

INSEPARABLE 1

Romance Novel

By Renata W. Müller

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„Distance for lovers is like wind for the fire:
Little flames are extinguished by it, but the strong ones are brought to combustion.”
Milán Füst

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CHAPTER 1

Nathaniel Cruz, St. Andrew's star midfielder shook his head in indignation at the words being yelled by his coach. On that day, he felt even more annoyed than usual by the coach's endless shouting and running back and forth during the game. Although he was only eighteen, he had a strong idea of how he would do the job of managing the team much more efficiently. He was also quite determined about his own future career as a footballer, for which St. Andrew's Secondary School, a place well known for its advanced sports education, was giving him a great push. It had launched about a dozen great athletes on the bumpy, but shiny, road of their professional careers. Its junior football team was a legend of its own due to its successes at the annual national championships organised by the English Schools' Football Association. And this year, Nate and the team once again stood a good chance to make it all the way to the final.

They regarded their opposing team, Downhill High, as quite an unpleasant rival, and their 'duels' often ended in a tie. This was thanks to the tactics applied with conviction by Downhill's coach. He preferred a passive, defensive style to attacking football. This tactic almost drove Mr Lewis, the coach of St. Andrew's, crazy. Even at this moment, he was running up and down the edge of the pitch, occasionally crossing the side line, while shouting instructions to his players. The linesman kept sending threatening glances towards him, signalling that if he continued to violate the touchline, he would be sent to the seating area as punishment.

St. Andrew's attacked into the sun, so visibility wasn't the best for them. This, and the one-one scoreline of the match annoyed Nathaniel all the more, and his general mood had of late been a bit edgy, anyway. He wiped his sweaty forehead into the sleeve of his royal blue jersey, and murmured something between his teeth, then turned to face the ball again.

Despite it being a weekday afternoon, there was quite a crowd of about two hundred people seated in the school's grandstand, watching the game. Right now, the opposing team's central defender, a short guy with unusually broad shoulders for his height, brutally pushed one of the St. Andrew's strikers to the side – the one who was on his way to cross the 16 yard line with the ball at his foot. The referee's hand immediately went up in the air, giving a free kick against Downhill High. Everyone turned expectantly towards Nathaniel, and he couldn't help but pull a smile. True, this was his speciality: free kicks from the edge of the penalty area. He could take them with his eyes closed, blind even. He had practiced them so many times at training. Now, as always, he carefully positioned the ball. He took exactly three steps back, then sized up the four corners of the goal, starting from the bottom right to the top right, and so on. Despite the fact that the sun was in his eyes, enhancing the challenge, he was strangely confident that he wouldn't miss. He licked the edge of his mouth, narrowed his eyes, and ran for it. He could sense, even see that he had got the ball at the best place, sending it flying towards the left corner of the goal with a vehement spin, making an arc. For a second,

he waited motionlessly to see the outcome, but then something covered up the sunlight which had shone into his eyes. He tilted his head to the left, but couldn't see what had created the sudden darkness. There came a huge blow to his face, which caused him to collapse to the ground, unconscious.

#

Nate had quite a bit of experience in football, despite his young age. Ever since he could remember, he had been running crazily on a pitch, chasing a ball. His exceptional talent soon caught the attention of the young boy's coaches, too. As his mother recalled – and since she loved to tell his stories, everybody knew them by heart – it was even thanks to football that he was able to quit wearing nappies. He must have been about three when he was already passionately playing in the garden, but his parents just couldn't convince him to get out of the habit. After a while they gave up trying, and waited for the thing to just happen in its own time. Led by a random idea, his mother once remarked in his presence that she didn't know any football players who wore nappies. The little boy became serious and stared at her pensively for a while. Right there and then, in the middle of the kitchen, he carefully pulled down his pants, undid his slightly wet nappy, and dropped it on the floor. Seeing his mother's puzzled expression, he said with the strong conviction of a three-year-old that if that was the situation, he didn't need one anymore, either. Evelyn Cruz firmly stated that from that afternoon onwards she had never had to put a nappy on her son. As time passed, Nathaniel had become a devoted football fan, who was able to recite the rules of the game from a young age. From memory, he was able to recall players from the English Premier League, and was equally familiar with players from the German Bundesliga, and Portuguese and Brazilian leagues. There were no such questions related to football that the little boy couldn't answer, and about which he didn't have an opinion of his own. Wherever the family lived, it was a priority for him to join the junior team at the local football club. And they had lived in various places. His present bad mood was also caused by his father's announcement a few days back about a new commission, which of course, meant that he and his mother would have to move house again. Nate had been completely upset by the news, and had a nasty fight with his father.

The tension between Nate and his father was often palpable. José Manuel Cruz was a child of simple Brazilian immigrants. It was due to his own strength and diligence that he was able to work his way up to the English consulate from his family of dockyard workers. It was in the army that he found his real calling, and later on, as a professional soldier, he managed to work his way higher and higher up the hierarchical system. The peak of his career was his nomination as a military attaché. He spoke English and Portuguese at native speaker level, and, of course, his Spanish was also fine. What was more, if needed, he was able to jovially converse with the Italian ambassador as well. Keeping up with his career moves, his family had also had to repeatedly change their dwelling place. Little Nathaniel wasn't bothered by this, after all, he could play football in any school, and they were always able to

find a football club for him. Since the possibility of a professional career had, however, begun to take shape before his eyes, he was more and more reluctant to accept the fact that they would have to move again. And the latest announcement had completely upset him. He felt like St. Andrew's could have been an ideal spring board for him to make it into the U18 football team. Numerous scouts, who had been travelling up and down the country, had shown interest in Nathaniel, and he knew that the timing of this upcoming relocation would, rather unfortunately, undermine his opportunities.

Nathaniel and José Cruz weren't particularly close, as the volatile, stormy-natured man was away a lot. Although Nathaniel had inherited much of his mother's pleasant character, fierce arguments often broke out between father and son.

On the other hand, Nate's relationship with his mother was perfectly harmonic and trustful. It was Evelyn who from time to time had tried to silence the stormy fights between the two, and help them reconcile. Evelyn was a real beauty, radiating warmth all around her. Unlike most English girls, she had black hair and brown eyes. Her skin, though, was absolutely pale, with a tendency for freckles. With the dimples on her face and her long, silky eyelashes she was still an attractive woman, even at her present age, and not just when she was young, when boys were queuing up for her mercies. In those rare moments when Manuel was in a good mood and had some time, he recalled how many fans he had had to knock out of the ring before he won over Evelyn's heart and hand. At times like this, they both laughed, and she left it at that. She didn't mention that the challenge hadn't been so big after all, because from the moment Manuel began to court her, there was no other man for her, and for a long time, even in the first years of their marriage, she was almost blindly in love with him. When they spoke like this, it was obvious that she still loved her husband despite all his faults, and that he, in his own way, also loved his wife. Evelyn almost never complained – at least, not when Nate was around – about the fact that her husband had so little time for her. When they were on a mission in Spain, she often had to make an appearance at her husband's side at various official events, where she was able to reveal her brilliant, dynamic personality to the public. However, since they had come back to England, it seemed to Nate that she had been spending too much time on her own. As a lector and literary translator she mostly worked from home, and it may have been due to this lifestyle that up until then she had been Nathaniel's closest confidant. He felt very devoted to her, and loved the aura of positive energy and safety that surrounded her. He was convinced that Manuel Cruz did not treat her in a worthy manner, since he neglected her so much. Although he had no proof, he suspected that his father hadn't been loyal to his mother. As a teenager, he felt deeply hurt by this. He couldn't understand why she didn't make a move, why she didn't do anything in defence. But he didn't have the courage to mention the issue, and since his mother also kept quiet about this, they never discussed it. This was perhaps the only thing that they didn't talk about, as their relationship was otherwise open and honest.

Evelyn had spent part of her childhood in the Republic of South Africa, and another part in Madagascar, where her parents, employees of the Wycliffe Global Alliance, had translated the Bible for many years into languages that up to then had no script of their own. She always said that her

childhood had been spent in an idyllic, almost fairy-tale-like environment, and the fact that she had been able to meet people of so many types and tempers, coming from so many cultural backgrounds, had helped her to handle her husband's volatile mood swings. Nathaniel still felt that his father should love his mother in a worthier manner, that he should be more thankful for having such a wonderful and attractive woman as a wife.

On the outside, Nate was a perfect combination of his parents. Recently, he had let his dark brown, curly hair grow long. With his distinctive eyebrows, light golden brown, smiling eyes and mocca skin he was very popular among the girls, but up until now, his passion and interests were solely restricted to football. His face was both vivacious and serene at the same time, cheerful and yet secretive. His facial expressions spoke of quick mood swings, which made it close to impossible for his peers to tell what was on his mind. He was tall, and thanks to his regular, strict workout, sporty and muscular. He was aiming for a professional career in football, and was doing all he could to make his dreams come true. This was why it had annoyed him so much that his father obviously wasn't taking his ambitions about football very seriously. Manuel was about to snatch him out of St. Andrew's in the middle of the term, thus making it impossible for him to successfully participate in the rest of the national football championship as a member of the junior team. Nate was furious at his father for putting his own interests first, so obviously ignoring those of his son's.

At the same time, on the other pitch, the girls' team had been working out, with very little enthusiasm. Their lack of dedication was accredited to the fact that the young ladies' attention was drawn to the ongoing match on the adjacent pitch. The sight of the handsome footballers caught their eye even more than the game itself. The snappy Alexis Woodville, who had joined the girls' team during the term, thought she would find new friends much more easily if she started playing football. Not that it was a problem for her to make friends. Even before that, she had been seen as a leading figure in her school. She voiced her opinion confidently and loudly in front of both children and adults. Her teammates soon learned to appreciate her speed on the pitch, even though there was a lot of room for improvement regarding her ball control. She herself didn't take it too tragically. Alex didn't usually panic about anything. She primarily saw football as an opportunity to do regular sports. She was quick on the pitch, and couldn't care less about ball control.

Like the other girls, Alexis kept glancing over to the other pitch, where the boys were sweating it out for victory, while Coach Lewis was shouting his lungs out. Andrea, a tall blonde, was throwing the ball to her with great power, and she had to kick it in the air. Then she was to pass the ball on to her teammates situated to her left. She put all her might into the kick, but the sun was mercilessly shining into her eyes. The ball ricocheted off the tip of her shoe and flew unstoppably in the opposite direction. Exactly where Nathaniel Cruz held his eyebrows in a frown, fixing his gaze on the outcome of the free kick he had just completed. The distracted football hit Nate's face full on. Alexis screamed out in fright, as she saw the handsome, brown-haired boy collapse. For a few seconds she stopped

breathing. She covered her mouth, and stared at the lifeless body, paralysed. For a moment, there was indeed a shock of silence on the pitch. The referee was the first to make a move towards the body lying on the ground, then his teammates joined in running to him. Since almost everybody had been following the flight of the ball towards the goal, there were very few who had witnessed what had caused the collapse of the midfielder. By the time Mr Lewis got there and knelt down beside Nathaniel, the boy's face was almost completely covered in blood. Lewis kept calling to him, and with his nervously trembling hands, patted Nate's cheek. Seeing this, the referee told him off with annoyance, and ordered for the school doctor to be called. Nathaniel was still not moving. The crowd of shocked faces multiplied around the body lying on the ground. Alexis had been standing in one place for a while, paralysed with shock. Holding her breath, she waited for the boy to get up. But nothing happened. Andrea ran to her, putting a hand on her shoulder in sympathy.

"I hope you know who it is that you have finished off with just one kick!"

Alexis slowly turned to face her, and shook her head very slowly, with an embarrassed facial expression very unlike her. Andrea sighed deeply, and it was indeed hard to tell whether this sigh had been caused by regret or envy. Directing her gaze onto the boy sprawled out on the grass, she softly said,

"Darling, your victim is none other than Nathaniel Cruz. The very guy."

Alexis stared at her uncomprehendingly, causing Andrea to frown and say with audible resentment in her voice, "Nate Cruz is the cutest guy at St. Andrew's, and not least, the new starlet of school football. The most talented player, who probably has an international career ahead of him. Or at least had, until two minutes ago," she added, with open irony.

Alexis' face went as white as a sheet.

"Nevertheless..."

It looked like she wanted to continue Nathaniel's characterisation, but her speech was cut short, as Alexis suddenly ran away from her, as fast as lightning. When she saw that after so much time the boy was still lying on the ground, and that Mr Murphy, the school doctor, was running to the pitch in a hurry, she was pierced by the ice cold recognition that something serious may have happened. Now she wanted to see with her own eyes what she had caused, and rushed like crazy towards the small crowd. In the meantime, the referee had told most of the boys to back away so as to let the injured player breathe freely. With determination, Alexis broke through the group surrounding Nate, and as soon as she caught sight of his face covered in blood, she collapsed desperately onto the ground beside the motionless body, openly shaking. The referee and Mr Lewis, who were also kneeling there, looked at her and immediately wanted to send her away.

"No," Alexis replied in full confidence. "I must see how he is. It was me... It was all my fault."

At that very moment, the school doctor arrived. Kneeling next to Nate's head, he signalled for everyone to step back, and held his ear against Nate's chest, carefully listening to his breathing. He

had dropped his black medical bag onto the grass beside him. Never diverting his eyes from the injured, he pointed to his bag, and began to speak with cool confidence.

“Give me the stethoscope!”

The people looked at each other in confusion, and Alexis also glanced up at them. She was closest to the boy lying on the ground, kneeling only an arm’s length from the doctor. Once again, she looked around in embarrassment, and her gaze settled on the medical bag. The previous order was heard again: “The stethoscope and a sterile white bandage from the bag.”

The girl wasn’t sure whom the order was for, but since she was closest and the others weren’t making a move, she undid the buckle of the bag with shaky hands, and lifted the stethoscope out of it. The doctor kept his eyes fixed on Nate, and without turning towards the girl, he held out his right hand for the device. In the meantime, he cautiously lifted the boy’s eyelids with his left hand, and leaned over him observingly. Placing the stethoscope to his ears, he listened carefully for a while.

“How did it happen?” he asked.

With a dying voice, Alexis informed him that the ball had hit him right in the face, and then he had simply collapsed. The doctor nodded, and very softly reached under Nathaniel’s neck with both hands, beginning to feel around the back of his skull.

“Now the sterile white bandage!” came the restrained order again, and Alexis no longer wondered whom the doctor was talking to. She simply put her hand into the bag and took out the little package. She tore it open, pulled the bandage out and placed it into the doctor’s hand. With slow and careful motions, the doctor began to wipe Nathaniel’s face, trying to locate the source of the bleeding.

“I don’t see any serious injuries on his face. By all means, the ball hit his nose in a rather unfortunate way, and that’s how it’s bleeding so strongly. It must have come unexpectedly,” the doctor assumed. “I guess, he wasn’t prepared for it, so he wasn’t even trying to protect his face with his hands.”

You can take my word for it – Alexis thought bitterly, and felt the lump growing in her throat.

As the doctor was cleaning the boy’s face from the blood, more and more of it had become visible, although it still looked quite messy. His dark hair had become moist and sticky with the mud of the pitch, and his locks were mixed with blades of grass, which had stuck to his forehead. Blood was still leaking from his nose, and there was even a little cut on the nice line of his mouth, also bleeding. The doctor told Alexis to take a few more sterile bandage pieces and hold them against the boy’s nose while he searched his bag for the cotton wool required for the tamponade. Alexis nodded, and pulled a bit closer to the boy’s head from the other side. With shaking hands, she began to clean the wound that she had caused. Not that the sight of blood scared her. Not in the least! After all, she wanted to be a doctor herself; the only thing she couldn’t decide was which direction to take within the field of medicine. The question was for the time open in front of her, and she thought she had enough time to make up her mind. This situation, however, was different. Her intensified nervousness and the shaking of her hands were a result of guilt. After all, even without intending to, she had been the cause of the

calamity. Thoughts were flashing in her mind wildly as she cleaned the face with a tremor: *What if it was something serious? What if there was a permanent injury? How would she live with the knowledge that she had broken this young man's promising career at its very beginning? Oh no!* – she screamed inside. *Wake up! Please, please, wake up!*

Her lips trembled every now and then while she muttered a silent prayer. Then, she could hardly help shouting out hysterically when the boy's eyelashes quivered, and his eyes slowly opened. She pulled her hands back with a fright and, holding her breath, waited to see what was going to happen. The doctor also leaned close and examined the pupils. Nathaniel was slowly coming round, and at first, he blinked vacantly. Life was returning to him second by second. Alexis felt like screaming again, now with relief. With infinite concern, she gazed fixedly at the boy, who slowly lifted his gaze upon her.

The doctor called his name.

“Nathaniel! Nathaniel, can you hear me?”

He tried to look in the direction the voice had just come from, then once again, closed his eyes. Alexis was come over by a wave of alarm, and almost unwillingly, she also began to talk to the boy, who was as yet unknown to her. Her voice was permeated with fear, but at the same time, it carried something like a stubborn command.

“Nathaniel, open your eyes. Please, come round! You must come back!”

His eyelashes lifted again. His gaze hesitantly found a spot to focus on. It seemed like he had found it on the girl's worried face. He struggled for his vision to clear up again, and as the seconds passed, his face grew more and more puzzled and surprised. Finally, to the relief of all, his voice returned, although in a whisper.

“What happened?”

“At last, son!” the doctor sighed. “For a while you were away, but it will be okay now. Tell me, can you remember what happened?”

All this time, Nathaniel had not diverted his eyes from the girl kneeling right next to him, leaning over him. A few messy bunches of her long auburn hair hid her concerned face. Her large green eyes studied the boy, while she bit her lip in apprehension. Her beautifully lined face was flushed, and she was gasping. Nathaniel's facial features slowly rearranged themselves into an honest expression of admiration, and even the hint of a pale smile appeared on his bleeding lips.

The doctor made another attempt.

“Can you remember what happened?”

The answer came slowly and broken.

“We were playing...”

He was probably trying to say the name of his opponents, which couldn't come to his mind. The doctor must have been of the same opinion because he went on asking him.

“Can you tell me your name?”

The boy kept staring at Alexis with an enchanted face, and gave a quiet but confident answer, “Nathaniel Cruz.”

It sounded like some kind of an introduction from his part, even if the situation was rather strange. Hearing it, Alexis smiled softly, and closing her eyes, heaved a deep sigh of relief. Even the doctor’s lips formed a little smile as he reassuringly turned to the crowd around them, “He will be fine.”

“Thank God!” cried out Mr Lewis in a burst of relief.

Leaning close to Nate, the doctor continued, “To be on the safe side, you shouldn’t move about too much. You have probably suffered a mild concussion. The ball hit you pretty badly.”

At the word ‘ball’, Alexis’ face suddenly turned red. She caught her eyes from Nathaniel’s gaze, which was still fixed on her, and hung her head in shame. The strong sunlight struck her from behind, casting a shiny outline around her crown of hair, its reddish tint all the more intense.

“Wow...” broke the undefinable sigh from the boy’s mouth.

Alexis sensed that her face was aflame in embarrassment, and she understood less and less why the boy was staring at her so stubbornly. She wasn’t sure whether it was clear to Nathaniel that she had caused the accident and that she was the one to thank for his concussion. She knew that the two of them hadn’t met yet, because the boy’s face, still dirty with blood, and yet so likeable and handsome, wasn’t in the least familiar to her. True, the school was really large, and she had only been attended there for two weeks; other than her own classmates and the members of the female football team, she knew almost nobody else. While she was pondering this, the doctor ordered a stretcher to be fetched for Nathaniel. He wanted by all means to prevent the boy from moving about too much until it was known exactly whether he had suffered a serious injury or not.

“I don’t know you,” Nate spoke in a somewhat stronger voice, making Alexis look up in wonder. “I haven’t seen you before. I’d definitely remember you. Concussion or not.”

She cleared her throat and replied with an uncertainty that was so unlike her, “I’m new here. I’ve only been studying at St. Andrew’s for two weeks.”

At this moment, the other players arrived with the stretcher and put it on the ground. Alexis moved back to give room. Following the doctor’s orders, they surrounded the boy to lift him onto the stretcher. Nate sat up slowly and was about to protest, saying he was okay and didn’t need to be carried, but he had to realise he was wrong. He began to feel dizzy as he attempted to straighten up, and had a head rush. The doctor commanded him strongly to lie down at once. Nate obeyed, and allowed his mates to lift him up carefully. All the time, he was looking for Alexis, who, in the buzz that had suddenly been generated, had got further and further away from him. As much as he could, he kept turning his head to find the girl, who now emerged from the crowd again, behind the nervously gesticulating Mr Lewis. The procession had already started moving with him towards the dressing rooms, while he continued to look out for her.

“Don’t move about so much, young man, or you might fall off the stretcher, dammit!” came Mr Murphy’s angry outburst.

As their eyes eventually met in the hustle, the boy silently mouthed the question, “What’s your name?”

Alexis caught it. Quietly, as if murmuring to herself, she responded while the boy disappeared into the distance, “Alexis Woodville.”

He most probably didn’t catch her response, as he shook his head slowly, with a frown. Then, as the doctor pressed him back onto the stretcher, they lost eye contact in the big tumult.

#

At this point, Alexis seriously wondered why the hell she hadn’t listened to her father, who had initially wanted to talk her out of football. James Woodville was a devoted fan of cricket and polo, and had found it hard to handle when his elder daughter announced that she was going to start playing in the school’s football team. Just like her, James Woodville also watched the big matches played by the best in the football league. He only laughed when his daughters considered him an old-fashioned macho, but he just couldn’t take female football seriously.

The Woodville family was quite well-off. They thanked their fortune to the stock market success of the elder James Woodville in the 70s, and it seemed like his son, James Woodville Junior – Alexis’ father – had inherited his father’s refined instincts to guide him in the fiercely changing world of shares and currency rates. Accordingly, the family had a rather posh villa for a home in a very elegant South-Western suburb of London, at the top of Richmond Hill, with a breathtaking view over Richmond Park. In the basement of the spacious six-bedroom house, there was even a swimming pool and a sauna. Behind the property, there was a considerably large garden, a favourite location of hide-and-seek and other activities for the girls, Alexis and Veronic. After growing out of such games, they still loved to spend their time in this tiny, idyllic private oasis, situated in the middle of a metropolis.

Alexis still stood on the pitch, with her feet rooted to the ground, still staring dumbfounded into the crowd, when the school building had long since swallowed the stretcher and the boy lying on it. “Nathaniel Cruz,” she repeated the name dreamily, uttering it for the very first time. At this point, she couldn’t surmise how crucial this name would become on the rest of her life.

The referee literally chased her off the pitch as the game had to continue, even in the absence of the wunderkind. Alex walked back to the other pitch exhaustedly, where the girls were discussing the most recent events instead of working out. She didn’t know exactly why, but a change had taken place in her, causing her to want to withdraw from the rest of the group. She said she wasn’t feeling too well, and taking the long route around the school building, she settled on a slow pace back towards the dressing rooms. The coach of the girls’ team looked at her with some sympathy. Not a word of resentment left her mouth about Alex’s interrupting the training. She knew the girl must have felt miserable after what had just happened. For the short two weeks she had known Alex, she had never seen the otherwise so lively and boisterous girl so much under the weather.

The truth was, Alex too had hardly recognized herself until now. Among her classmates at school, she had always been the ringleader. An energetic, dominant personality either loved or downright hated by her peers, but never leaving anybody in the cold. In grade eight she had determinedly cut her hair short like a boy's, and was constantly in trouble, so much so that she had to visit the headmaster's office almost every week. She was often caught getting up to mischief, driving her teachers crazy with her stormy behaviour.

Back home, however, within the walls of the Richmond Hill house, everything was different. Whenever she got home, by the time she entered the last door on the first floor, she was a different person. The cause of her big transformation was the precious tenant of the room. Veronica, Alex's sister, was four years her junior. She was a kind, smiley, loveable teenage girl, a tad more serious than average, but not morose at all. She didn't look too different from her peers until she stood up from her chair. Since birth, she had suffered from an incurable muscular dystrophy. When she was a baby, nobody had noticed that anything was wrong with her. True, physically she was developing a bit slower than average, but mentally she was a cheerful and open-minded kid from the start. Alexis could hardly wait for the arrival of the baby into the family, and was on tenterhooks before the birth. When asked if she wanted a little brother or a sister, she responded as if it was to be taken for granted that she was going to have a sister. When her dad asked with a smile why she was so sure about it, she replied with unshaken confidence, "I have prayed to God and asked Him to send me a little girl, because I'd really love to have someone I could play dolls with."

Her parents exchanged a glance, and found the little child's honest conviction about prayers being answered very charming. Perhaps they envied her childlike certainty, mourning for their own faith, which had grown much weaker over time. In any case, whenever a relative or friend brought up the baby issue, Alexis gave the same confident answer. They were somewhat worried in case she'd be bitterly disappointed at the arrival of a little brother. Once an aunt laughingly offered that they should take the opportunity to join together in prayer again, to ask God for a little sister. Alexis at first looked at her in surprise, then shook her head, and noted apologetically that *there was no need for the prayer at all*. With the enviable and naïve confidence of a four-year-old, she explained that *she had already told God once about the issue, and the Lord was not so forgetful nor hard of hearing as to misunderstand the request the first time*.

At that, the adults were lost for words, blinking at each other with shock. James Woodville left the room in a panic, fearing he would hurt the aunt's feelings with his unstoppable laughter. Six months later, the Woodvilles had a daughter as foretold, and they named her Veronica. From the start, Alexis loved her with a special affection, and called her by the nickname Ronnie.

After the birth of her second daughter, Elisabeth Woodville fell into post-natal depression, and found it hard to look after her baby. Besides, she wasn't the type of woman blessed with overflowing motherly instincts, so this period was especially hard for the whole family. A little good in all the bad, they were able to employ an exceptionally warm-hearted and cheerful Spanish nanny, who took great

care of the girls, not to mention that they managed to learn pretty good Spanish from her through the years.

Veronic must have been about five when it turned out that there was more to her condition than just developing a bit slower than the other kids of her own age. The examinations confirmed she had muscular dystrophy, which could be traced back to a genetic defect. Elisabeth fell into a depression again, and James Woodville stopped understanding the universe. There had been no precedent for such things in the family. For a long time, he couldn't comprehend that he had to face something that, by all means, was not in his power to change. By and by, though, he had come to terms with the idea that his second daughter would never ride a horse, and she wouldn't even be able to run around with the other kids. And as for her illness, there wasn't a single doctor who could give an exact prognosis about its further progress. This uncertainty and helplessness drove him crazy. But his love for his daughter was strong, and in time he learned to accept and handle the issue quite well. Veronic was smaller and looked more fragile than the other children, but she had a sweet charm, an inborn contentment in her nature which people felt drawn to. This was why James couldn't understand how his wife could treat the little girl with such coldness. Not that the woman was rude or offensive to her, but she kept a distance from the girl. As if she wasn't her daughter. She obviously couldn't get over the fact that the child born by her wasn't physically sound. Elisabeth was very keen to look healthy; she did sports and painstakingly followed a healthy diet. Veronic's kind nature and smart, inquisitive behaviour would have conquered her cold heart too if only she had given the little girl a chance. But she hadn't. She made sure to keep a distance, and treated the child with such rigid politeness as if she had been a guest temporarily placed in her house. In company, she was almost never seen with her.

The sad diagnosis didn't change Alexis' feelings at all. She continued to adore her little sister as before. Alex was a little wildling, always up to something bad, and at the heart of things going on at home, just like at school. Ronnie was quieter and a lot calmer. She analysed things much more soberly even at a tender age, and the four-year difference between the sisters had soon become insignificant both in a mental and an emotional sense. What was more, Alex often turned to her cool and smart younger sister for advice – and Ronnie also loved her silly, gorgeous-looking older sister. While Ronnie, with her straight dark hair, thin face and clever, brown eyes, had a soft and childlike appearance, by the age of 17, Alexis had grown to be a real beauty. Her auburn hair, which reached down to her waist, was by itself enough to constantly attract the attention of boys. Her pale complexion and almond-shaped green eyes gave her an attractive look even if she didn't highlight these pleasant features. During her highschool years, when most girls spent hours in front of the mirror doing their makeup, she wore shabby jeans, boyish trainers and plain t-shirts. She often put her wild waves of hair into a ponytail, and instead of pony-riding, she learned target shooting with the boys from her neighbourhood. Nevertheless, she always regarded Veronic and her relationship with her as foremost in priority.

Veronic's condition at times got better, but would again, deteriorate. Sometimes she was so well that they could even go out for a walk, and leaning on Alex's arm, Veronic would be out in the garden all afternoon. Their loud laughter filtered into every room of the two-storey villa in Richmond, even though Elisabeth was quick to close her windows to spare herself of the noise. At times, though, Ronnie felt so weak in the morning that even sitting up was hard for her. On days like this she stayed in bed, and lay through the lessons held by the private tutor without as much as a complaint, wearing a faint smile. When Alex came home, her first priority was to see her sister. As soon as she entered the door, she knew whether Ronnie was having a good day or a bad one. They didn't speak much about this, never felt regretful nor sad. Alex would just kick off her shoes and dive into the bed next to Ronnie. They would hug one another and share things about their day. Alex would often tell Veronic funny things about her classmates, and would give an account of how her last appearance at the headmaster's office had turned out. At times Veronic would give her advice about homework. Since she read a lot, her literary knowledge was inexhaustible. Alex often benefitted from this when she had to write a paper in English literature. Ronnie almost never complained, especially about her condition. They both just accepted the situation as it was, never wondering 'what if'... To Veronic, her mother's coldness was richly compensated by her sister's dedication, and her father's support.

As Alexis walked about the school building on her own, Ronnie came into her mind, or, to be more exact, her mother's cold attitude, which drifted like a cloud between the walls of the otherwise so tastefully furnished villa. *It had also been because of her mother that she had wound up here*, she thought bitterly. It wouldn't have been so necessary to change school in the middle of the year if Elisabeth hadn't behaved so impossibly once again. Alex heaved a big sigh, and shook her head, thinking about the incident which had caused her to end up at St. Andrew's, midyear. *Of course, it was also true* – she continued the train of thought somewhat more permissively – *that if she hadn't enrolled at the school, she would never have met Nathaniel Cruz. She wouldn't have joined the St. Andrew's girls' football team; she wouldn't have started training with them; and she probably wouldn't have hit the top goal scorer so unfortunately in the head with the ball.* When she got this far into her thoughts, she blushed again at the memory of the embarrassing event. She felt so ashamed of her clumsiness that she wanted the sky to fall on her. There was so much to share with Ronnie when she got home! *And what would she say? Should she visit him and say sorry? Or should she lay low and hope that things would be forgotten without any serious consequences?* As a matter of fact, she already knew what she would do as she went through the various alternatives in her head. The only thing that made her feel uncomfortable was how the boy had been looking at her. Looking? He stared at her the whole time, as if he had never seen a white person before. This had embarrassed her. Embarrassed her in such a strange way as she had never felt in the presence of boys. It wasn't typical of her to lose her voice and have her hands tremble like leaves in the wind. Of course, the situation was quite unique. She felt tense, and feared that she had caused a permanent injury through her

mistake. That was the truth. That must have caused her unusual embarrassment. It could only have been this, what else?

While she brooded over the idea, she reached the dressing rooms. She was completely alone, as the girls were still out on the pitch. She didn't mind. It felt good to be in silence, not having to talk about the issue with anyone. She would discuss the whole thing back home with Ronnie. After showering, she quickly dressed and went to see Mr Lewis. She wanted to know which hospital Nathaniel had been taken to for examination. With a cheeky grin, the coach responded to her in a way which suggested that he was able to read an enamoured teenage girl's mind. Alexis hated his overly intimate facial expression. *Arsehole!* – she sulked inside, swallowing her anger. If she hadn't depended on the coach's good will to get the information, she would probably have spilled the hot tea she had got from the drinks machine onto the man's lap, as if by accident. Since Mr Lewis couldn't tell for certain whether or not the boy would be kept in the hospital overnight, she decided to visit him as soon as possible. She felt guilty about the things that had happened, and wanted to say sorry to him. But she didn't want it to happen at the school, in front of everybody, so the hospital seemed like the ideal place for this.

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Nate got out of the car escorted by the school doctor in front of St Vincent's Hospital. He didn't feel bad: he certainly wasn't feeling nauseous, which would have been a definite symptom of a concussion. Every now and then, though, he had dizzy spells, so he walked carefully, avoiding sudden moves. At the reception, his details were taken, and a nurse soon took him to an examining room on the first floor. They told him to take his clothes off and rest in bed until the doctor on duty would come and tend to him. Back in the car, Mr Murphy had asked him whether or not he should phone Nate's mother to inform her. Nate quickly said no. He didn't want to scare his mum to death by having a stranger call her with the news of his accident. He was sure his mum would be too overcome with shock to understand that her son's condition wasn't so bad. So they agreed it would be better if Nate himself called her from the hospital.

As the doctor left him alone in the ward, Nate fished his phone out of his bag, and while searching for his mother's number, he thought about the best way to tell her the news in the coolest manner. Nate knew his mum very well. He knew that Evelyn Cruz wasn't hysterical by nature, she took most things quite easy; still, she had her vulnerable spots. And the most vulnerable of them all was her son's health.

Ev never made a scene when her son brought home bad news from school due to some kind of mischief he had got up to. Nate had never been a bad student, and although he didn't finish his first few years with flying colours, he did well enough. During the last three years, though, since he had started focusing on his football career with more intensity, he had neglected his studies a bit. As soon

as his disinterest began to show on his grades, instead of punishing him or introducing bans, his mother had sat down with him to discuss the issue. She told him she had understood and had accepted that for the sake of a professional football career he was concentrating most of his energy on the sport. This, however, didn't mean he could completely neglect his school subjects. He could be an amazingly talented footballer, but he still had to know that leading a sports career was a game of jeopardy. Even if he could make his dreams come true and become a professional footballer, one unfortunate injury was enough to put an end to it all. And what would he do then without any qualifications or a profession? The fifteen-year-old Nate understood this, and accepted the logical argument. As much as he could, with the little motivation he was able to muster, he tried to improve his grades. He always made sure his achievements at school wouldn't sink below a certain level. He only had a vague idea of what direction to take with his training if football didn't materialise, or if it didn't turn out the way he had hoped it would.

The only thing that would upset his mum was – and Nate was sure about this – if he had some kind of an accident. She reacted terribly sensitively to such things. There was a sad story to this, which, while waiting for his mum to attend to the call, came to Nate's mind again.

Evelyn had a talent for handling kids, and she also enjoyed their company. The fact that Nate still didn't have any siblings wasn't by accident. She had had four miscarriages before Nathaniel's birth. It was hard for her to get pregnant. She had been married to Manuel for almost four years when the pregnancy test turned out positive for the first time. They were both unspeakably happy until she had had a miscarriage in the 11th week of her pregnancy. The doctor comforted her with the words that there was nothing unusual about it. It happened to every third woman, and there was no reason to feel desperate about the future. Her second pregnancy ended in its 12th week, and the third time the embryo was already four months old when there was no heartbeat found during a check-up. By that time, and with a heavy heart, Evelyn had begun to come to terms with the thought that she would never be able to give birth to a baby. Manuel comforted her as much as he could, but he was also very obviously helpless. After the third failure, they waited a full year before trying again. She wanted to give her body a chance to regenerate, and she also needed time for spiritual renewal. Even for the fourth time, it was hard for her to conceive. Her days were spent with dread, and she watched her body with worry, waiting to see what would happen. She painstakingly minded her diet, and made sure not to strain herself. All in all, she lived through the first five months in stress, and then the baby died in her uterus after five months. She still had to give birth to the dead baby – as was normal in such cases – but their first destination was not the room they had so lovingly prepared, but the cemetery. This resulted in a complete breakdown, the most horrible phase of her life, as she called it. It also made the pain more difficult that the medical examinations hadn't shown up any organic abnormalities that could have been the cause of her several miscarriages. It was at this time that she travelled to her parents for a few months, *for recreation*. Her mother and father were at the time positioned in the Philippines. Evelyn, reconciled to her fate, returned to England mentally sound, focusing on new things. It could be said

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