and he realized they wouldn't exit this closet in the same mood as they'd entered. It was impossible to ignore that the air was sizzling hot around them. Heat engulfed her when he stroked her hair. Paralyzed, she gave herself over to the irresistible force. As Hayden kissed her cheek, then closer and closer to her mouth, the rest of her resistance abandoned her brain like a whirlwind. The boy's passion was too real, too tempting, and Lana no longer wanted to resist this obvious attraction. The truth was, she trusted him, longed to be with him and felt that she was falling deeper from day to day. As she felt his gently pleading kisses on her lips, her resistance crumbled for good, and her mouth responded wordlessly. They had both fantasized about what it would be like to kiss the other, but reality surpassed their imagination. Lana had been kissed before, but this was the first kiss that made her knees become liquid, and the world ceased to exist around her. This was THE KISS, the one she had read about in romantic novels, and whose existence she had doubted up until now. There was only she and Hayden, and his mouth, which stuck demandingly onto hers, the moment he sensed her submission. With a foggy mind, she realized she was in love. She couldn't even tell in which moment like-mindedness turned into friendship, and friendship turned into love, but she was sure Hayden Ravensdale had captivated her heart. And she also knew there was no one else in the world she would be happier to give her heart to.

Since Hayden's left hand was pulling to her closer and closer, with his right against the back of her neck, Lana's fingers also began to make their way up his biceps. Running her palm up his neck, she finally dug her fingers into his hair, causing Hayden to sigh with pleasure. He whispered her name with a groan, and feeling encouraged by her submission, his tongue just began to make way between her lips when the noises of the surrounding universe slowly started to penetrate the invisible hemlock covering them. As the outside noises were approaching them, their lips parted unwillingly, and Lana drew back a little. Hayden's lips came to rest on her forehead, and his distracted breathing sweetly tickled her skin. Spellbound, Lana was now thinking the word *kiss* had definitely gained a new meaning in the past few minutes. There was *kissing* as such, and then there was *kissing with Hayden Ravensdale*, a totally new concept. She was puzzled by the physical unison between them that had been established so quickly, and which – she assumed – although many women dream of it, only a

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