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ONE

"Aren't you joining us?" Gena, Claire's only friend, asked her sassily.

Staring around the shiny blue-lightened club, people who were mostly their classmates dancing and having fun, Claire smiled softly.

"No, I love observing from a distance," she answered. "Besides, I'm leaving very soon." She slowly sipped the champagne in her glass while eyeing her gorgeous Japanese friend she'd known throughout the college years.

Claire and Gena were more than just besties; they were sole sisters who had each other's back for thick and thin. Neither could imagine life without the other.

"Why now?" Gena cried, pursing her lips into a pout. "Are you in the mood to fight with your witch stepmom or something?"

Claire scowled. "Not really. She's the least of my concerns right now. By the way, I'm spending the weekend at the beach house. Would you like to come?" she asked, eyeing Gena hopefully.

As if she was going to say no, Claire chuckled inwardly.

"I'd love to!" Gena snapped gleefully. "You know that I love having a good time, don't you?"

"I was just making sure. Who knows?" Claire shrugged.

"Oh please! We both need a break, girl." Gena dropped on the barstool with a sigh, untying her dark, straight hair with a stout pull of the hairband.

"Well, let's do it then," Claire uttered. "I've got something important to do there." Her look was suddenly rueful, her eyes on the glass she was tilting nonchalantly.

Sighing, Gena pulled her face closer to Claire's. "Are you finally going to visit your father's grave?" she asked, and Claire nodded softly. "It will be fine, don't beat yourself."

"I hope so," Claire breathed, the feeling overwhelming her until today. "Anyways, let's forget about that." She tried to enjoy the graduation party that she only attended out of Gena's conviction.

The two had just graduated from college, a week ago.

"I can't believe we're done with the school shit," said Gena, beckoning for a drink from the bartender.

"I know, right?" Claire sighed, staring at her glass as if it was something interesting. And suddenly she looked at Gena with a bright, hopeful smile. "I wonder what awaits us," she uttered.

All she's hoping for is to bury the emptiness in her heart. Was there anything out there for her? Should she take a vacation or something? Claire couldn't decide, for she had a lot to think of now that the school was over.

"Hey." Gena snapped her fingers, disrupting Claire's trance. "What are you thinking of?"

Claire chuckled. "I want to feel alive, Gena," she said, making Gena frown bemusedly. "Even a little bit I want to feel like I'm really living."

"What?" Gena grabbed her tequila from the bartender.

"Never mind, it's nothing to stress about," Claire said dismissively. "I'll just go home now, I'm very tired. I'll see you tomorrow, huh?" She yawned while saying this.

"Sure," Gena uttered.

Claire didn't waste more time at the party; she immediately hopped into a taxi and rode back home. Today had been a bit emotional for her, and partying was the least of her needs.

The taxi pulled over in front of her house.

"Thank you," she told the driver, and immediately strode towards the gigantic gate.

Her house was a large two-story: electric fence and enormous gate made it utterly modern. Walking inside, Claire was welcomed by a well-trimmed garden, a vast swimming pool, and a pair of swings that always visualized her childhood.

A soft smile escaped her as she made her way inside, thanking the heavens that her stepmother wasn't on the loop to ruin her evening further. She was probably cooking her deadly potions somewhere, Claire thought, for she always considered *her* a witch.

Feeling emotionally exhausted, Claire kicked her golden heels, and then peeled off the white strapless dress she was wearing. She climbed on the bed right away, as though afraid to catch a cold. She just texted Gena about the time of their departure, and closed her eyes to rest her mind.

The next day, just as agreed, the two began their journey. They arrived in Montesby around one in the afternoon. It was a beautiful town with attractive natural scenery, where the green met the blue. The sea and the vegetation were hand in hand adorning the place. Claire smiled with mirth as they stepped out of the taxi right in front of the beautiful beach house.

"Claire?" An old man regarded her in awe. "What a surprise, my girl! You have gotten so tall that I nearly forgot you." He was around seventy or so.

"I will take it as a compliment, Grandpa. How are you?" Claire returned happily, her smile brighter as the golden sunlight nourishing her blonde hair.

"Very fine, my child," he said, throwing a curious glance over Claire's shoulder.

Gena was watching them without a word, smiling.

"Um . . ." Claire moved aside wittingly. "This is my best friend, Gena. And Gena, this is my grandfather," she introduced them.

"Nice to meet you, young lady." The old man smiled with politeness.

"Same." Gena grinned.

"Well, why don't you come in? I'm sure you must be hungry, right?" he said urgently, leading the way inside.

"You bet I am," Gena muttered.

A while later Claire was taking a little walk with the old man, hand in hand. She hadn't been here in ages, and the only reason she decided to come this time was to finally find peace for herself; after spending a long moment despising her late father.

The burden of hatred was too heavy to carry around for longer.

"What took you so long?" The old man asked tenderly, his steps slow.

Claire had no definitive answer for that. Maybe she was afraid?

"I was just waiting for the perfect time, I guess," Claire answered in a small whisper.

Or maybe she wasn't ready to accept some facts in her life, she thought to herself.

"Do you still resent your father?" her grandpa asked carefully, and Claire swallowed hard. "You can cry if you want to, and curse him out loud if you want to. But your father never forgot about you, trust me."

"I don't know about that." Claire laughed bittersweetly, trying hard to fight the pricking tears. "If he did . . . he wouldn't have left me believing otherwise."

"Not true, Claire. All he wanted was to prepare a better future for you," her grandfather insisted.

"Future?" Claire scoffed with incredulity. "What future is there if I'm now all alone? This is not what I wanted, Grandpa. I wanted a family!" She sniffed, her anger exploding. "I just wanted to go home and find people who would hug me, ask how my day was, and whether I'd want to join them for dinner. But he denied me that! He had the chance to do it but he didn't! All he cared about was his work!" She allowed the tears to swim in her eyes, and slowly slid down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, my child." The old man pulled her for a hug, and she completely melted in his warmth. "It will be fine, you'll see." He patted her back softly, allowing her sobs to pass.

"I'm only here so that I can finally let go of all the anger, and start afresh," Claire said as they pulled apart, sniffing. "I want to be free. I'll let go of all the hatred so that I can live my life without resentment."

"I understand, and that's very wise." He smiled proudly. "So, does this mean you're ready to take what he's left you?"

Claire blinked, but immediately recalled the meaning.

"I think so. It's what he wanted for me, right? I'll accept it now." She forced a smile despite finding it weird.

"Very well, that means you're a grown up now," her grandfather remarked, making them both laugh.

"I'll have to visit him. I'd like to do it right away," said Claire. "I believe a lot will change from today. I can feel it." She smiled optimistically, and the old man had nothing else to say, other feeling happy for her.

It was two in the afternoon, when Claire arrived at the cemetery. Nothing had changed, she thought. It had been four years since her father died, and that was her first visit since the burial. It felt terrible, but she had to do it.

Sighing heavily at the sight of several graves, scribbled with the names, dates, and lovely titles of someone's loved ones, Claire went straight to that of her father. It was in a great condition, green grass adorning it.

Swallowing hard, Claire placed a large bouquet of flowers on top of it, taking her sunglasses off. She slowly squatted down and ran a hand on the engraved words on the silver plate on the ground, her dad's name beaming.

"Hi, Dad," she uttered, smiling faintly. "It's me . . . your Claire." She pressed her lips together, fighting the tears.

She really wished that the dead could hear. She hoped her father could hear.

"It took me so long, huh? I know, I had no courage to face you. I just couldn't stand the sight of you anymore. You weren't the same dad I knew before; not that friendly one who loved me."

She broke into uncontrollable tears, sitting down on the soft grass.

"I'm going to be an interior designer, just as I wanted," she proceeded. "But you are not going to see it. You didn't even see me wearing the graduation gown. As always, you didn't show up. You're so cruel, Mr. Levy."

Claire knew it was pointless blaming the dead, but she needed to vent anyway. She just blurted all that she'd kept inside. Minutes passed, and she felt better somehow.

It was time to say goodbye.

With a deep sigh, Claire decided it was enough, hence made her way out. Fine or not, she felt like something was off her throat, and that made her feel better. Oblivious of anything and anyone, she suddenly realized that she had an audience.

What the hell? She screamed inside.

"Are you feeling better now?" a male voice asked.

Claire swerved around. "Are you talking to me?" she asked the owner of the voice, frowning.

"Yes, you," he replied, and she looked at him, puzzled.

"I'm not sure if I'm supposed to receive that from a stranger, but thanks for your concern anyway," Claire replied casually, and turned to where she was heading.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you, I should've introduced myself first, maybe?" he remarked, his manners gallant. "Hi, I'm Bruno." His bashful smile would have driven any woman crazy; but not Claire.

All she wanted was to get out of this place that could never be a meeting place, and definitely a place to exchange pleasantries from a stranger. For heaven's sake, he could even be a ghost! She thought.

She paced a few steps towards him, nonchalantly, and stopped. "Are you a journalist, by any chance?" she queried. "Because I don't have any scoop for you, in case that's your issue."

He better be a journalist and not a ghost, she kept thinking.

Bruno bursted out laughing, vividly amused. "A journalist? No, I just saw you in there and I felt concerned, that's why I couldn't ignore you."

"Oh, really now? How sweet of you, huh?" Claire retorted. "Well, you should stay here and do the charity job then, don't you think? Thank you for your concern, Bruno, but I'm fine."

"Ouch," he muttered, holding his heart as though highly wounded. "I'm sorry if I was rude, but you honestly looked devastated there. But well, I can see you are full of energy now, so I'll take my leave."

Eyeing him leaving, Claire felt somewhat guilty for lashing out without any grand reason.

"Wait," she urged.

"Yes?" Bruno quipped.

"I'm sorry. I'm not having a good day to be honest," she confessed.

"Apology accepted." Bruno beamed kindly. "And I'm sorry, I can tell you're having it bad."

"Well, thanks." She sighed, and they slowly continued to walk.

"I think I said my name, but I haven't heard yours yet," said Bruno while staring at her with a mischievous gleam.

"Claire," she told him softly.

"Oh. Such a pretty name." His voice was teasing with warmth.

"Um . . . thanks." Claire had no reason to stay sullen; her face brightened with an indulgent smile.

"So, are you new around here? I've never seen you before," Bruno proceeded.

"Oh, aren't you a know-it-all? How can you tell if I'm new or not?" she replied accusingly, and he laughed heartily. They were already outside the cemetery.

"Well, you can say that out loud," he bragged. "I know almost everyone around here, but this is the first charming face to meet the eyes."

"So that's how you get into them ladies, huh?"

"You're beautiful and funny," Bruno uttered, laughing. "Would you mind having a cup of coffee?" he flatly proposed.

"You're not flirting with me, are you?" Claire asked, and laughter escaped Bruno. "Well, I'm just warning you, because I'm not easy to handle."

"I really had no plans to, but I guess I've changed my mind a second ago," Bruno replied, and she gasped incredulously. "I'm just kidding, Claire. I'm only inviting you for a coffee, nothing more."

"Cool, let's have coffee," she relented with a little smile.

TWO

Apparently there was a modern sleek restaurant Claire didn't know existed. The ambience was calm and friendly. Bruno's car pulled over, and the two went to one of the empty tables.

"Didn't expect to see you so soon." A young waitress passed by, her blonde hair in pigtails. She smiled blushing, making Claire stare at her stunned.

"Well, I'm as unpredictable as the weather," Bruno replied, shrugging heedlessly as Miss pigtails walked by with a tray of food.

He snapped a finger and another waiter made his way towards their table.

"You seem very popular here," Claire made a casual remark upon the gesture.

Bruno smiled and said, "That's because I live here."

"Oh, and what do you do around here? Photography?" Claire was bemused, her eyes squinted inquisitively.

"Um, I'm the restaurant owner," he replied.

Oh. Evidently Claire hadn't seen this coming. Well, he wasn't a weirdo after all, she thought to herself at the remainder of their meeting earlier.

"Congratulations. This place is terrific," she uttered, her eyes roaming around with admiration. The waiter inquired about their menu choice afterwards. "Chicken casserole, please," she replied.

"Thank you, I guess." Bruno's smile was brighter. "I'll have the same," he said, and then faced Claire. "Care for a drink? The cocktails here are to die for; not that I'm bragging."

"Oh? Is that true?" Claire asked the waiter. "I know he's your boss but I'm the customer here. I'm the King . . . No, the Queen!"

They all laughed.

"They are great." The waiter nodded in agreement, his smile assuring Claire of this grand allegation.

"Sure. Why not? Worst case scenario, I'll just not ever come back if you both scam me." She let the gentlemen win.

"So . . ." Bruno resumes his full, undistracted attention back to Claire. "Why are you around here? Because I know you're not from here." His brown eyes were blazing with wonder and playfulness, his smile boyish.

"Well, I just came to relax over the weekend," Claire answered with a deep sigh. "And to visit my parents." Her voice was low without ecstasy, and it seemed Bruno understood why.

"I'm sorry. I was also visiting my mother," he said in a similar tone of voice, reclining back in his seat.

"Really?" Claire uttered, and this turned to be an ordinary talk as Bruno talked of his dead mother. "I'm sorry for your loss," she breathed.

"It's okay. We're still surviving, aren't we?" Bruno enthused, his sassy mood restored.

"Yeah. Surviving." Claire's mind was back to her house in the city where her stepmother was always on her neck, turning her life a living hell.

It was time to maybe move out, she'd constantly say this, but the memories of her childhood would always hold her back.

"Are we on the memory lane?" Bruno snapped his finger on her face, chuckling at how lost she looked.

"Oh, come on!" Claire dismissed with a smile. She was indeed enjoying the moment, and so was Bruno.

"And where exactly do you live?" he asked after a short pause of laughter.

"Lisbay."

"Hmm . . . that's interesting."

"Why? I'd much rather live here if it weren't for other reasons," she said truthfully.

"I agree. I do like this place better than the city," Bruno said, running a hand through his funky curls.

Smiling, Claire's tummy started rumbling, and she eyed him blankly upon his small laugh. "I think food would be better than your teeth," she said, and now he laughed even louder. So did she.

"Wow! Big appetite, huh?" Bruno teased.

"What can I say?" Claire flushed. "I love eating."

And indeed, she loved eating. Maybe food was the best part of her life.

"Okay, beautiful." Bruno got up, so as to personally speed up their order.

"We can just wait, though! Don't pay attention to my rumbling." Claire tried to stop him, but he was too adamant. "Gosh!" She laughed, allowing herself to relax.

Between lunch and talking, time seemed to be going quite fast. Bruno was quite friendly, and it was impossible not to get lost into his ability to converse.

Claire had nothing much to tell, however, for her life had been a dull, empty page with nothing but her step family and the failed romance during high school.

Well, only Gena was her tale to tell. She was missing the Asian already.

As for Bruno, he was spontaneous and adventurous. He'd been to major cities of Europe, and studied in Barcelona. He was just a free spirit, enjoying life and the simple things it had to offer.

Photography was Bruno's biggest passion, and he loved it. He saw beauty in everything he took shots of, according to his own words.

Nevertheless, Claire never stopped staring at him, sometimes. He was handsome, charming and boyish in manners, with something special that makes one feel at ease with him.

He was probably in his mid-twenties or so, Claire reckoned.

But that was all. She had no time to crush over some guy she'd just met in the cemetery. However, she liked his company quite well. Her phone buzzed suddenly, and it was none other than Gena.

"Hello," Claire answered while looking at Bruno, who was also looking at her with a small frown.

"Hey, where are you?" Gena replied from the other end, her voice ballistic.

"Um, with a friend," Claire replied, smiling. "Why? Do you need anything? Or you just miss me already?"

"Which friend that I don't know about? Spill it, have you met some cute guy over there?" Gena asked her in a naughty way.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Is that the only thing you could think of? We'll talk later, be there soon!"

"You better, because I can't wait, you know. And I'm bored to death here," Gena lamented and it was the end of the call.

"Oh God!" Claire exclaimed.

"What?" Bruno abandoned his mobile.

"It's already six and I am still here! I've got to go, Bruno." Claire collected her bag in frenzy.

"Alright, but—" Bruno chuckled at her haste moves. "Take it easy, Claire, it's not the end of the world."

"Yeah, right! Talking to someone who lives right here."

Bruno couldn't hold his laughter as he stood up. "I can give you a ride if you don't mind," he suggested.

"No, you've done enough. I don't want to trouble you anymore. But thanks for the nice lunch, really," Claire assured, her smile grateful. "I've completely lost track of time from the talk and all, and maybe I should blame you." Her pink lips pouted cutely.

"Me?" Bruno uttered, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, you." Claire grinned, fixing her wavy, golden hair with her fingers. "Bye." And then she kissed him on the cheek.

"But—" Bruno started, but she was already striding off, waving at him in child-like manners. "But it seems like it's going to rain soon," he muttered apprehensively.

The weather changed abruptly. The sky was too dark as if a very heavy rain was going to crash. Claire didn't care, however, because she had an umbrella inside her backpack.

Ten minutes passed but there was no sign of any taxi on the main road. She decided to walk, hoping to find one on the way.

After a short while, the rain started pouring. Claire fished the umbrella and opened it immediately. Not having a choice, she decided to walk through the rain that was increasingly heavy.

She tried to call Gena but there was no signal. Her jeans and sneakers were all wet, for it was quite windy, and the cold had started to get into her skin.

"Crap!" Claire snapped. "I'm so damn tired, and this stupid umbrella is totally useless!" It was already dark, and about fifteen minutes had already passed.

Still there wasn't a trace of any car, bus . . . or even a taxi. She kept walking.

The geography of the place was terrible as far as heavy rainfall was concerned. It would easily get slippery, and tremendous erosion would take part thitherto. She had to walk carefully, but one can't always be careful enough.

She suddenly slipped and fell, without noticing that she was walking onto a little slope. There was an eroded part that formed a temporary reservoir in which rain water collected and cascaded away. Claire slid straight towards it, and only managed to grab the tree branch which supported her balance.

Looking down she felt terrified. She tried to hold onto the branch tightly, but it was hard. The rain water kept rippling past her heading onto the little railing bridge.

Damn it!

Claire tried to pull herself up, several times, but still couldn't. She screamed for help but there was no one there. Not even an animal passing.

It was so strange and sudden. Coming from a perfect nice day, and in a blink of an eye she was fighting for her life, in such a stupid manner. She even had to laugh a bit. She was cold, and the water wouldn't leave her in peace.

What the hell was happening with her life? Was this real or some kind of a bad dream? Was she really hanging by a tree branch amid the rain? Claire wondered inside and the fear began consuming her little by little.

"Ugh!" she bawled, trying once again to push herself up, her heart beating fast at the speed of the running water cascading vigorously.

Was she going to die? Was she even afraid of dying? If she thought better, there was nothing major to live for in her life. Could this be the sign for her eternal salvation? Perhaps it's her ticket to see her mother, and her father as well.

And maybe ask him why he neglected her like that.

Claire began laughing. She was laughing between the tears, thinking of her horrible life so far; the life filled with longing and loneliness. She was tired of holding on, in both this moment and all those times she'd forced herself to do so.

Perhaps it's time to let go, time to be free from this cruel world.

However, just as she's about to give it up, willingly and free, something happened. Like an angel shining from afar, Claire glimpsed the double lights approaching from a distance. It was a car, she thought, and perhaps her final moment wasn't yet.

THREE

The evening was stormy. Mr. Stevens and his grandson, Ryan, were on their way home as the rain kept pouring intensely with thunder striking eerily in the sky.

"We should've gone to your house, son," said Mr. Stevens warily, his eyes gleaming from the blue light in the sky. "This rain won't stop now; are you really able to drive this way?"

"Don't worry, I know this road better than you think," Ryan said confidently, and he meant it. His muscular arms gripped the steering tightly, tentatively avoiding all the weak spots as he kept driving the large SUV.

Ryan was an epitome of handsomeness; tall, athletic built, with amazing facial features that deserved more than one glance. He was also a matured guy, with a very stronger personality than his actual age.

"Okay, if you say so." Mr. Stevens pulled a bottle of Scotch.

"I thought the doctor forbade that," Ryan remarked, scowling, and it was always a fool's errand.

Mr. Stevens was crazy for whisky, but it wasn't enough for him to be an alcoholic, thankfully.

"Son, if I die, I'll just die," he said. "Might as well do it as a happy man instead of a sad, old bag of bones!"

"That famous speech," Ryan muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ignoring the sarcasm, Mr. Stevens added, "I'm not spending a few of my last days in the world like a warrior who's left his wife and kids at home." He cleared his throat at the burning sensation upon chugging the drink, and it was enough to make Ryan shake his head to the sides.

"I was able to convince the shareholders about the redevelopment deal," Ryan said, finding the distraction from this horrendous weather. He glanced at his grandfather as

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