

THE CHRONICLES
— OF —
HEART
— A LOVE BEYOND TIME —

REMYA KRISHNAN



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Remya Krishnan 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-69906-37-1

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: September 2026

Acknowledgements

“Some journeys begin with a plan; this one began with a thought that refused to leave me.”

The seeds of this book were sown during the COVID years—a time when the world seemed to pause, yet our thoughts often became louder. What began as scattered notes, ideas, and classroom reflections slowly found their way onto paper and eventually into the pages you now hold.

Before anyone else, I thank God, whose grace has been my constant companion. Through moments of uncertainty, self-doubt, writer's block, and countless revisions, His guidance carried me forward.

As an English teacher and an avid reader, I have been shaped by countless authors whose words have filled my shelves and my heart. Their stories taught me to think deeply, feel generously, and believe in the enduring power of literature. Well, every writer deserves someone who believes in the book even on the days the writer doesn't. I was fortunate enough to have that person beside me; a very special thank you goes to my husband, whose quiet support became one of the strongest pillars of this journey. He listened to ideas that were sometimes fully formed and sometimes hopelessly tangled,

read drafts when asked, offered encouragement when needed, and patiently accepted that conversations at home could unexpectedly drift towards chapters and their edits.

To my parents, thank you for instilling in me a love for learning and the values that continue to guide me.

To my sister, thank you for your constant encouragement, for reminding me to keep going whenever the road seemed long.

To my friends, I owe a special debt of gratitude. You patiently endured my endless discussions about chapters, ideas, questions, and revisions, you willingly read drafts, listened to half-formed thoughts, and encouraged me when I wondered whether this project would ever reach the finish line. Your faith in this book often exceeded my own, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

To my students, past and present, thank you for being my daily inspiration. Every insightful interpretation, every curious question, and every earnest "Ma'am, will this come for the exam?" reminded me why teaching is a privilege and why literature continues to matter.

A very special thank you goes to my daughter, Serah. She was only six when much of this writing journey began. While I was trying to teach lessons through books, she was unknowingly teaching me lessons about wonder, curiosity, resilience, and joy. She may not realize it yet, but she helped shape these pages more than she knows.

My sincere thanks to Blue Rose Publishers for their support and guidance throughout the publishing process. I am grateful to their team for helping transform this manuscript

into a book and for providing a platform to share my work with readers.

Finally, to every reader who opens this book, thank you. If these pages make literature a little more approachable, inspire a deeper appreciation for language, or help even one learner discover confidence in their abilities, then every late night and every rewritten paragraph has been worthwhile.

This book may bear my name on its cover, but it carries the fingerprints, prayers, encouragement, and kindness of many people.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Remya Krishnan

Prologue

"Some people stay for a lifetime. Others become a lifetime."

Amy was one such person."

Looking back now, I often wonder whether our lives are shaped by the choices we make or by the people God chooses to place in our path. Had someone told me then that an ordinary December morning would divide my life into a *before* and an *after*, I would have laughed at the absurdity of it.

This is not merely a story about love.

It is a story about faith when prayers seem unanswered, about hope when every reason to hope has disappeared, about learning to let go, and about discovering that sometimes God's greatest miracles arrive in forms we never expect.

Amy Mason was twenty when she changed my life forever.

Yet the story did not begin there.

It began years earlier, when she was simply another student I met during a church service.

It was the twentieth of December, 2013.

Winter had wrapped the morning in a grey veil. The sun struggled to pierce the dense clouds, and the biting wind made

even the simplest task feel burdensome. As I walked towards the church, I remember questioning my own enthusiasm for teaching. Getting out of bed before dawn every morning had begun to feel like a punishment more than a profession.

Inside, however, the atmosphere was entirely different. Laughter echoed through the hall. Christmas hymns floated gently through the air, and volunteers hurried from one corner to another, ensuring every visitor felt welcomed.

That was when I first noticed her.

While everyone else seemed occupied with celebration, Amy moved quietly among the crowd, distributing food packets with effortless grace. Between greeting strangers with a warm smile, she struggled to answer a rather stern phone call from her mother, who was reminding her—in no uncertain terms—that examinations were approaching and church work could wait.

I remember smiling to myself.

There was nothing extraordinary about her appearance.

She wasn't the sort of girl who made an entire room fall silent when she entered it.

Yet there was something remarkably beautiful about the way she cared for people. She possessed the rare ability to make whoever stood before her feel seen, heard, and important. It was a quality that cannot be measured by beauty, wealth, or accomplishment.

At that moment, she was simply Amy.

One of the many young people I taught during weekend Scripture classes.

I had no idea that, in time, she would become the greatest lesson God would ever teach me.

Contents

Memories	1
To Be on Knees.....	5
At the Hospital	10
Silent Burdens.....	14
Between the Lessons.....	21
The Next Day.....	23
At Amy's House	26
Surprise Visit.....	28
The Evening Reflection	32
A Quiet Evening	33
The Shudder	35
Hospital Parking Lot.....	39
After Quite a Long.....	47
The Mourn.....	50
A Breath Between Storms	74
The First Dawn	78
Between Grief and Grace	90
The Evening.....	102
Resilience	108
The Transit	112
A Place at Home	151

The Weight of Silence	155
Under The Snow.....	158
The Wedding Day.....	166
A Promise Before Tomorrow.....	176
Forty-Eight Hours.....	181
A Shared Miracle	185
A New Beginning	186
Epilogue.....	188

Memories

Every morning began the same way.

I would kneel beside my bed, fold my trembling hands, and ask God to forgive me for something I had never spoken aloud.

I had not stolen.

I had not lied.

I had not harmed another soul.

Yet guilt clung to me like a second skin.

The reason had a name.

Amy Mason.

Every time I saw Amy, my heart skipped a beat. It wasn't the so-called teenage love but rather a strange, soul-soothing fervor. One-sided love, I must confess, is like savoring your favorite chocolate. You wouldn't want anyone to know you have it, not even your closest friends, yet you relish it all by yourself. It's bliss.

I worked at the same University where Amy was enrolled. As a Professor of English, I was often tasked with drafting and scripting for various events. Amy, proficient in the language

and ever benevolent, often offered her assistance. She extended this kindness to anyone she thought needed help.

"Sir... are you terribly busy?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"Who's asking."

"Someone willing to rescue you from paperwork."

Madam Thomas informed us about the upcoming Annual Sports Day and asked a few of us to check if you needed any help with data preparation. Since it's the weekend, I can assist if you permit," she said with her characteristic smile.

Amy was terrible at lying and often got caught. I knew Madam Thomas would never assign such tasks to a student in her second form. Students always seem to have access to more information about their school and teachers than expected.

Still, I chose not to expose her.

"Oh! Yes, Amy, I was indeed looking for help, and here you are. This is the layout for the program. You'll need to proofread the script and email it back to me. You can do it here since my classes are over."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

As she worked, her eyes scanned the screen intently, and her fingers moved swiftly over the keyboard. She was so engrossed

that she didn't notice her teacher stealing glances at her. My guilt resurfaced, condemning me repeatedly for my feelings.

I was twenty-seven. In West Carolina, most men my age were already married with families of their own. Instead, I found myself nursing feelings for someone I had no right to love.

At 27, my parents were naturally worried about my unmarried status. Though I lived away from them, we stayed in touch. My father's schizophrenia had disconnected him from the world. Schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder causing abnormal interpretations of reality, marked by hallucinations, delusions, and disordered thinking. For my father, it was debilitating.

As a 15-year-old, I remembered him as a loving husband who helped my mother prune the garden or assist her in the kitchen. Despite disagreements, he ensured no issue lingered before bedtime. "No problem is too big to carry to bed," he used to say. But over time, his behavior changed. He became paranoid and argumentative. Eventually, it all went downhill; he lost his job, and things went from bad to worse.

One day, during my senior year, I found him harming himself. That day changed my perspective. I blamed myself for not taking care of him and considered ending my life. My mother's intervention saved me and made me understand her unwavering dedication to him despite the challenges.

"Sir! It's done. I've edited and framed the required details. You may review it," said Amy.

"Thank you, Amy, for your help. Here's a little reward," I said, handing her a chocolate. I always carried a pack of her favorite chocolates. Somehow, they made me feel her presence.

“Thank you, sir! See you in the evening classes at church,” she said, stealing my heart as she left.

I’m usually punctual when it comes to my students. That evening, I arrived on time and played a few notes on my guitar while waiting for the students. One by one, they all arrived—except Amy. I taught the class, but my eyes kept darting to the door. When I asked Susie about her, she told me Amy had a high fever and had been taken to Dr. Sam.

I masked my concern, but Amy's absence from school lingered heavily on my mind. As the days passed, sleep eluded me, and an inexplicable restlessness took its place. I found myself longing to see her, if only to reassure my troubled heart.

To Be on Knees

It was a Thursday afternoon, and I had been engrossed in the final drafting of the speeches to be delivered by the guests invited to the opening ceremony of the Annual Sports event at school. The rigorous work and continuous practice sessions had left me exhausted, and Amy's absence had diminished my appetite entirely. I remember surviving on brewed coffee for the past three days.

Since I hadn't received any call from Susie regarding Amy, I decided to walk over to their house to check on her myself.

It was Friday evening. A gentle breeze brushed my hair as I made my way through the pastures. As I walked, I caught myself imagining conversations that had never happened and moments we had never shared. I smiled at the absurdity of it, yet I couldn't stop. Her thoughts had infiltrated every corner of my mind, dominating my daily tasks. I often started chores only to leave them unfinished, distracted by thoughts of her. I hadn't checked on my folks for two days. Nothing else seemed to matter; all I wanted was to see Amy. She was gradually becoming charting my priority list.

As I walked through the grasslands, I wondered how I should behave when meeting Amy's mother. I had never met her in

person but had heard a lot about her from my friends at school. She was known to be a strict disciplinarian—a natural outcome of being a working single parent. Her husband had passed away from a brain haemorrhage after being bedridden for six long years. I suppose Amy and Susie were in elementary school then. Those girls are incredibly strong, undoubtedly taking after their mother.

As I continued toward their lane, I debated whether or not to carry flowers. Eventually, I chose white lilacs over red roses. Often, you follow your heart but end up doing what your mind dictates.

When I reached their door, I felt a wave of nervousness, as though I were there to ask Ms. Mason for her daughter Amy's hand in marriage. I wished that were the case. Alas! The irony is that your heart remains unaware of your age, while your mind never lets you forget it.

Mustering all the courage I could, I rang their doorbell. While waiting, I mentally rehearsed the lines I had prepared. That's when my eyes fell on their little garden. It was beautifully maintained—not with extravagant plants or fancy flowers but with a simple charm that reminded me of Amy. I was certain she must have been the one tending to it.

Fifteen minutes passed, but no one answered the doorbell. I rang it again to no avail. It was getting dark, so I decided to leave the flowers at their door with a message.

Just as I turned to leave, something caught my eye. The kitchen window was slightly open, its curtain swaying gently in the evening breeze.

A strange uneasiness settled over me.

What if she was simply asleep?

No... something didn't feel right.

"Amy!" I called again, louder this time.

Nothing.

For a brief moment, I stood there, torn between respecting her privacy and following the instinct that something was terribly wrong. Finally, I reached through the partially open window, unlatched it, and climbed inside.

The house was eerily silent. Once inside, I noticed how different their home was from mine. My mother often struggled to keep things tidy, and she would lament not having a daughter to help her out. Now, I understand her sentiment. Amy's house gleamed with a resplendent charm. The white and baby-pink curtains were impeccably arranged, each fold respecting the other. The walls were adorned with a variety of photo frames, and the living area was separated from the dining room by a colorful bead curtain that gave the space a vibrant touch. It felt like stepping into an art gallery, brimming with life.

A sudden pain jolted me back to reality when I stubbed my toe on a wooden chair. The excruciating pain reminded me of why I was there—to see Amy.

"Amy?" I called as I hurried from one room to another.

Then I heard it.

A faint gasp.

I rushed upstairs and found her lying beside her bed. Her breathing was laboured, and her face had turned frighteningly pale. The sight sent a wave of panic through me.

"Amy!" I cried, dropping to my knees beside her.

Her lips moved, but no words came out. With trembling fingers, she pointed weakly towards the wardrobe.

"The... nebulizer..." she whispered.

I found it within seconds and helped her use it, praying it would ease her breathing. It didn't. Without a second thought, I carried her in my arms and bolted toward the main door and ran like a madman, covering three miles in ten minutes to reach the nearby hospital.

"Please, Lord... don't take her away from me."

"Sam! Sam! Where are you? This is an emergency!" I shouted, drawing the attention of everyone nearby. A nurse rushed over with a stretcher, and Amy was taken from my arms. I felt crushed as they wheeled her into the ICU. Her unconscious grip on my hand lingered in my memory.

I made a few calls to inform her mother. Within twenty minutes, Ms. Mason arrived, tears streaming down her face, her eyes filled with unanswered questions.

"Hello, Ms. Mason. Amy is inside with Dr. Sam. Things seem to be under control, and she's responding to treatment. I know it's hard, but please don't worry too much," I reassured her.

"My baby! My poor child!" she sobbed. "Thank you so much, Mr...err?"

“Bright. William Bright. I’m Amy’s teacher at school,” I introduced myself. Before she could ask more questions, I decided to leave.

“Madam, since you’re here, I think I should take my leave. But please don’t hesitate to reach out if you need anything. It would be an honor to help.”

“Oh, thank you so much, sir, for being there for my daughter when I couldn’t. I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“She’s important to me too, madam. Well, I should go now.”

“You take care!” she said, her gratitude evident.

At the Hospital

Sam and I had been friends and classmates at school for as long as I could remember. When Amy was admitted to the hospital, I requested Sam to keep me updated about her condition and not to trouble Amy's mother with anything related to finances. I couldn't rest that evening. Sleep was a distant stranger, and my mind was consumed with worry. Kneeling by my bedside, I whispered prayers into the stillness of the night, pleading for Amy's recovery. The silence was broken only by the occasional creak of the floorboards or the rustle of leaves outside my window. I didn't even realize when dawn arrived until my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

The screen lit up with Sam's name. My fingers hesitated over the phone, my heart pounding. What if the news was unbearable? What if... I shook off the thought and answered on the third ring.

"Will," Sam said, his voice steady, "Amy is better now. She's been shifted to the general ward."

Relief flooded through me like a tidal wave. My knees buckled, and I sat down heavily. "Thank God," I whispered. "Thank you for keeping her safe." Later that morning, Amy was discharged from the hospital. She was finally going home.

Visiting Amy

I decided to visit them again to see how she was doing. This time, Susie was at the door to greet me.

“Hello, sir! Nice to see you here. Come on in,” she said with a bright smile.

“Hi, Susie! Hope you all are doing well. How is Amy?”

“She’s recovering, sir. It’s slow, but she’s getting better. Come, I’ll take you to her room.”

The house, once unfamiliar, now felt strangely welcoming. Though I knew my way to Amy’s room, I let Susie lead. Sometimes, it’s safer to follow than to lead. When we reached her door, Susie gestured for me to enter. Amy was half-seated on her bed, a book resting on her lap. She looked up and adjusted her posture when she saw me.

“Oh! Good morning, sir! How have you been?” she said, her voice warm but weak.

“Good morning, Amy. Relax, don’t strain yourself,” I said gently.

“I’m fine, sir. Thank you. Just this body ache and the loss of taste—it’s frustrating. But I’m ready to get back to school.”

“Take your time, Amy. There’s no rush. We’ll arrange remedial sessions for anything you’ve missed.” I paused. “Where’s Ms. Mason?”

“Mom was here until this morning. She had an important meeting, so she had to leave. But I’ll let her know you came,” Susie chimed in.

I felt a wave of relief. Their mother's absence spared me from her barrage of questions. "That's alright. I'll see her some other time. Take care, Amy, and get well soon."

Susie escorted me back to the door. "Bye, sir," she said politely.

As I walked back to my apartment, I felt a strange calmness settle over me. Meeting Amy and seeing her on the mend was a balm to my frayed nerves. Still, something about the whole situation lingered in my mind, like a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit.

A Conversation with Sam

I decided to stop by Sam's office before heading home. He was seated in his cabin, looking unusually smug.

"Hey, Will! How have you been? By the way, you should know we took excellent care of Amy, just as you asked."

"Amy," I corrected him sharply. "Her name is Amy."

"Of course! Amy. And I think her mother liked me—maybe even for her daughter," he said, a sly grin spreading across his face. "She was so thankful to me, as if I were a hero."

"Shame on you, Sam!" I snapped, my voice cold. "A mother's gratitude for saving her child doesn't warrant such disgraceful assumptions. You're a doctor, for God's sake!"

Sam leaned back, unfazed. "Relax, Will. I deal with hundreds of patients every day, but I've rarely been invited to a patient's home for dinner. That's all I'm saying."

"Dinner?" My stomach churned. "Ms. Mason? Inviting you?"

“Exactly. She’s gracious, Will. Maybe she has some plans for her daughter and me.”

“So... are you going?” I asked, hoping for a firm no.

“Yes, obviously!” Sam said with a chuckle. “And since you’re here, maybe you could help me. Should I bring champagne, a bouquet, or something sweet? I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

“Stop behaving like a lovesick teenager,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Do whatever you want, but don’t make this a bigger deal than it is. Anyway, I came to ask about Amy. She seemed weak today. Is everything alright?”

Sam stood and placed a hand on my shoulder, his expression suddenly serious. “Will, you know I can’t share patient details. But as your friend, I’ll tell you this—she’s doing fine. We ran some scans before discharging her, and so far, everything looks good.”

“Thanks, Sam,” I said, my voice softer now. “And... I’m sorry for snapping at you.”

“No problem. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a dinner to attend,” he said with a grin.

I left the hospital, my heart heavy with unease. Something about Sam’s demeanor, and the way he spoke about Ms. Mason, didn’t sit right with me. As the evening sky turned shades of crimson and orange, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was far from over.

Silent Burdens

I reached home, though I couldn't recall how. My body felt drained, every ounce of energy stripped away. Hunger gnawed at me, but the thought of moving to prepare food felt like a task beyond me. The next thing I remembered was being startled awake by the shrill ring of the phone.

It was my mother on the other end. Her voice, soft yet tinged with concern, was a stark reminder of how long it had been since I had last checked in. By then, it was mid-afternoon—I had slept for nearly three straight hours.

“I was worried. You didn't answer my calls, Will.”

There was something in her voice that made me pause. It sounded strained, almost fragile. As she spoke, I sensed that something was terribly wrong. Little did I know that Dad had attacked her again. It was the third time in a matter of months that she had narrowly escaped serious injury.

When she finally recounted what had happened, her voice trembled with fear, pain, and sheer exhaustion.

The earlier incidents at home had been just as traumatic. During one of his episodes, he had struck her on the temple with a showerhead, leaving her with a wound that required six stitches. The second attack had been equally frightening.

With each incident, the violence seemed to escalate, testing the limits of her strength and resilience. The injuries eventually healed, but the fear, anxiety, and emotional scars lingered long after the bruises had faded.

And now, this. He had tried to strangle her with a wire he found lying in the kitchen while she was cooking. The maid must have stepped away for a moment, leaving him unsupervised on the porch.

We have pleaded with mom time and again to admit Dad to a care facility, but she remained steadfast in her refusal. Her reasons were rooted in a deep sense of duty and love towards him which I at that point in time struggled to comprehend.

“He’s my husband,” she said firmly, her voice unwavering despite the pain. “I vowed to stand by him through thick and thin. You kids can say whatever you want, but until you’ve walked a mile in my shoes, you won’t understand. Yes, there are days when he hurts me—more than I ever imagined he could—but you don’t see the side I see. When his memory aligns, even for a fleeting moment, he becomes the man I fell in love with. He weeps for the harm he caused, holds me with such tenderness, and treats me as if I’m the most fragile thing in the world. Those moments, brief as they may be, give me the strength to carry on. They remind me of the man he used to be, the man I built this home with. This house holds memories—yours, mine, and his. And you want me to abandon him to strangers? No. He belongs here, with me. Until death do us part.”

Her words haunted me long after the call ended. I wanted to rush home, to shield her from harm, to be the son she deserved. But as always, I was powerless.

They say boys shouldn't cry, but the stereotype broke for me every time I hung up after talking to her.

Gathering myself, I freshened up and brewed a cup of coffee, a small attempt to shake off the weight of her words. Work awaited, and I needed to show up at work, even though every fiber of my being screamed for an escape.

Later that evening, I worked until exhaustion consumed me. It was easier to drown in tasks than face the whirlwind of emotions that followed me home. Escapism was my refuge, albeit temporary.

By the time I got home, it was late. Unlocking the door, I was lost in thought—about Mom, about my failures as a son, and about Amy. Amy Mason, the girl I loved but could never confess my feelings to. Knowing she had dinner with Sam, my closest friend, made my heart ache in ways I couldn't articulate.

I entered the house and switched on the lights, only to be startled. There he was—Sam—sitting casually on my sofa.

"Sam! You scared the life out of me!" I exclaimed, my voice a mix of irritation and surprise. "You could've at least told me you were coming! I'd have made dinner or something. I mean—wait, weren't you at the Masons'?" I corrected myself awkwardly, realizing I'd forgotten his supposed plans.

Sam said nothing. He just stood, watching me with an unreadable expression as I changed into my knickers and

prepared for bed. I was too tired to engage in one of his monologues, so I dismissed him casually, pulling the blanket over myself.

"Wake me up when you leave," I mumbled, rolling away from him.

Moments later, I felt him beside me. His arm wrapped around me in a tight hug, and his voice broke the silence.

You know what gave you away?"

I stayed silent.

"You never asked whether she passed her scans."

Pause.

"You asked whether she'd eaten."

"Doctors notice these things Will."

I stayed quiet, unsure of what to say. But Sam was persistent.

Will... I owe you an apology."

I frowned. "For what?"

"There was never any dinner with the Masons."

I stared at him.

"What?"

"I made it up."

For a moment, I simply looked at him, trying to understand what he had just said.

"You lied to me?"

"I did."

"But why?"

He leaned back and sighed.

"Because I wanted to see your reaction."

"My reaction?"

"You've known me long enough to know I don't play matchmaker." "The moment I mentioned Mrs. Mason inviting me over, you stopped listening to everything else. You weren't worried about me. You weren't even curious about the invitation."

"You only cared that Amy might become a part of it."

I lowered my eyes but said nothing.

"I've been watching you for weeks, Will," he continued quietly.

"The way you speak about her. The way your face changes whenever someone mentions her name. The way you dropped everything the moment she fell ill."

He paused.

"I've treated hundreds of patients. Their families cry. Their friends worry. But you... you looked as though your whole world was slipping away."

The room fell silent.

Then he asked, almost gently,

"Tell me honestly... are you in love with Amy?"

The question settled heavily between us.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

"There isn't a single day," I said quietly, "when I don't ask God to take these feelings away."

Sam didn't interrupt.

"I never wanted this," I continued. "She's my student. She's younger than I am. She deserves a life untouched by the confusion in my heart."

"So you decided to punish yourself instead?"

"It's not punishment."

"What is it then?"

I looked at him and managed a weary smile.

"It's acceptance."

He waited.

"I love her," I admitted at last. "I probably always will. But love doesn't always demand possession. Sometimes... loving someone means protecting their peace, even if it costs you your own."

Sam rubbed his forehead.

"You really believe you can spend the rest of your life pretending none of this exists?"

"I don't have to pretend," I replied. "I simply have to live with it."

He let out a slow breath.

"You're either the bravest man I've ever known... or the biggest fool."

"Perhaps both."

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"I won't tell anyone," he said. "Your secret is safe with me."

I nodded, grateful for the promise, though I had the uneasy feeling that the conversation had changed something between us forever.

The next morning at school, I saw Amy walking across the corridor with her friends. She looked stronger than she had a few days earlier, though traces of fatigue still lingered on her face. The sight of her smiling eased a burden I hadn't realised I was carrying.

During recess, I handed her the notes she had missed.

"Thank you, sir," she said with a grateful smile.

"You can always count on me, Amy," I replied.

Later that evening, she called.

"Sir, would it be possible for you to help me with some grammar topics after school? My exams are near, and I'm struggling a little. Mom has already given her permission."

"I'd be happy to," I replied, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

For now, that was enough.

Between the Lessons...

Back then, my days revolved around school and the after-school tutorials I conducted. My routine rarely changed. I woke at five every morning and seldom made it to bed before eleven at night. Life had become an endless cycle of lessons, lesson plans, and exhaustion—until I rearranged my schedule to make room for Amy.

Finding a time that suited us both wasn't easy, but some opportunities are worth every inconvenience. The effort seemed insignificant when compared to the quiet joy those few hours brought me.

Our lessons soon became the highlight of my day. Looking back, they remain among my fondest memories. Amy's eagerness to learn rekindled my own love for teaching. Without realizing it, she inspired me to become a better teacher—and perhaps, a better man.

She was an exceptional student, attentive and genuinely curious. Once she opened a book, the rest of the world seemed to disappear. I, on the other hand, was guilty of occasional distractions.

Every now and then, I caught myself watching her instead of the lesson. She frowned whenever she stumbled upon a difficult sentence. A rebellious strand of hair constantly slipped across her face, and she would absent-mindedly tuck

it behind her ear, only for it to fall back moments later. She never seemed to notice.

I noticed every single time.

"Sir?"

I didn't respond.

"Sir!" she called again, laughing softly.

I blinked, suddenly aware that I'd been staring into space.

"Are these lessons wearing you out?" she asked with genuine concern. "You look tired. I wish I could manage these chapters on my own. Just a few more classes, and I promise I won't trouble you anymore."

Her innocence never failed to disarm me.

"You've got it all wrong, Amy," I replied with a smile. "I was only deciding what to teach you next. Now then, shall we move on to paraphrasing?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes, sir."

When the lesson ended, she packed her books and walked towards the school gate, where her mother waited for her every afternoon. I watched from a distance until they disappeared from view.

Strangely enough, despite everything that had happened, I still hadn't properly met Ms. Mason. Part of me was relieved. Another part dreaded the day we finally would.

The Next Day

As usual, I was in the English club, preparing for our session. I was also working on my thesis about the origins of silent letters in the English language when I heard the rhythmic tic-tac of sandals approaching.

She walked in, wearing a blue frock that reached her knees, smelling faintly of jasmine. The sunlight streamed through the windows, casting a golden glow on her. Her dress, sandals, and hairdo were perfectly coordinated. She looked like she had stepped out of a fairytale.

I tried to keep my expression neutral, masking the chaos of emotions swirling within me.

"I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting, sir."

"It's good to see you looking so much better today, Amy."

"Aa... tha... thank you, sir," she stammered, clearly caught off guard.

We continued with the lesson as usual. When it ended, I reminded her to be punctual the next day.

"Sure, sir. I will," she said and left.

I packed up and headed to the parking lot. To my surprise, I found her sitting on a bench, scribbling in a notebook.

"Still here, Amy? Everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Mom's busy at work and asked me to wait here until she arrives."

“How long will she take?”

“An hour or so, maybe.”

“The guards won’t allow you to stay this late on campus. I’ll drop you home—it’s on my way.”

“Oh no, sir! I’ll wait for Mom. I don’t want to bother you.”

“Amy, you’re never a bother. Come on, hop on the bike.”

As we rode past the grasslands, I felt a surreal sense of contentment. The ride home passed in comfortable silence. The cool evening breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass, and for the first time in days, my mind felt unexpectedly at peace.

“Sir, do you live alone here? What about your family?”

“My family lives in North Carolina. I visit them during vacations. My younger brother practices medicine in New York.”

“Why did you choose to live here, away from them?”

“Sometimes, life demands choices that don’t align with your preferences. But you make them because they’re necessary. Teaching has always been my passion, and this school gave me the chance to live my dream.”

“You’re right, sir. Choices often choose us.”

“Not always, Amy. Only sometimes.”

The rest of the ride was silent. It was nearly dark by the time we reached her house.

“Sir, would you like to come in for a cup of coffee? Mom will be home soon, and she wants to meet you.”

“No, dear. Some other time.”

“Please, sir. I insist.”

Reluctantly, I agreed.

She took my coat and hung it neatly in the living room.

“Make yourself comfortable, sir. I’ll get your coffee.”

I wandered around the room, thinking about what I would say to her mother. That’s when I noticed a little notebook titled Amy’s. It was the same one she had been scribbling in earlier. I reached out to pick it up, but just then, she entered with the coffee.

“Here’s your cup, sir.”

I quickly let go of the book and took the coffee. It was just the way I liked it, though even if it wasn’t, I knew I’d still cherish it—for her.

“Thank you for the coffee, dear. I must be on my way now. Take care, and I hope your mom gets home soon.”

“Good night, sir!”

“Good night, Amy,” I replied, smiling to myself. It truly was a good night.

At Amy's House

Amy lay awake, staring at the ceiling. No matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept drifting back to the day's events—to Mr. Bright's kindness, the ride home, and the quiet concern in his eyes.

She buried her face in the pillow.

"Lord... please take these thoughts away," she whispered.
"This isn't right."

The bedroom door creaked open.

"Amy?" Ms. Mason called gently.

Amy sat up at once. "Mom..."

"I heard you talking. Are you alright?"

"I think I just had a bad dream," Amy replied, forcing a faint smile.

Her mother studied her for a moment before gently brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"If something's troubling you, don't keep it to yourself. You can always talk to me."

"I know, Mom."

Amy rested her head against her mother's shoulder. Yet even as she closed her eyes, she knew there were feelings she couldn't yet understand—let alone explain.

Surprise Visit

(5:00 A.M.)

The sharp ring of the doorbell pierced the silence of dawn. Half-asleep, I glanced at the clock before dragging myself to the door. It was barely five in the morning. I couldn't imagine who would visit at such an hour.

As I opened the door, I froze.

Standing before me was Ms. Mason.

"Good morning, Mr. Bright," she said politely.

"G-Good morning, Ms. Mason," I replied, still trying to gather my thoughts. "Is everything alright? Has something happened to Amy?"

"No," she answered softly. "Amy is fine."

Only then did I notice the weariness in her eyes.

"May I come in for a few minutes?"

"Of course."

I stepped aside and invited her into the living room.

"I'm sorry," I said, embarrassed by the untidy state of the house. "I wasn't expecting company this early."

She offered a faint smile.

"I won't take much of your time."

I nodded and waited.

For a few moments, neither of us spoke.

Finally, she broke the silence.

"Mr. Bright, I came here because I need your help."

"My help?"

She clasped her hands together.

"Amy speaks very highly of you."

I smiled.

"She's a remarkable student."

"I know," Ms. Mason replied. "And I'm grateful for everything you've done for her. You've encouraged her, believed in her, and helped her regain her confidence after her illness."

She paused.

"But..."

That single word unsettled me.

"I've noticed something these past few weeks."

I remained silent.

"Amy has changed."

My heartbeat quickened.

"She's quieter than usual. She's distracted. Yesterday I found her awake in the middle of the night. She was praying... and crying."

I lowered my eyes.

"When I asked what was wrong, she insisted she'd had a nightmare."

She sighed.

"Perhaps that's all it was."

Another pause followed.

"But I've been a mother long enough to know when something is troubling my daughter."

Her words carried neither accusation nor anger.

Only concern.

"I'm not here to blame you, Mr. Bright," she continued gently. "In fact, I respect you. Any man who risks his own safety to save someone else's child deserves respect."

I looked at her, surprised.

"But young hearts are fragile."

She met my eyes.

"They often mistake admiration for something much deeper."

"If I'm wrong," she said quietly, "I'll gladly apologise."

She hesitated before continuing.

"But if I'm right... I need your help."

I already knew what she was going to ask.

She said, her voice trembling for the first time. "She's preparing for the most important examination of her life. I don't want anything to distract her—not now."

She looked at me steadily.

"If you ever feel that your presence is becoming a source of confusion for her... I ask you to be the first one to step away."

Those words pierced my heart.

Not because they were unfair.

Because they were.

If our roles had been reversed, I might have asked the very same thing.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally found my voice.

"Mrs. Mason..."

She waited.

"I understand why you're here."

I took a slow breath.

"You have my word."

Her eyes softened.

"I have always considered Amy my student first. That will never change."

She nodded, visibly relieved.

"Thank you."

She rose to leave.

As I walked her to the door, she turned back once more.

"I hope you don't think poorly of me."

I shook my head.

"No, Mrs. Mason."

I managed a faint smile.

She smiled for the first time that morning.

"Take care, Mr. Bright."

I watched her walk away until she disappeared beyond the gate.

Long after she had left, I remained standing at the doorway.

For the first time since I had met Amy, I realised that love was not merely about holding on.

Sometimes, loving someone meant knowing when to let go.

That morning, I made a promise to her mother.

Little did I know that keeping it would become the greatest test of my life.

The Evening Reflection

That evening, as he cycled home after his classes, Ms. Mason's words replayed in his head over and over. Every line, every word, every pause—he analyzed them all. He couldn't shake the realization that Amy might feel the same way about him. The thought both thrilled and terrified him.

Where will they go after her exams? he wondered, his heart sinking at the idea of her leaving. But despite everything, he couldn't suppress the happiness that bloomed within him at the possibility that she cared for him too.

A Quiet Evening

As I cycled home that evening, Mrs. Mason's words refused to leave me.

Every sentence echoed in my mind.

"If you notice anything that could hurt her... please be the first one to step away."

For the first time, another thought crept into my mind.

What if Amy felt something too?

The possibility frightened me.

It also filled my heart with a joy I had spent months trying to suppress.

Our lessons would end after her examinations.

Six months.

That was all.

What would happen after that?

Would she leave West Carolina?

Would I ever see her again?

The questions followed me all the way home.

Several miles away, Sam sat alone in his office.

"Nurse," he said quietly, "could you bring me Amy Mason's reports?"

"Right away, Doctor."

A few moments later, the file was placed before him.

He read every page carefully.
The colour gradually drained from his face.
Without saying a word, he closed the file and slipped it into
the top drawer of his desk.
After a long silence, he looked towards the window.
"Please ask Mrs. Mason to collect Amy's reports tomorrow."
"Yes, Doctor."
The nurse left.
Sam remained seated, his fingers resting on the closed file.
"How am I going to tell them?" he whispered to himself.

The Shudder

“Susie, stay in the car. I’ll quickly grab Amy’s reports from the hospital,” Ms. Mason said as she stepped out, trying to mask her unease.

Inside the hospital, she approached Dr. Sam with a mix of anxiety and hope. “Doctor, is everything alright in Amy’s reports?”

Dr. Sam hesitated, his face lined with concern. “Ms. Mason... I wish I could say there’s nothing to worry about. But... I can’t.”

Her heart sank. “What do you mean? Please, Doctor, don’t leave me guessing. Tell me clearly.”

Taking a deep breath, Dr. Sam began, “I didn’t intend to keep this from you, but Amy begged me not to tell you. She insisted. I had no choice. However, her condition has reached a point where you need to know.”

Ms. Mason, now visibly tense, demanded, “What condition, Doctor? What are you talking about? What’s wrong with my daughter?”

Dr. Sam sighed, recalling the moment he first discovered the truth. “When Amy was brought in, she was struggling to

breathe. At first, I thought it was just asthma. But further tests revealed something more serious. Her reports confirmed it... but somehow, she overheard me discussing her case. Later, when I checked on her, she confronted me.”

“She... confronted you?” Ms. Mason asked, her voice breaking.

“Yes,” Dr. Sam nodded gravely. “She was wide awake and waiting for me. When I walked in, she said, ‘Oh, so I’m just another file for you, huh? A case you don’t think will live to see her 20th birthday.’ I was taken aback, but she already knew too much.”

Tears welled up in Ms. Mason’s eyes as anger erupted. “How dare you hide this from me? She’s just a child, Doctor! You had no right!”

“I understand your anger,” Dr. Sam said calmly. “But she threatened to refuse further tests if I told you. She said if her mother knew, she’d run away from home. I had to tread carefully to ensure she got the necessary care.”

Ms. Mason’s voice quivered, a mix of fury and desperation. “You should have told me! I’m her mother—how could you keep me in the dark? I’ll take her to the best hospital. I’ll do whatever it takes to save her!”

Dr. Sam’s expression softened, yet his words carried a heavy weight. “Ms. Mason, Amy is suffering from COPD—Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. COPD is a disease that slowly damages the lungs and makes breathing increasingly difficult. It’s something we normally diagnose in much older adults, which is why Amy’s case is so unusual.” One in a thousand

cases is found to be in a teenager, it's rare in someone her age, but her case is severe.

Mrs. Mason gripped the edge of the desk.

"There must be some mistake."

"We repeated every test because of her age," Sam replied quietly. "I wanted to be absolutely certain."

He slid the reports towards her.

"I wish I were wrong."

Her trembling hands reached for the file.

"Can she be cured?"

Sam lowered his eyes.

"No."

The room fell silent.

"We can manage her symptoms and slow the progression, but we cannot cure the disease."

Mrs. Mason searched his face desperately.

"Then... how much time does she have?"

Sam hesitated.

"If the disease continues to progress..."

He struggled to finish the sentence.

"...Amy may not have more than two years."

The words shattered her.

"No..."

Tears streamed down her face.

"There has to be something. Surgery... a transplant... anything."

"I've considered every option," Sam said gently. "Her condition is too advanced."

"I'll give her my lungs."

Sam looked at her helplessly.

"If only love alone could save her."

Mrs. Mason broke down.

"My little girl..." she sobbed. "She's only seventeen."

Sam remained silent.

Some diagnoses leave a doctor with medicine.

Others leave him only with silence.

She folded the reports against her chest and walked out in silence.

Behind her, life in the hospital continued as usual.

Ahead of her, nothing would ever be the same again.

Hospital Parking Lot

Mrs. Mason stepped out of Dr. Sam's office clutching Amy's medical reports tightly against her chest.

“Mom! You almost took a decade to get back here! What took you so long? Mom! Mom, are you even listening to me?” Susie’s voice cut through the air, impatient but laced with concern.

Ms. Mason opened the back door of the car, placing the reports inside with clumsy, fumbling hands. She moved as though in a trance, her motions uncoordinated, her mind replaying Dr. Sam’s devastating words on an endless loop. Susie’s questions went unanswered, her voice drowned out by the storm raging within her mother.

“Mom!” Susie screamed, leaning forward from the back seat, her voice sharper now, pulling Ms. Mason out of her daze.

“Yes, dear! Yes! What happened? Did you say something? I didn’t hear,” Ms. Mason replied, startled, her words rushed and shaky.

“Mom, what’s wrong? You’re not yourself. You seem... different. Is everything okay? Is anything bothering you?” Susie asked, her young eyes filled with worry as she reached out to squeeze her mother’s hand.

Ms. Mason forced a fragile smile, a pale shadow of her usual warmth. “Yes, everything’s good, sweetheart. I’ll handle everything. Don’t you worry. Remember, you girls always have Mumma’s back.” Her words were meant to reassure, but the cracks in her voice betrayed her inner turmoil.

Susie tilted her head, perplexed at her mother’s odd behavior. Her eyes scanned her mother’s tear-streaked face, the distant look in her eyes, and the trembling hands gripping the steering wheel. Something wasn’t right.

“Mom, why are you crying?” Susie whispered, her voice soft but insistent. “And Mom... why did you take this turn? Did you forget we have to pick Amy up from school?”

Her hands gripped the wheel tighter, her thoughts spiralling. The road blurred before her eyes as she drove recklessly, the speedometer climbing with every passing second. The world outside seemed distant, unimportant.

“Mom! Slow down!” Susie’s scream brought her back to the present, but it was too late. The car skidded across the wet road before crashing violently into the thick trunk of an old banyan tree.

Everything went silent.

Classroom – Earlier That Day

I was already waiting in the English Club when Amy walked in.

She greeted me with her usual smile before quietly taking her seat.

For a brief moment, I found myself watching her longer than I should have.

Then Mrs. Mason's words returned to me.

"If you ever feel that your presence becomes a source of confusion for her... I ask you to be the first one to step away."

I lowered my eyes and turned back to the lesson.

"Good afternoon, Amy."

"Good afternoon, sir."

We spent the next hour working through grammar exercises.

As always, she listened with complete attention, asking thoughtful questions whenever she found something difficult.

Teaching her never felt like work.

It felt like purpose.

"Sir..."

I looked up.

"I'm done."

"Already?"

She laughed softly.

"I think your explanations are finally working."

"I'm relieved to hear that."

She smiled.

When the lesson ended, she gathered her books before hesitating near my desk.

"Sir... may I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Mom's running late today. Would you mind dropping me near St. Peter's Church? I've already told her."

"Certainly."

"Thank you."

Together, we walked towards the parking lot.

For once, neither of us hurried.

The silence between us felt strangely comfortable.

As I unlocked my bike, I noticed Amy writing something in a small notebook.

"You seem very protective of that diary."

She smiled.

"It keeps all my thoughts."

"And should I be worried?"

She laughed.

"Only if you're planning to read it."

"I wouldn't dare."

She tucked it safely into her bag before climbing onto the bike.

The journey began in silence.

Halfway there, I heard her humming softly.

"You have a beautiful voice," I said.

She laughed shyly.

"It's only a hymn."

"I'd still like to hear it."

After a moment's hesitation, she began to sing.

Her voice was gentle yet filled with conviction, every word carrying a quiet faith that seemed far beyond her years.

By the time she finished, neither of us spoke.

"I didn't know you sang so beautifully," I finally said.

She smiled.

"My grandmother taught me that hymn."

For the rest of the journey, our conversation drifted naturally towards faith, hope, and the strange ways God chooses to shape our lives.

For reasons I couldn't explain, I found myself listening far more than speaking.

Some lessons, I realised, are never taught from behind a teacher's desk.

Some are learnt from the people we least expect.

As we walked past the pastures and paddy fields, our conversation turned to faith and God. I admired how calmly and thoughtfully Amy answered the questions I posed—sometimes deliberately challenging—to test her perspective.

Through her responses, I discovered a side of myself I hadn't explored before.

To my students, I was "The Grumpy Head," a strict teacher they dared not cross. My short temper was legendary among them, and I kept personal interactions to a minimum. My reserved nature stemmed from the lessons life had taught me, often the hard way. Friends were few—if any—apart from Sam, my sole confidant. But Amy was different. In her company, I softened. She unknowingly smoothed the rough edges of my character, revealing a more tolerant and reflective side of me.

As we neared the church, dark clouds gathered overhead.

Within moments, the heavens opened.

Rain poured relentlessly, drenching us within seconds.

"We're not making it to the church in this weather," I said, raising my voice above the rain. "Come back to my place. We'll wait until it settles."

She hesitated.

"I don't want to trouble you, sir."

"You won't. Besides, I'd rather explain your absence at church than explain why you caught pneumonia."

She smiled despite herself and nodded.

By the time we reached my house, we were completely soaked.

I unlocked the door and hurried inside.

"Amy, you can't stay in those wet clothes," I said. "You'll fall ill. I only have a spare shirt and a pair of track pants, but they'll have to do. Your dress should dry quickly in the machine."

She accepted them with quiet gratitude and disappeared into the guest room.

While she changed, I prepared two mugs of coffee.

When she returned a few minutes later, the oversized clothes made her look almost childlike. Her damp hair rested against her shoulders as tiny droplets of water fell onto the wooden floor.

I handed her a towel.

"Dry your hair first," I said. "That's an order from your teacher."

She laughed softly.

"Yes, sir."

She obediently began drying her hair while I placed another log into the fireplace.

Soon the room filled with warmth, accompanied by the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

As we settled into our chairs, I slid a mug towards her.

"Now tell me," I said, "what secrets does that little notebook of yours hide?"

She smiled.

"Nothing important."

"I find that hard to believe."

After a moment's hesitation, she opened the notebook.

"It's only a poem," she said quietly.

"I'd like to hear it."

She nodded and began to read.

*"After so long, it's a balm to see unparalleled sunshine,
The kind that transcends the dearth and debris of the soul,
Of the flesh, and of the body.
How hard it is to cleanse detestable thoughts!
But when you realize the sunshine you once called yours
Belongs to another realm,
You walk with acceptance, a smile unflinching,
And find the real 'you' within.
The process kills you inside out—
But as always, the soul learns to heal itself.
Give it time and space to mend,
And once again,
The 'you' within will rise and shine,
Stronger than before,
For the wheel keeps turning,
And the journey goes on."*

When she finished, neither of us spoke for several moments.

Finally, I broke the silence.

"You're gifted, Amy."

She lowered her eyes, embarrassed.

"I just write what I feel."

As I watched the rain fall beyond the window, I realised that some people don't merely walk into your life.

They quietly become a part of it.

After Quite a Long...

The rain continued to drum against the windows, filling the silence between us.

Amy..." I finally said. "I've read countless poems over the years, but very few have stayed with me the way yours just did."

She smiled faintly, almost shyly, as if unsure how to handle the praise. "Thank you, sir," she said softly, her gaze momentarily dropping to her coffee cup. There was a quiet humility about her that only added to her charm.

The rain outside continued its relentless downpour, the rhythmic tapping against the window providing a melancholic symphony to the moment. As I sipped my coffee, I found myself studying her—not with admiration alone, but with curiosity. There was a quiet sadness hidden beneath her smile, something her poem had revealed far more honestly than words ever could.

For a fleeting moment, I almost asked what had inspired it.

I didn't.

Some questions deserved patience.

Just then, her phone vibrated.

She answered, but the call kept breaking.

"It's the network," she muttered. "I can't hear anything."

"Use mine," I said, handing her my phone.

She thanked me and dialed the number again.

I watched her expression change almost instantly.

The colour drained from her face.

The coffee mug slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor.

"Amy?"

She stood frozen, the phone trembling in her hand.

"It... it was the police," she whispered.

My heart sank.

"They said..." Her voice broke. "Mom and Susie... they've met with an accident."

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then instinct took over.

I picked up my keys.

"Come on," I said quietly.

"We're going to the hospital."

She nodded, unable to speak.

As we stepped into the rain once again, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that our lives had just changed forever.

Without thinking, I stepped closer, my instincts urging me to provide some semblance of comfort. “Amy,” I said softly, my voice steady but filled with concern. “It’s going to be okay. I’m here. We’ll figure this out together.”

I knew that no words could truly comfort her at this moment, but I was determined to do everything I could to help. She had always been a source of light for others; now it was my turn to be the same for her.

The Mourn

The rain showed no mercy.

It lashed against the windshield as I hurried Amy to the car. She walked beside me like someone whose soul had already left her body. She neither resisted nor spoke. She simply followed.

I opened the passenger door and helped her inside before rushing to the driver's seat.

Just as I started the engine, my phone rang.

It was Sam.

"Will, get to the hospital. Now."

"We're already on our way," I replied.

A brief silence followed.

"We?"

"Amy's with me. Sam... how are they?"

Another pause.

"Just get here."

The line went dead.

His voice told me everything he hadn't.

The drive felt endless.

Amy sat motionless beside me, staring through the rain-soaked window without blinking. I wanted to comfort her, to tell her everything would be alright, but the words refused to leave my mouth. Sometimes hope sounds dishonest when your own heart no longer believes it.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the hospital.

Police vehicles crowded the entrance, their flashing lights painting the wet pavement in shades of blue and red.

I switched off the engine.

Amy didn't move.

"We're here," I said gently.

No response.

I stepped out, walked around the car, opened her door, and held out my hand.

She looked at it for a moment before placing hers in mine.

It was ice cold.

Together we walked into the hospital.

The corridor outside the operating theatre was overflowing with doctors, nurses, and police officers. The air smelled of antiseptic and fear.

A sheriff approached us.

"Ms. Amy Mason?"

Amy nodded faintly.

"I'm sorry you're going through this, but we need to ask you a few questions."

She remained silent.

"Do you suspect anyone who might have wished to harm your family?"

Her fingers tightened around mine.

The officer waited.

"So far, our investigation suggests it was an accident, but we need your statement."

Amy's lips parted, yet no words came.

I stepped forward.

"Officer... could you give her a minute?"

He nodded and stepped aside.

I turned towards her.

"Amy..."

She kept staring at the floor.

"I know this is difficult."

Still nothing.

"But answering these questions is the only way they'll let us proceed. Take your time. I'm right here."

She closed her eyes briefly before taking a deep breath.

Then she walked back towards the officer.

"We've lived here for almost twenty years," she said quietly.
"My parents never had enemies. I don't suspect anyone."

Her voice never broke.

That frightened me more than tears would have.

The officer nodded sympathetically before handing me a sealed evidence pouch.

"These belongings were recovered from your mother's vehicle."

I accepted it without looking inside.

Amy had already begun walking towards the operating theatre.

Sam moved in and out of the theatre doors, speaking rapidly with nurses.

Amy stood before the glass panel, trying desperately to see inside.

Minutes passed.

Then she turned abruptly.

"Susie."

Her voice was barely audible.

"Where's Susie?"

The receptionist directed us to the intensive care unit.

A consultant met us outside.

"Your sister sustained a severe head injury," he explained gently. "A large branch struck the passenger side during the accident. The impact caused a brain haemorrhage."

He paused.

"She's in a coma."

The words seemed to echo endlessly through the corridor.

"We've managed to stabilise her, but..." He hesitated.

"...the next forty-eight hours will be critical."

Amy said nothing.

Neither did I.

We were allowed inside.

Susie looked impossibly small beneath the white hospital sheets.

Machines breathed for her.

Monitors spoke in rhythmic beeps.

The room felt painfully alive while she remained perfectly still.

I turned away.

For the first time that day, tears blurred my vision.

I stepped outside to compose myself.

When I returned...

Amy was gone.

My heart lurched.

"Amy?"

No answer.

I searched every corner of the ward.

The waiting room.

The cafeteria.

The washrooms.

Nothing.

Panic tightened around my chest.

I called Sam immediately.

"Sam... Amy's disappeared."

"What?"

"I can't find her anywhere."

"I'll meet you outside OT-4."

Barely five minutes later, he came running down the corridor.

Before I could speak, he looked at me.

His face told me everything.

"Will..."

My stomach dropped.

"Mrs. Mason?"

Sam lowered his eyes.

"We couldn't save her."

The words struck with a force I cannot describe.

"We tried everything," he continued quietly. "The internal bleeding was too severe. Her body simply stopped responding."

For several seconds, neither of us spoke.

Then another thought hit me.

Amy.

She had heard.

She knew.

Without another word, I ran.

I searched the hospital grounds, the parking lot, the nearby park, every street she could possibly have taken.

Each passing minute gave birth to a new fear.

What if she had collapsed?

What if she had disappeared?

What if...

I refused to complete the thought.

Exhausted, I finally pulled my car to the side of the road.

For the first time in years, I found myself praying without words.

Just then, my eyes fell upon the old stone church across the road.

I froze.

Of course.

Where else would she go?

"Thank You," I whispered.

Leaving the car where it was, I sprinted towards the church.

The main gates were locked.

But the small side entrance stood slightly ajar.

I slipped inside.

The church was almost empty.

My footsteps echoed softly as I walked down the aisle, searching every pew.

Then I saw her.

Kneeling before the very first pew.

Her head rested upon folded hands.

Her shoulders trembled with silent sobs.

At that moment, I realised that some grief is too deep for words.

I placed myself beside her. I could hear her sobbing; aware of her demeanor, I extended my hand over her shoulder; she might have sensed me, all together she just hugged me tight, so tight that I literally did not have any idea of how I should have responded. First I thought of speaking to her but seeing her crying out that bad, I decided to just hold on to her, without any word spoken, I just let her be. She cried her heart out. I simply remained there, allowing her grief to unfold without interruption.

Sometimes all we need is a person who would not say anything, a person who not judge you for your doing, a person who would not try to console you even, but just be there to take you all over in silence.

Sometimes silence speaks the loudest. I was that someone to Amy at that time.

She cried bitterly and inconsolable, I just had my hand running over her hair. Gradually, her sobs became quieter.

She moved away, wiping her eyes with trembling hands.

They could not save my mom sir! They could not! She bled herself to death sir, I could do nothing to save her; how would I survive without her, we could barely imagine an evening without mom, now how do I handle this, I'm broken, I can't take this. It's all because of me. I am the one responsible for this; it's all my fault. I should have been the one on the death bed not my mom. Why has God spared me a life like this? I don't want to live anymore in this world without my mom being by my side. (crying harder)

Before she could continue, I gently raised my hand.

"No."

She looked at me through tear-filled eyes.

"Don't ever say that again."

She lowered her gaze.

"I don't know how to live without her."

"I know."

"No..."

She shook her head.

"You don't."

"My whole world ended today."

I waited before answering.

"I don't know how to mend a heart that's been broken like yours."

She remained silent.

"I can't replace your mother."

"I can't lessen your pain."

"And I certainly can't explain why God allows such things to happen."

The church fell silent once more.

"But I do know this."

She slowly looked at me.

"Susie needs you."

Her eyes widened.

"Right now, she's lying in a hospital bed, fighting a battle she doesn't even know she's fighting."

I paused.

"When she wakes up..."

"...she'll be looking for only one person."

"You."

Amy's lips trembled.

"You are all she has now."

A fresh wave of tears escaped her eyes.

"I don't know if I'm strong enough."

"You don't have to feel strong."

"You only have to keep going."

She stared at the cross above the altar.

"What if I fail her?"

"You won't."

"What if I don't survive this?"

I gently interrupted her.

"You will."

She looked at me.

"And you won't face it alone."

For the first time since we had entered the church, she didn't cry.

She simply closed her eyes.

After a long silence, she nodded.

Almost imperceptibly.

"I'll try."

I smiled faintly.

"That's all anyone can ask."

Slowly, I stood and held out my hand.

She looked at it for a moment before placing hers in mine.

Together, we walked towards the church doors.

The rain had begun to ease.

Outside, the clouds were slowly giving way to a pale evening sky.

Neither of us spoke.

Some silences are not empty.

Some are simply too full of sorrow for words.

As we walked back towards the hospital, I realised something.

Until that day, I had believed love was about protecting someone from pain.

I was wrong.

Sometimes...

Love is simply refusing to let them suffer alone.

I helped her get up from the seat and we both made our way out towards my car.

The days that followed passed in a blur.

Mrs. Mason's funeral was held two days later.

There were no close relatives to shoulder the responsibilities. Years ago, she had married Amy's father against her family's wishes, and over time, every bridge between them had been burned.

Friends, neighbours, and a few colleagues gathered to pay their respects.

Amy walked behind her mother's casket in silence.

She didn't cry.

Perhaps grief had travelled beyond tears.

I wanted to walk beside her, but I chose not to.

Some journeys are meant to be walked alone.

Instead, I remained at the hospital with Susie.

Someone had to be there if she opened her eyes.

The ward was unusually quiet.

Susie lay exactly as I had left her—still, pale, and suspended between life and uncertainty.

I pulled a chair closer to her bed and opened the Bible that always travelled with me.

My mother reads Psalm 91 to my father every night.

Without thinking, I found myself reading the same chapter aloud.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty..."

The words filled the room with a strange peace.

I didn't know whether Susie could hear me.

Perhaps she couldn't.

But somehow, I felt she wasn't alone.

"...For He shall give His angels charge over you,
to keep you in all your ways."

"Amen."

I looked up.

Sam was standing quietly at the doorway.

"I didn't want to interrupt," he said.

I closed the Bible and smiled faintly.

"Come in."

He pulled up a chair and sat beside me.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Finally, he broke the silence.

"Will..."

"Hmm?"

"I've known you for almost twenty years."

I looked at him.

"And I've never seen you this involved."

I remained quiet.

"I understand why you're helping them," he continued.

"Anyone with a heart would."

He leaned forward.

"But don't lose yourself in the process."

I traced my fingers along the edge of the Bible.

"They have no one, Sam."

"I know."

"Amy's barely holding herself together."

"I know."

"Susie's lying here with no idea her mother is gone."

"I know."

His voice softened.

"But what about you?"

I looked away.

"My parents called yesterday."

I lowered my head.

"I didn't answer."

"They're worried."

"I know."

"You haven't spoken to them in days."

I remained silent.

"They're your family too, Will."

Every word found its mark.

"I'll call them," I said quietly.

"You should."

He rested a hand on my shoulder.

"And one more thing."

I waited.

"Don't make promises your heart won't survive."

I understood what he meant.

"I've already made one."

Sam sighed.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

He stood to leave.

Before reaching the door, he turned back.

"Get some sleep."

"I will."

We both knew I was lying.

An hour later, Amy returned from the cemetery.

Her eyes were swollen, her face drained of colour.

She walked straight to Susie's bedside and sat down without saying a word.

"Amy," I said gently.

She looked at me.

"You should go home and rest."

She shook her head.

"I'm staying here."

"You haven't eaten since yesterday."

"I'm not hungry."

"You won't be able to look after Susie if you don't look after yourself first."

For a long moment, she said nothing.

Finally, she spoke.

"You've already done more than enough for us, sir."

There was gratitude in her voice...

...but also distance.

As though she was trying to convince herself that she no longer needed anyone.

"I'll manage."

I knew that tone.

It wasn't strength.

It was grief disguising itself as independence.

I nodded.

"Very well."

I stood up.

"I'll come back this evening."

She gave a faint nod before turning towards Susie once again.

As I walked out of the ward, I stopped at the nurses' station.

"If either of the girls needs anything..."

The nurse smiled gently.

"We'll call you."

I thanked her and walked towards the parking lot.

The road home felt strangely unfamiliar.

Only the previous evening, Amy and I had laughed over coffee while the rain tapped against my windows.

Now the same roads felt empty.

Beauty, I realised, is often the most temporary thing we possess.

The following morning, after a sleepless night and a hurried shower, I drove straight to school. I wasn't there to teach; I was there to ask for time.

As I knocked on the Principal's door, his familiar voice called from inside. He looked up from his desk, gestured towards the chair opposite him, and said, "Come in, William. I was about to send for you."

After I took my seat, he sighed deeply. "I'm deeply sorry about Mrs. Mason. The entire staff was shocked by the news. I also want to thank you for standing beside those girls when they had no one."

I acknowledged his words with a silent nod.

"I understand you've been at the hospital ever since the accident," he continued. "I only hope you're taking care of yourself as well."

"I'll manage, sir," I replied.

He studied me for a moment before asking, "So, what can I do for you?"

"I've come to request fifteen days' leave."

He leaned back in his chair, visibly conflicted. "You know that's difficult, William. The Examinations are barely three months away."

"I do, sir. But Amy and Susie have no one. If there had been even a single relative to look after them, I would never have come here with such a request."

The room fell silent.

Finally, he spoke. "I can't promise fifteen days. That decision rests with the management. However, I can sanction two days immediately while your application is being considered."

Relief washed over me.

"Thank you, sir."

He smiled gently. "In return, I expect you to take care of yourself too."

"I'll try."

As I walked out of his office, one thing was clear in my mind. Whether my leave was approved or not, I wasn't going to leave Amy alone.

Instead of driving straight back to the hospital, I stopped outside a departmental store. Only then did it occur to me that Amy hadn't changed her clothes since the accident.

The task proved far more difficult than I had imagined.

Women's clothing had always been a mystery to me. Dresses of every imaginable colour and design surrounded me, and for the first time in my life, I genuinely sympathised with men who accompanied their wives shopping.

"This really shouldn't be this difficult," I murmured to myself.

A sales assistant walked over with a warm smile. "May I help you, sir?"

"I sincerely hope so," I admitted, making her laugh.

"I'm looking for a dress."

"For your wife?" she asked.

I almost choked.

"No."

She smiled knowingly. "Your fiancée?"

"No."

"Then...?"

"A friend."

She nodded politely. "Alright. What's her size?"

I stared blankly. "Honestly... I have no idea."

"How tall is she?"

I gestured awkwardly. "About... this tall."

She laughed. "That's certainly a unique way of describing someone's height."

Embarrassed, I rubbed the back of my neck. "I'm afraid I'm completely out of my depth."

"Don't worry," she said reassuringly. "You're not the first gentleman to walk in looking this lost."

Within minutes, she selected three simple cotton dresses.

"These should fit."

"I'll trust your judgement," I replied.

As she packed them, she smiled and said, "Whoever she is, she's fortunate."

I smiled faintly.

"I think it's the other way around."

After thanking her, I picked up some food and drove back to the hospital.

The ward was unusually quiet.

Amy had fallen asleep beside Susie's bed, her head resting gently against the mattress. She looked utterly exhausted.

I quietly placed the shopping bag and the food on the table before gently touching her shoulder.

"Amy..."

She woke with a start and immediately apologised. "I'm sorry, sir."

"You don't need to apologise."

Glancing at the clock, she looked surprised. "Sir... shouldn't you be at the University?"

"I've made the necessary arrangements," I replied, placing a sandwich before her. "Now eat."

"I'm really not hungry."

I smiled gently. "That wasn't a request."

For the first time in days, the faintest smile appeared on her face.

It was small.

But it was enough.

We ate quietly. Once she had finished, I slid the shopping bag towards her.

She looked at it curiously.

"I thought you might like a change of clothes."

She looked at me in surprise.

"Sir... you really didn't have to."

"Perhaps not," I replied. "But I wanted to."

Her eyes glistened.

"I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't have to. Just try them on."

A few minutes later, she returned wearing one of the dresses.

It fitted perfectly.

"It suits you," I said with a smile.

She looked down shyly.

"The sales assistant deserves all the credit."

That earned me the faintest laugh.

It was the first time I had heard her laugh since the accident.

Just then, Sam entered the ward carrying Susie's latest reports.

"I have some good news," he said.

Both of us looked at him hopefully.

"She's responding much better than we expected. There are still a few tests left, but she's improving."

Amy's eyes filled with cautious hope.

"Will she recover, Doctor?"

Sam smiled reassuringly.

"We're hopeful."

For the first time in several days, hope quietly found its way back into the room.

Making certain assertions and calculations as he spoke to the nurse with him; "She seems better than yesterday", said Sam.

We still have to run her through a few more tests and that would be all. You can then take her home. We would wait for a few more days for the situations to get a little better.

Will she ever get back to a normal doctor?! Asked Amy.

Well! I cannot really promise you a complete return but yes of course we hope a great lot of improvement in her health.

A Breath Between Storms

Sam left. Amy was more than just tired. I could see the weight of exhaustion pulling her down, so I suggested she rest for a while.

" A Breath Between Storms

After Sam left, I looked at Amy.

The exhaustion on her face was unmistakable. She had endured more in the past few days than most people would in a lifetime.

"You should get some sleep," I said gently. "Don't worry. I'll answer the calls if anyone needs you."

Without protest, she lay down and closed her eyes.

Within minutes, she was asleep.

I returned to the stack of assignments waiting to be graded. Every now and then, I found myself glancing towards her. In sleep, she looked almost peaceful, though the faint tear stains on her cheeks reminded me of the battle she had fought before finally surrendering to exhaustion.

Watching her stirred an unexpected sense of gratitude within me.

For the first time in days, I thought of my own parents.

I reached for my phone and called my mother.

She answered after a few rings, her familiar voice instantly bringing me comfort.

I apologised for not calling sooner and told her everything—the accident, Mrs. Mason's passing, Amy, and Susie.

She remained silent for a long moment before speaking.

"My heart aches for those girls, Will. Losing a parent is painful at any age, but losing both your parents so young..." She sighed. "Take care of them, son. We'll keep them in our prayers."

Then, almost as though she wanted to lighten the conversation, she added, "There's some good news too. Victor has decided to move back home. He wants to open his clinic here."

A smile found its way onto my face.

"That's wonderful, Mom. Once things settle down here, I'll come home too."

"We'll be waiting," she replied warmly. "Just promise me you'll keep calling."

"I will."

As the call ended, I silently thanked God—not only for my parents, but for the countless blessings I had so often taken for granted.

A soft knock on the door drew my attention.

The housekeeping staff had arrived.

The sound stirred Amy awake.

She looked disoriented for a moment before sitting up.

"I really think you should go home and rest," I said. "Nothing is going to change overnight. Your exams are only a few months away, and your mother would want you to finish what you started."

She looked down quietly before nodding.

"I'll try, sir."

"I know you will."

Later that evening, while both sisters rested, I slipped away to the hospital cafeteria with my laptop.

The place was almost deserted.

I ordered a cup of coffee and spent the next hour preparing lesson plans and responding to my students' submissions.

Work, I had discovered, was often the only thing capable of silencing an exhausted mind.

When I returned, both Amy and Susie were asleep.

The room felt unusually peaceful.

I stretched out on the couch and checked my phone.

There was a message from the Principal.

My leave had been approved. I was to remain available should the University require me, and he thanked me for continuing my virtual lessons despite everything. He also informed me that several teachers and a few of Amy's classmates planned to visit the hospital the following afternoon.

I smiled to myself.

For the first time in several days, life no longer felt as though it were falling apart.

Somewhere between that thought and the silence of the room...

sleep finally found me.

The First Dawn

A gentle tap upon my shoulder stirred me awake. For a brief moment, I remained suspended between sleep and reality, trying to remember where I was. Then my surroundings came into focus—the soft hum of the monitors, the faint scent of antiseptic, and Susie's hospital bed by the window.

A blanket had been carefully draped over me. My spectacles and phone rested neatly on the bedside table.

"Good morning, Teacher!"

Sam's cheerful voice broke through my thoughts.

"It appears someone finally managed to get a proper night's sleep," he said with a grin. "Freshen up and meet me in my office. I've got something to discuss with you."

Before I could ask what it was, he had already disappeared down the corridor, as hurried as ever.

I stretched slowly, feeling the stiffness that comes from spending the night on a visitor's couch. My eyes instinctively searched the room.

Amy wasn't there.

A strange emptiness settled over me.

Just then, the door opened.

Amy walked in, carefully balancing two steaming cups of coffee and a small slice of pie. The morning sunlight slipped through the half-drawn curtains, falling gently upon her face. Though grief still lingered in her eyes, there was a quiet composure about her that hadn't been there the previous day. It wasn't happiness—far from it—but it was the first sign that sorrow had begun to loosen its relentless grip.

"Good morning, sir," she said softly. "I hope you slept well."

"I did," I replied, quickly relieving her of one of the cups. "Though I suspect someone was kind enough to make sure I stayed warm through the night."

She looked away almost immediately, pretending to be occupied with the pie.

The faint flush that coloured her cheeks was answer enough.

For reasons I couldn't explain, the blanket resting upon my shoulders suddenly felt warmer than it had a moment ago.

We settled into our chairs in comfortable silence.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee slowly filled the room, momentarily overpowering the sterile scent of the hospital. It is remarkable how something as ordinary as a cup of coffee can restore a little normalcy to a place burdened by pain. For a few precious moments, the room no longer felt like a hospital ward. It simply felt... peaceful.

After a few sips, I remembered the message the Principal had sent the previous night.

"Amy," I began, "the Principal informed me that a few teachers and some of your classmates will be visiting later this afternoon. They wanted to see how you and Susie are doing."

She nodded thoughtfully, her fingers wrapped around the warm cup.

"I think..." she said after a long pause, "...I'll go home after everyone leaves."

She lifted her eyes to meet mine.

"I've been thinking about everything you've been telling me."

Her voice was calm, yet carried the quiet maturity that grief often bestows upon those who have suffered deeply.

"You were right, sir. I can't remain imprisoned by yesterday forever. Mom worked too hard to give us a future. If I abandon my studies now, everything she sacrificed for will lose its purpose."

She stopped for a moment before continuing.

"I'll always miss her... I don't think that pain will ever leave me. But I don't want my grief to become an excuse for giving up on life."

Her words lingered in the silence that followed.

I looked at her with quiet admiration.

There are moments when teachers discover that their students have already learnt the lesson long before it was ever taught.

This was one of those moments.

A smile found its way onto my face.

"That's exactly what your mother would have wanted to hear," I said. "I'm proud of you, Amy."

She lowered her eyes shyly, clearly uncomfortable with praise.

Then another thought crossed my mind.

"But tell me something," I said. "Why didn't you wake me? You shouldn't have gone all the way down to the cafeteria by yourself. I could have brought the coffee."

She smiled faintly.

"I've already wasted enough time grieving, sir."

Her gaze drifted towards the morning sky beyond the window.

"I don't wish to waste any more."

For reasons I couldn't explain, those simple words settled deeply within me.

At the time, I thought she was merely speaking about that morning.

Much later, I realised she had been speaking about life itself.

Determined to lighten the mood, I smiled.

"Well then," I said, setting down my cup, "I suppose I shouldn't waste any time either. Dr. Sam has summoned me to his office, and I've learnt that keeping doctors waiting is rarely a wise decision."

That finally earned the faintest smile from her.

It was fragile.

Almost hesitant.

Yet beautiful enough to convince me that somewhere beneath the ashes of grief, hope had quietly survived.

As I walked towards the door, I glanced back one last time.

Amy had already turned towards Susie, gently straightening her blanket before brushing a loose strand of hair away from her sister's forehead.

Grief had not diminished her kindness.

If anything, it had made it gentler.

I freshened up and made my way to Sam's office, though not without a lingering sense of uneasiness. His message had sounded casual enough, yet hospitals have a way of making even the simplest conversations feel ominous.

When I entered, he looked up from the reports spread across his desk and motioned for me to sit.

"You look worried," he observed with a smile. "Relax, Will. Nothing's gone wrong."

"I've learnt not to assume that whenever a doctor calls me into his cabin," I replied, settling into the chair opposite him. "Is there something I should know?"

Sam folded the file before him and leaned back.

"It's about Susie. Medically speaking, there's neither good news nor bad. Her condition remains stable. There's been no significant improvement, but thankfully, no deterioration either."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"In situations like these, stability is often a blessing."

I nodded silently.

He was right.

"There's something else I've been meaning to discuss with you," he continued. "I think it's time both you and Amy begin returning, at least gradually, to your normal routines. Sitting beside Susie's bed every waking hour won't change her condition, and Amy's examinations are only a few months away. If anyone understands the value of time, it's her English teacher."

A faint smile escaped me.

"I've already spoken to her. It wasn't easy, but I think she's finally beginning to understand."

"I hope she does," Sam replied. "Grief deserves its time, but life demands it too."

"I've taken a fortnight's leave from school," I said. "As long as I'm free, I'd rather stay close. If anything changes, I want to be here."

Sam looked at me thoughtfully before shaking his head with an amused smile.

"You really do carry the whole world on your shoulders, don't you?"

"I've never been particularly good at doing otherwise."

"Just make sure you don't exhaust yourself trying to save everyone."

There was a brief silence before he looked at me again, a mischievous smile gradually replacing his professional expression.

"By the way..."

I already knew that look.

"What?"

"When I came into the room this morning, you were sleeping so peacefully that I almost felt guilty waking you."

"I must have been more exhausted than I realised."

"Oh, you certainly were."

He laughed.

"You were wrapped up in that blanket like a child on a winter morning."

I smiled.

"I appreciate your kindness."

"My kindness?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't cover you."

I frowned.

"You didn't?"

Sam shook his head, clearly enjoying my confusion.

"When I walked in, Amy was already sitting beside Susie. She'd covered you with the blanket, placed your spectacles and phone on the table, and told me not to wake you immediately because you hadn't slept properly in days."

For a brief moment, I forgot to breathe.

"So..." Sam continued, trying—and failing—to suppress his grin, "I let you sleep."

I lowered my eyes instinctively.

For reasons I couldn't explain, a strange warmth spread quietly through my heart.

It wasn't the blanket that had kept me warm that morning.

It was the thought behind it.

"What are you smiling at?" Sam asked.

I looked up, startled.

"Was I smiling?"

"You've been smiling for the last thirty seconds."

I cleared my throat, hoping to hide my embarrassment.

"I suppose I was just... grateful."

He studied me for a moment before laughing softly.

"No, Will."

He stood, placing a friendly hand upon my shoulder.

"You're much more than grateful."

Before I could think of an appropriate response, he walked towards the door.

"I'll pretend I never noticed."

"Sam..."

He looked back.

"Thank you."

He smiled.

"What are friends for?"

As I walked back towards the ward, I found myself replaying our conversation.

The image refused to leave my mind.

Amy quietly placing the blanket over me.

Carefully setting my spectacles beside the bed.

Asking Sam not to wake me.

They were such ordinary gestures.

Yet it has often been the smallest acts of kindness that leave the deepest imprint upon the human heart.

Love, I was beginning to realise, rarely announced its arrival through grand declarations.

More often, it revealed itself in quiet, unnoticed moments that the world would consider insignificant.

By evening, the room had slowly come alive.

Several teachers arrived from school, accompanied by a few of Amy's classmates. The once-silent ward echoed with gentle conversation, words of encouragement, and the occasional burst of laughter. Bouquets found their place upon every available surface, while handwritten cards soon outnumbered the flowers themselves.

For a little while, the hospital ceased to feel like a place of suffering.

It felt almost... human again.

I stood quietly near the window, watching Amy.

She thanked each visitor with remarkable grace, though I could tell the effort it took her. Grief had not disappeared; it had merely learnt to wear a composed face.

When the last visitor finally left, silence returned to the room.

Amy began arranging the bouquets one by one, carefully trimming the stems before placing them into a large vase near the window. She handled every flower with the same gentle care she seemed to extend to everything and everyone around her.

"When are you planning to head home?" I asked.

She looked up.

"In a little while. I'll be back before noon tomorrow."

Then, after a brief pause, she added,

"But you should go home too, sir. You've hardly rested. If you continue like this, you'll only make yourself ill."

I smiled.

"Now who's giving advice?"

She smiled back.

"I've had a good teacher."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should."

After making sure Susie had been fed and settled comfortably for the night, we quietly left the hospital.

The drive to her house was wrapped in a comfortable silence.

The roads were unusually empty, the fading sunlight casting long shadows across the fields we passed. Neither of us felt compelled to fill the silence with conversation.

Some companionship needs no words.

When we finally reached her house, I brought the car to a gentle halt.

She reached for the door before I spoke.

"Amy."

She turned.

"Take heart."

She waited quietly.

"You're stronger than you believe... and kinder than this world deserves. Don't ever lose either."

For a moment, she simply looked at me.

Then came that familiar smile.

Gentle.

Grateful.

Unforgettable.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Amy."

I watched until she disappeared behind the front door before driving back towards the hospital.

All the way there, one thought remained with me.

Strength is often mistaken for the absence of tears.

But perhaps true strength is simply finding the courage to keep walking while carrying them.

Back in the ward, Susie was sleeping peacefully.

The room had fallen silent once again.

I picked up the Bible from the bedside table and began reading softly—not because I knew she could hear me, but because hope, like faith, often works quietly.

When I finished, I closed the Bible and whispered a simple prayer.

For Susie.

For Amy.

For wisdom enough to know when to speak... and when simply to remain beside them.

Outside, dawn had long surrendered to night.

But within my heart, another dawn had quietly begun.

Between Grief and Grace

The night wrapped itself around the Mason residence with an unsettling stillness. Outside, the world had long surrendered to sleep, but inside Amy's room, slumber remained a distant stranger. Grief has a peculiar way of distorting time. The hours neither move forward nor remain still; they simply linger, stretching themselves into an endless silence where memories speak louder than voices.

Amy lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her mother's smile. Every familiar corner of the house seemed to whisper a memory—the dining table where they had shared countless meals, the kitchen fragrant with spices only Mrs. Mason knew how to blend, the worn armchair where she would spend her evenings reading. The house remained exactly as it had always been. Only its heartbeat was gone.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, she slipped out of bed and walked towards her mother's room. Her footsteps were slow and hesitant, as though she were entering a place too sacred to disturb. Nothing inside had changed. Mrs. Mason's favourite scarf still rested across the back of the chair, a half-finished novel lay on the bedside table with its bookmark tucked neatly between the pages, and her perfume bottle

stood exactly where she had left it, its faint fragrance stubbornly refusing to surrender to time.

Amy picked up the scarf with trembling hands and held it close to her face. For one impossible moment, she almost believed her mother had merely stepped out and would return at any second. The illusion dissolved as quickly as it had come. Her knees gave way, and she sank beside the bed, clutching the scarf against her chest as tears streamed freely down her face.

"Mumma..." she whispered, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry."

The words she had imprisoned within herself for days finally poured out. "If only I had known you were coming to the hospital... if only I had known you had found out about my illness... I would have stopped you. I would never have let you leave. I could have protected you." She buried her face in the bedsheet, sobbing uncontrollably. "But I couldn't... and now you're gone. Everyone tells me to be strong, but I don't even know what strength feels like anymore. Susie needs me, and I'm terrified I'll fail her too."

The room offered no reply. It simply held her grief in its silent embrace.

Exhausted by tears, Amy rested her head upon the mattress, still clutching the scarf in her hands. Somewhere between her prayers and her sorrow, sleep quietly claimed her.

When she opened her eyes again, everything around her had changed. The room was bathed in a warm, golden light unlike anything she had ever seen. Standing before her was Mrs. Mason, just as she remembered her—calm, radiant, and

smiling with the same tenderness that had comforted every childhood fear.

"Mumma..." Amy breathed, scarcely believing what she saw.

Mrs. Mason gently cupped her daughter's face and smiled. "My precious girl," she said softly, "you mustn't carry a burden that was never yours."

Fresh tears rolled down Amy's cheeks. "I'm sorry. I couldn't save you."

"You were never meant to," her mother replied. "What happened was never your fault."

"I don't know what to do anymore," Amy confessed.

A gentle smile crossed Mrs. Mason's face as she brushed a loose strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. "Yes, you do. You've always known. You're stronger than you believe, Amy. You always have been."

Amy lowered her eyes. "I'm frightened."

"I know."

"I'm tired."

"I know."

"I'm afraid of losing Susie too."

Mrs. Mason took both her hands into her own. "Then don't waste today fearing tomorrow. Take care of your sister. Take care of yourself. Love her the way you've always loved her, and whenever life becomes too heavy, remember whose daughter you are."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. They didn't need to. Some silences speak more eloquently than words ever can.

"I love you, Mumma," Amy whispered.

"I know," Mrs. Mason replied, kissing her gently on the forehead. "I've always known. My little wonder girl... keep walking. Life hasn't abandoned you. It still has a purpose for you."

The golden light slowly began to fade.

"Mumma... please don't go," Amy cried, reaching out desperately.

Her mother's smile never faltered.

"I haven't left, sweetheart. I've only gone where you cannot yet follow."

Amy awoke with a sudden gasp.

Morning sunlight streamed gently through the curtains, filling the room with a quiet warmth. She instinctively touched her forehead. It still felt strangely warm, almost as though her mother's kiss had lingered beyond the dream.

Slowly, she walked towards the window and pushed it open. A cool breeze carrying the fragrance of wet earth and blooming jasmine drifted into the room. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It reminded her of home. It reminded her of her mother.

For the first time since the funeral, tears did not come.

Instead, a faint smile touched her lips as she whispered into the morning air, "I'll try, Mumma."

No voice answered her.

Yet somehow, for the first time in many days, she no longer felt alone.

As the sunlight bathed the room, a quiet resolve settled in her heart. She knew she had to keep going, not just for Susie, but for herself and the legacy of love her mother had left behind. A new day had begun, and with it, a new sense of purpose.

“I cannot give up so soon. I will have to live for my sister, I will have to get her back into life for my parents. This is going to be my reverence for the uncertainty that I could stop from happening.”

Getting herself ready for the hospital, she thought to carry something for Susie, her favourite strawberry porridge. Having cooked that, she carried some of her books too so that she could catch up with her missed lessons at school.

As she opened the door to the room she could see her teacher reading to Susie from the Bible.

“Had you not gone home last evening”? she asked him.

(after completing the prayers) Hey Amy! Good morning....yeah I did not go home, as it was quite late after I finished my classes.

Well, how about you? Could get some rest?

(smiling) yes I did. Thanks a lot sir for being more than I could ever expect. I don't know how to express myself better but I am really grateful to you, in fact both of us are; Susie and I are grateful to you. But I would also like to add to this that kindly do not compromise with your schedule for us. You can trust

me... I will not commit anything stupid. I am well aware of my responsibility towards this girl and my parents.”

Oh dear! How relieved I am to hear all that you just spoke. But I want you to understand that I am not doing anything that would take any extra effort, I am doing what I feel good about, by no means this is out of any sympathy or consideration. I reiterate, I do things I feel good about, so don't you worry about anything.

She smiled over my words.

I have got some porridge... Susie likes it, this delicacy is one of her favourites. I shall check with the nurse before trying to feed her.

“Oh that's amazing! Susie would love it this time too.”

As she got some put for Susie, she gave me some too.

“I don't know your taste but forbid me if it does not suit your taste buds”.

I never had a sweet dish since I left home. I mean I never like eating at the bakery and being a greenhorn at cooking, I just loved what she put forward. The aroma of the rose water and the freshly ground strawberries filled the room.

So you are a great cook too hmm!

“Mom taught me to cook, she had her special herbs and spice mix to everything she cooked, which made her food much different from everyone else's in the town. Sometimes her friends would also come over home just to see her cooking, even the simplest of the meals she made were just so out of

the world. I never knew then that I would end up bringing her expertise like this. (Her eyes filled with tears)

(Enters the Nurse) (Amy quickly wiping off her tears)

We need to take Susie for some tests..

“Yes of course”, said Amy.

There were a few test run on her and then by the evening we were intimated by Sam that the chances of Susie’s return would fade away with the passing of time and that we will have to keep connecting with her every often, trying to talk to her and getting her attention....Amy had been hearing each of his words with utmost care. Later it was around 5 in the evening she was getting ready for home, as usual, I dropped her and got back to the hospital getting on with my work. things kept going normal in that same pace for the next 15 days. It was then almost 45 days; Susie being hospitalized, there were minor improvements in her health, owing to which they initiated physiotherapy too. Everyday she would be taken to the laboratory and be brought back after a couple of hours, meanwhile Amy kept doing all that she could possibly do as a guardian for her sister. Also, she kept working very hard to excel in academics too. Nearly two months remained for the Annual examinations and I could read the stress on Amy’s face. Her health was deteriorating too, quite often she caught cold and a fever ... and whenever I would try check on her health, she would simply say it’s the weather that causes this and that there was nothing to be bothered about.

“Hey Willi! Hope you are doing good and the girls too, well , see Vicki is now settled and there is something he wants to tell you” said mom o’er the video call.

Vicki and I had always shared a close bond, but whenever he wanted to reveal something big, he'd usually rope Mom in to help break the news. I couldn't help but wonder—what was it this time? He'd spoken to me just two days ago and hadn't mentioned anything unusual.

"Vick, come here and tell him yourself," Mom urged, smiling.

"Bro, don't let Mom overhype it," Vicki said, laughing nervously. "It's nothing huge—just that I'm planning to get hitched. I mean you know the girl, you have met her once, remember at the graduation ceremony, the one who came to meet you.."

"Sara right!?" I said.

"Yes Sara. We have been together since college days and now that everything is fine. I thought of spilling the beans at home. I tried telling you but as usual could not gather the strength. We plan to get the wedding scheduled by the early autumn this year. Nothing grande just a simple wedding ceremony, you tell us your convenience and accordingly we may choose a date."

"That's incredible news, Vicki! I'm beyond happy for you—truly over the moon. I wish I could have heard it from you in person. Sara is a wonderful girl, and I've always liked her. You two are going to make an amazing pair, no doubt about it. How did Dad take the news?"

"I told him during one of his lucid moments," Mom chimed in. "He gave a thumbs-up to show his approval. We even showed him Sara's pictures. He joked that his little boy is just like him—brave and bold when it comes to choosing a bride."

I couldn't help but laugh heartily. "Mumma, it's been ages since I've had such good news. Tell Vicki to pick a date, and I'll make sure I'm there in time."

"Alright then! Wedding bells are just around the corner, Vicki! Will is fine with whatever date you choose," Mom said, her excitement shining through her words.

She turned to me with a more serious tone, her motherly concern evident. "Listen, son, I know you're juggling a lot right now—work, the girls, and everything else. But as your mother, I have to say this: take care of yourself too. Don't burden yourself with more than you can manage. You need your strength for what lies ahead."

"Yes, Mom, I understand your concern," I replied, trying to reassure her. "But trust me, I'm doing fine. You, on the other hand, should focus on the wedding preparations now. Vicki's big day deserves your full attention." I smiled, deliberately steering the conversation away from me.

"Yes, of course, son! I've already started making a list of things to do," she said, her enthusiasm bubbling back.

The next morning, Amy came over. She looked frail, her weakness apparent, but she greeted me with her usual warm smile, as if willing herself to appear stronger than she felt. Her determination, even in such trying times, was something I deeply admired.

Morning, sir! Hope you had a good night's sleep. Here's breakfast. Let's have it, and then we'll take Susie to the therapist," Amy said, her voice calm but tinged with exhaustion. Despite her frailty, she had slipped into a rhythm, managing the days with an almost mechanical resolve.

Later that morning, during his rounds, Sam came in with some encouraging news. “Susie’s making progress. She can now be moved to a wheelchair with back support. I think it’s time we shift her home,” he said with a reassuring smile. Amy’s face lit up at the thought of finally taking her sister home after a month-long stay at the hospital. It was a bittersweet moment—a mix of relief and the weight of what lay ahead.

Amy wasted no time. She had already prepared a room on the ground floor for Susie, decorating it with flowers and fairy lights. The care and thought she had put into the space were evident—it was warm, cheerful, and inviting, a perfect sanctuary for Susie. When we arrived at their home, memories of my past visits rushed into my mind, vivid and intense, like flashes of lightning.

Susie was carefully settled into her new bed, her movements slow but deliberate. The physiotherapy was helping her; she could now listen attentively and respond to conversations, even if only with subtle gestures. Amy sat by her side, holding her hand, her voice soft yet filled with emotion. “Welcome home, Birdie! I missed you so much. This house missed you so much. Mumma and Papa missed you so much,” she whispered, her eyes glistening with tears.

For the first time in weeks, I felt a sense of hope. But life wasn’t about to slow down for me. That week was packed to the brim with responsibilities—multiple sessions at school and tutorials that demanded my full attention. After ensuring Susie was settled, I had to step back, leaving the house for nearly eight days. Still, I made it a point to call Amy daily, checking in and hearing updates about Susie. Amy, ever

patient and understanding, would listen to everything I said, responding with her quiet strength.

Sam had also arranged for a home nurse to help with Susie's care and household chores, which was a much-needed relief. While Amy took charge of the cooking, the nurse managed everything else, allowing Amy to focus on her sister and herself. Though her responsibilities were far from over, having this support made things a bit more manageable for her.

It was a turning point, a delicate balance of hope, determination, and the unyielding strength that Amy seemed to carry, even when the odds were against her.

Those were the days when there had been unrest between the state and the system of education. Unemployment of the educated was the reason for the protest. Owing to that protest the system decided to postpone the Annual exams for all the students, school-going, undergraduates and even postgraduates. There was a wave of turmoil amidst the students, eventually, Vicki's wedding dates were adjusted accordingly.

"How was your day? How's Susie doing?"

"Susie is doing well, she looks at me with all the anger in the world when I try feeds her veggies, she has never liked them anyway. Other than that, everything's fine sir."

Good, good. I'll drop by tomorrow evening to see Susie. It's been a while since I last saw her."

"Oh, okay, sure," Amy said, her voice calm yet welcoming.

As the call ended, a thought lingered in my mind—I wanted both Amy and Susie to come to Vicki's wedding. It felt

important, not just for them to be part of the celebration but also for my mom to meet them. Somehow, I knew it would mean something special to everyone involved.

The Evening

The Evening

Nine days had passed since I last visited the Mason sisters. With examinations postponed and life slowly returning to its rhythm, my days had once again become consumed by lesson plans, assessments, and after-school tutorials. That evening, however, I rearranged my classes so I could leave early. By five o'clock, I was home. After a quick shower, I changed into fresh clothes, mounted my bicycle, and set off towards their house, welcoming the cool evening breeze that accompanied me.

On the way, I stopped at a florist and picked out a bouquet of fresh lilies for Susie. As I was leaving, my eyes wandered to a display of chocolates near the counter.

I smiled to myself.

Amy's sweet tooth had become impossible to forget.

When I rang the bell, the door swung open almost immediately.

"Good evening, sir!" Amy greeted with the same gentle smile I had come to cherish.

Though her face still carried traces of exhaustion, something had changed. The sadness was still there, but it no longer overshadowed everything else. She looked stronger

somehow—not because her grief had diminished, but because she had learnt to carry it with quiet grace.

"Good evening, Amy," I replied. "How are both my patients doing?"

She laughed softly.

"One is recovering beautifully," she said, "and the other keeps pretending she's a doctor."

"I'll let you decide which one is which."

She stepped aside, inviting me in.

The house felt different.

Not happier—perhaps it was too soon for that—but alive again. The curtains were drawn open, fresh flowers adorned the dining table, and the familiar fragrance of homemade food lingered gently in the air. Life, I realised, possesses an extraordinary ability to return, even to places that have known unimaginable sorrow.

Susie was resting comfortably by the window when I entered.

"Hello, young lady," I said cheerfully, handing her the bouquet. "I hear you've been giving everyone a difficult time."

Susie shook her head dramatically before pointing at Amy with an expression that needed no translation.

"So it's your sister then?" I laughed. "I knew it. If she troubles you too much, you let me know. I'll have a serious word with her."

Amy rolled her eyes.

"Sir, you're encouraging her."

"I prefer to call it maintaining justice."

The room echoed with quiet laughter.

Turning towards Amy, I held out the box of chocolates.

"And these," I said, "are for the hardest-working student I've ever had."

She looked genuinely surprised.

"You remembered."

"I've learnt never to underestimate your love for chocolates."

She accepted the gift with a shy smile.

"Thank you, sir."

"I've also been hearing impressive things about you. Mrs.

Thomas tells me you've caught up with nearly all your pending work."

Amy glanced towards Andrea, who happened to be arranging medicines on the side table.

"I couldn't have done it without Andrea. She takes care of almost everything here, which gives me enough time to study."

Andrea looked up and smiled.

"We make a good team."

"You certainly do," I replied.

For a while we spoke about school, Susie's recovery, and the approaching examinations. It felt strangely comforting to discuss ordinary things again. There was a time when every conversation revolved around hospitals and prescriptions. Now, little by little, life was reclaiming its rightful place.

"Oh!" I said suddenly, almost forgetting the real reason for my visit. "I have some important news."

Both sisters looked at me curiously.

"My younger brother, Victor, is getting married next week."

Amy's face lit up immediately.

"That's wonderful, sir! Congratulations."

"Thank you."

I hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"I was wondering... would the two of you come with me?"

She blinked.

"To the wedding?"

I nodded.

"My parents have heard so much about both of you that they're beginning to think I've invented you."

Amy smiled but quickly lowered her eyes.

"I... I don't think we should."

"Why not?"

She looked towards Susie.

"Travelling would be difficult for her. Besides..." she paused, "...you've already done far more for us than anyone could ever expect. We don't want to become a burden to your family."

I couldn't help smiling.

"I knew that would be your answer."

She looked at me, puzzled.

"So I spoke to Sam yesterday."

"You did?"

"I did. He has no objections, provided Susie continues her physiotherapy. Victor has already arranged for a physiotherapist near our home, so that's taken care of."

Amy looked unconvinced.

"But Andrea..."

Before she could finish, Andrea walked into the room carrying a tray of coffee.

"If you're wondering about me," she interrupted with a grin,

"I'm coming too."

"You are?"

"Of course."

She placed the cups on the table before adding mischievously,
"Who says no to a wedding, good food, and free wine?"
The room burst into laughter.
Even Susie laughed.
For a brief, precious moment, grief quietly excused itself from the room.
Amy looked around at all of us before finally shaking her head in surrender.
"I suppose you've planned everything already."
"Guilty," I admitted.
She laughed.
"Alright, sir."
I couldn't hide my excitement.
"So that's a yes?"
"Yes."
"I'll pick all of you up on Monday morning."
She extended her hand towards me.
"Thank you."
I looked at her hand for a brief second before shaking it gently.
"No, Amy."
"For what?"
"For saying yes."
As twilight slowly settled over the town, I took my leave.
Amy and Susie stood at the doorway waving until I disappeared beyond the bend in the road.
The journey home felt unusually light.
The cool breeze, the fading sunlight, and the quiet hum of my bicycle somehow seemed to echo the same thought within me.

For the first time in many weeks...
I wasn't cycling away from sorrow.
I was cycling towards hope.

Resilience

“How could you possibly agree to the proposal, Amy? You know you’re too weak to travel more than 20 miles at a stretch. A change in climate will undoubtedly wreak havoc on your health. You could’ve easily declined his request instead of agreeing to it! And don’t think I haven’t noticed your negligence toward your medications and treatment sessions. A doctor can only do so much if the patient isn’t consistent or willing to recover,” Sam said, his voice firm, laced with both frustration and concern.

Amy couldn’t bring herself to respond. She knew deep down that everything Sam had said was true.

“You’re absolutely right, Sam,” Amy said softly, her voice trembling yet resolute. “But I have to go with him this time. This might be my only chance. I’m trying to embrace whatever life has left to offer me, through the doors that are still open. I know my time is limited, and so are my hopes for recovery. I understand your fears for my health, but I promise I’ll take care of myself.”

Sam’s face flushed with anger as he leaned forward, his voice rising. “Amy, don’t you understand how vulnerable your body is right now? This isn’t a risk you can afford to take! Your

COPD means your oxygen levels are already lower than normal. And because the lungs and heart are so interconnected, your heart is under constant strain. Do you even realize what could happen if something goes wrong?"

Amy smiled faintly, her calm demeanour in stark contrast to Sam's fury. "Doc, you're coming with us, aren't you? If you're there, you can keep an eye on me. I think the invitation is still open."

Sam sighed heavily, shaking his head. "I'll have to come, or your recklessness might just cost you your life."

With that, Sam turned and left for his rounds, leaving Amy at the table. She sat there in silence, tears streaming down her cheeks, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. After collecting Susie's medical reports, she headed home.

When Amy arrived, Andrea greeted her with a warm smile. "She's been smiling all day since you left," Andrea said, pointing toward Susie, who was sitting on the bed, gazing out the window.

"I didn't even have trouble changing her today," Andrea continued. "She's been more than just a good girl."

Amy, who had been weighed down by Sam's words, suddenly felt a renewed sense of determination as she saw Susie's cheerful expression—a sight she hadn't seen in such a long time.

"Hey, sweetie pie! What are you looking at so keenly?" Amy asked, walking over to her sister.

Susie slowly turned her neck, her improved mobility a result of the physiotherapy sessions. She looked directly at Amy, her eyes gleaming with happiness.

Amy gently ran her hand through Susie's hair, her voice soft and full of affection. "We're going to the wedding, Birdie. And I promise, you'll have the best time ever."

Just then, Andrea entered the room, holding a bowl of broccoli-spinach soup. "Time for supper!" she said cheerfully.

Amy left the room after ensuring Susie was comfortable. She showered, then sat at her desk, trying to write in her journal. Her thoughts were scattered, but one thing was clear: Susie's happiness had reaffirmed her decision to go to the wedding, no matter the challenges.

That night, after wrapping up my work, I decided to call Amy to check on her and Susie. It was Andrea who picked up.

"Hello, Mr. Teacher," Andrea said playfully. "The girls are asleep now. I can wake Amy if you want."

"No, that's alright, Andrea. Let them rest. I'll call in the morning," I replied.

The following morning, after finishing my classes, I went shopping for gifts. It had been ages since I visited my parents, and with the wedding around the corner, I wanted to surprise them. I bought my mom a delicate gold bracelet and my dad a toy knife that looked strikingly real. For Sam, I picked out a set of trousers and a shirt.

After dropping off the gifts at my place, I dove back into work, my schedule keeping me busy until late evening.

Three days passed in a blur. When I finally found time to visit the Masons, I was astonished to see that everything was ready. The girls had packed their bags and made all the necessary arrangements.

“This looks fantastic, Amy! Everything’s done already. What can I help you with now?” I asked, genuinely impressed.

Amy said nothing but smiled warmly, a gratitude that words couldn’t express shining in her eyes.

“Thank you, sir, for having us along,” she said finally. “This means so much to us, especially to Susie. She’s been so happy and lively these days—it’s all thanks to you.”

Her words stayed with me as I left their home, my heart swelling with admiration for Amy’s resilience and courage. This was a journey of hope, love, and strength—and I was honored to be a part of it.

The Transit

Homecoming

Dawn had barely broken when I pulled up outside the Mason residence with the traveller I had hired the previous evening. Considering Susie's condition, I wasn't willing to take even the slightest risk. She needed enough room to lie comfortably throughout the journey, and I wanted every medicine, blanket, and piece of equipment within easy reach should we need it.

While the driver secured the luggage, I stepped inside the house one last time. I checked every window, every latch, and every door. The house would remain locked for over a week, and somehow I couldn't bring myself to leave without making absolutely certain everything was in order.

"If you're ready, Amy," I called, "let's get going. We still have to pick Sam up on the way."

She stood quietly at the entrance, the house key resting motionless in her hand. For a long moment, she simply looked around the familiar walls. Some houses are built with bricks and timber; others are built with memories. I knew that locking that door wasn't merely about securing a house—it was

about temporarily leaving behind the last place that still echoed with her parents' laughter.

Taking a deep breath, she finally turned the key, slipped it into her handbag, and walked towards the vehicle. She settled beside Susie, gently adjusting her blanket before fastening her own seat belt.

A few minutes later, we stopped outside Sam's apartment. He was already waiting with a backpack slung over one shoulder, though the expression on his face suggested he still believed the journey was a terrible idea.

"Good morning, everyone," he greeted as he climbed aboard.

"Morning, Doctor," I smiled. "Ready for the adventure?"

"I'll decide that once everyone reaches alive," he replied dryly, earning a laugh from all of us.

With that, we finally began our journey.

The first few hours were surprisingly pleasant. The roads stretched endlessly through rolling meadows dressed in shades of emerald and gold. Susie watched everything with childlike fascination, pointing excitedly towards grazing horses, tiny cottages, and streams that sparkled beneath the morning sun. Amy, too, seemed lighter than she had in weeks. She spent most of the journey gazing silently through the window, occasionally smiling at something only she had noticed.

Watching the sisters smile again filled me with a quiet contentment. After everything they had endured, those small moments of happiness felt like victories.

As we gradually entered the mountain roads, however, the mood inside the vehicle began to change.

The higher we climbed, the thinner and colder the air became. Our cheerful conversations slowly faded, replaced by Amy's persistent coughing. At first it came in short spells, but before long each bout grew harsher than the last, leaving her visibly breathless.

"Pull over," Sam said immediately.

I brought the vehicle to a halt without a second thought.

Before the engine had even fallen silent, Sam was already beside Amy, helping her steady her breathing. He handed her the inhaler, patiently guiding each breath while gently rubbing her back.

"Easy... slowly... don't force it."

Amy nodded weakly, fighting to regain control of her breathing.

After several anxious minutes, she seemed well enough for us to continue.

But only for a while.

Barely half an hour later, another coughing fit struck.

Then another.

Our journey soon became a series of short drives interrupted by frequent halts along the winding mountain roads. Every stop lasted a little longer than the one before. My eyes rarely left the rear-view mirror, searching for signs that Amy was recovering.

She wasn't.

At one point, I noticed her quietly folding the handkerchief she had been pressing against her lips. As she lowered it into her lap, I caught sight of tiny crimson stains.

Blood.

My fingers instinctively tightened around the steering wheel.

"This..." Sam said softly while continuing to support her, "...is exactly what I was worried about."

He looked at Amy with undisguised concern.

"You shouldn't have made this journey."

Despite her exhaustion, she managed a faint smile.

"I'll be alright."

"No, Amy," he replied gently. "You're trying to convince yourself more than you're convincing me."

Unable to ignore their hushed conversation any longer, I glanced back.

"Sam... is everything alright? Should we turn back?"

Before he could answer, Amy spoke first.

"It's only the change in weather, sir," she said between shallow breaths. "Please don't worry. I'll be fine once we reach."

I wanted to believe her more than I wanted to believe my own eyes.

For the remainder of the journey, I drove slower than ever before, stopping every thirty minutes whether anyone requested it or not. The mountains rose majestically around

us, their peaks wrapped in drifting clouds, but I found myself unable to admire their beauty. My thoughts remained fixed on the girl seated behind me, whose courage far exceeded the strength of her fragile body.

By the time evening settled across the valley, the familiar silhouette of home finally emerged upon the mountain ridge.

"There it is," I said, unable to hide the excitement in my voice. "Welcome home."

No matter how many years I spent away from it, the first glimpse of that house always quietened something within me. It stood proudly atop the crest exactly where my father had dreamt of building it decades ago. Every stone, every timber beam, every wide veranda bore his unmistakable touch. To most people it was simply a beautiful mountain home. To me, it had always been a sanctuary—a place where every joy had been celebrated and every sorrow gently embraced.

This evening, however, it looked transformed.

White fairy lights cascaded gracefully from the rooftop like falling stars. Orchids and tulips adorned the entrance, while rows of lanterns illuminated the pathway leading to the front door. Decorated for Victor's wedding, my childhood home looked less like a house and more like a bride patiently waiting for her family to return.

"Destination arrived, folks," I announced softly.

As I switched off the engine, I caught Amy's reflection in the rear-view mirror. She looked utterly exhausted, her face pale from the journey. Beside her, however, Susie's eyes wandered

excitedly from one decoration to another, drinking in every little detail with childlike wonder.

Sam stepped out first and stretched his aching back.

"Mate," he called with a grin, "unless this luggage has suddenly learnt to walk, I could use a little help."

I laughed despite the concern that still lingered within me.

"We'd better get everyone inside first."

I stepped out of the vehicle and looked once more at the warmly lit house standing before us.

After weeks of hospitals, grief, and uncertainty...

we were finally home.

We had brought far more luggage than I had anticipated. There were suitcases, Susie's bedding, medicines, physiotherapy equipment, and enough supplies to last the week. While the servants unloaded everything, Sam carefully lifted Susie from the vehicle. Amy stayed close beside her despite looking utterly exhausted herself. Even in her own frailty, her first instinct was always to care for someone else. It was one of the countless things I admired about her.

Once everything had been carried inside, I led them towards the front entrance.

There stood my mother.

She had been waiting for us.

The moment she saw us, her face lit up with a smile so warm that the weariness of the entire journey seemed to melt away. Somehow, seeing Amy standing beside me at the doorstep

filled me with a strange sense of completeness. For the first time in a long while, home felt fuller than I had ever remembered it.

"My goodness!" Mom exclaimed as she hurried towards us. "You've finally arrived."

Without the slightest hesitation, she embraced Amy.

Amy looked completely taken aback.

"It's... it's nice to meet you, ma'am."

"Oh, none of that," Mom laughed. "If William has brought you here, then this is your home too."

Her eyes shifted towards Susie.

"And you must be our little princess."

She bent down and gently kissed Susie's forehead before instructing the staff to prepare the ground-floor guest room.

"Let's make sure she's comfortable first."

Within minutes, the servants had arranged everything exactly as Sam instructed. Andy assisted him in setting up Susie's medications, oxygen supplies, and physiotherapy equipment while Amy quietly unpacked her sister's belongings.

Only after Sam finally nodded with satisfaction did Mom allow herself to relax.

She turned towards the girls once again.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am that you came."

Her voice grew softer.

"This house has waited many years for daughters."

Amy lowered her eyes.

"We didn't want to trouble anyone."

"Trouble?" Mom smiled lovingly.

"My dear, love never arrives as trouble."

She gently held Amy's hands within her own.

"I know you've endured more than most people experience in an entire lifetime. But remember something."

"Some sorrows cannot be removed."

"They can only be carried."

"And I believe God gives the heaviest burdens only to the strongest shoulders."

Amy's eyes glistened.

"I'll try."

"I know you will."

Mom kissed her forehead affectionately.

"And until you leave, allow me to spoil both my daughters."

Unable to watch Amy become emotional any longer, I intervened.

"Mom, perhaps you could begin by spoiling us with dinner?"

She laughed.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Within minutes, the dining room filled with warmth, conversation and the comforting aroma of home-cooked food.

Throughout dinner, I noticed something that quietly filled my heart with joy.

Amy had already begun helping Mom in the kitchen.

She insisted on carrying plates despite repeated protests, helped arrange the table, and afterwards stood beside Mom washing the dishes as though she had belonged there for years.

I found myself watching them from the doorway.

There they were...

the mother I adored...

and the woman I loved...

laughing together over something neither of them realised I was listening to.

For a brief, beautiful moment...

the house felt complete.

Only then did Sam quietly walk over to me.

"So..."

he asked softly,

"where's your father?"

I hadn't spoken about Dad all evening.

Perhaps I wasn't ready.

I simply nodded.

"Come."

We climbed the stairs together.

As I stood outside my parents' room, countless memories came rushing back. Every birthday. Every Christmas. Every lesson he had taught me. Every story he had read to us before bedtime.

I slowly pushed the door open.

His bed was empty.

The bathroom was silent.

Then I saw him.

Standing alone on the balcony.

His entire attention was fixed upon a potted lily swaying gently in the evening breeze.

"Dad..."

I called softly.

As expected...

there was no response.

He remained exactly where he was, absent-mindedly turning his favourite wooden knife over in his hands.

I walked towards him without another word.

From my pocket, I removed the toy knife I had bought for him before the journey and quietly placed it on the nearby table.

He didn't even look at it.

Sam silently positioned himself a few steps away, wisely allowing me to take the lead.

For a while I simply watched Dad.

Age had stolen much of the strength from his body.
Illness had stolen even more from his mind.
But somewhere beneath all of that...
he was still my father.
An idea suddenly crossed my mind.
I picked up the new knife and began pretending I couldn't
remove it from its sheath.
I frowned.
Pulled.
Twisted.
Grunted in exaggerated frustration.
Nothing.
Again.
Still nothing.
Every few seconds Dad glanced sideways before returning his
attention to the flowerpot.
I refused to give up.
After all...
he had been the man who taught me patience.
If anyone deserved mine...
it was him.
Several minutes passed.

Finally, with an exasperated sigh, I placed the knife back on the table as though admitting defeat.

Silence followed.

Then...

to my astonishment...

Dad slowly reached for it.

He examined it carefully, turning it over in his weathered hands.

A faint spark of curiosity flickered across his face.

He looked at me.

Only for a second.

Then, almost mischievously, he slipped the knife into his pocket.

I laughed aloud.

"You won, Dad."

Before I realised what I was doing, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him.

His body felt frail.

Cold.

Unresponsive.

For a few heartbreaking seconds, nothing happened.

We simply allowed the silence to preserve what words never could.

Mom had spent years keeping every corner of their room exactly as Dad remembered it. The curtains hung where he had always wanted them. The furniture remained untouched. Even the smallest decorations sat precisely where they had been before illness entered our lives. She believed that if memory ever found its way back, even for a fleeting moment, it deserved to return to a familiar world.

Watching Dad slowly retreat into himself once again, I understood something I never fully had before.

Love is not always measured by what we receive.

Sometimes...

it is measured by what we choose to keep giving, long after the other person has forgotten how to give anything back.

My admiration for my mother only deepened.

If I had ever learnt compassion...

I had learnt it by watching her love my father.

"Come on," Sam finally said quietly, resting a hand on my shoulder.

"They'll be wondering where we've disappeared to."

I took one last look at Dad before quietly following him downstairs.

Vicky was already seated in the living room, surrounded by rolls of decorative lights, guest lists, and a notebook overflowing with wedding plans. He was making final adjustments to the lighting arrangements while Sam and I settled beside him with the remaining invitation cards that still had to be addressed and delivered.

There were far too many left.

Sam began reading out the names one after another while I penned them carefully onto the envelopes. We were expected to hand-deliver each invitation later that afternoon, which meant we still had several hours of work ahead of us.

As I wrote, I found myself wondering where Amy had disappeared. I hadn't seen her for nearly two hours. Before the thought could linger any longer, she appeared at the doorway carrying a tray of freshly prepared melon squash.

"Would anyone care for some?" she asked with a cheerful smile.

There was a brightness in her that I hadn't seen in many days. The fatigue still lingered upon her face, but something had changed. My mother's warmth had begun weaving its quiet magic around her, just as it had around countless people before. It was impossible to remain untouched by Mom's affection.

"Now that's exactly what we needed," Vicky exclaimed, reaching eagerly for a glass.

After everyone had settled down, I looked towards Amy.

"Why don't you join us? We could certainly use another pair of hands. I'll guide you if you get stuck."

"I'd love to," she replied, pulling up a chair opposite me.

Truth be told, I simply wanted her around a little longer.

I handed her a stack of invitation cards while Sam resumed reading the names aloud. Amy wrote with remarkable

neatness, pausing only occasionally to confirm a spelling or an address.

After a few minutes she looked up.

"The Topkins?" she asked with an amused smile. "That's quite an unusual surname."

"It certainly kept our school entertained," Sam laughed.

Vicky joined in immediately.

"Becca Topkins was our classmate. Her younger brother was my closest friend, and because of their surname, everyone made fun of them."

"Everyone except William," Sam interrupted, pointing towards me. "He was the only one who refused to join us. In fact, he'd usually end up scolding us for behaving like bullies."

I smiled.

"I still don't understand why any of you thought it was funny."

Vicky laughed.

"Some things never change."

The room erupted in laughter before we quietly returned to our work.

By the time the last invitation had been addressed, it was almost lunchtime. We decided to deliver the cards after we had eaten.

Amy excused herself, and I instinctively found myself walking towards Susie's room. I hadn't checked on her since morning.

As I entered, I found the room empty.

"She's out in the garden with Andy," Amy said from behind me.

She was arranging Susie's medicines neatly upon the bedside table.

"Looks like she's enjoying herself."

Amy smiled.

"More than enjoying herself, sir. I hardly recognise her these days. She doesn't want to sleep, doesn't want to stay indoors, and keeps insisting on seeing everyone. I've never seen her this excited."

She paused before continuing softly.

"And I think it's because of you."

I looked at her in surprise.

"Because of me?"

"Yes."

Her eyes wandered briefly towards the window.

"You've given us something we had almost forgotten."

"What is that?"

"A home."

The words lingered between us.

She looked around the room before speaking again.

"Your mother... she's extraordinary. Never once has she made us feel like guests. From the moment we arrived, she's treated us as though we've always belonged here."

A faint sadness crept into her smile.

"You're fortunate, sir... to still have both your parents."

I knew she wasn't talking about me anymore.

She was thinking about her own.

Trying gently to steer her away from those memories, I smiled.

"If I'm fortunate to have my parents, then my parents are equally fortunate to have gained two daughters this week."

That finally brought back her smile.

"I think Mom is happier than all of us put together."

She laughed softly.

"I believe you're right."

I glanced at my watch.

"We'll be leaving to deliver the invitations after lunch. Why don't you come with us? It'll give you a chance to see a bit of the town... and perhaps meet a few old friends of ours."

Her smile faded.

"What about Susie?"

"There'll be half a dozen people looking after her," I assured her. "Andy will be here, Mom will be here, and Sam isn't going anywhere far. We'll only be away for a few hours."

She thought about it for a moment before nodding.

"Alright, sir. I'd like that."

Lunch was already being served when we walked into the dining room. The house buzzed with cheerful conversations

as cousins moved in and out, discussing decorations, music, and last-minute arrangements. Susie had just returned from her stroll and was happily finishing her meal while Andy patiently fed her.

As always, Amy quietly slipped into the kitchen to help my mother.

She carried dishes, arranged the table, refilled serving bowls, and insisted on clearing the plates despite Mom's repeated objections.

I stood for a moment near the dining-room doorway, simply watching them.

My mother laughed at something Amy had said before affectionately brushing a loose strand of hair away from her face.

Amy smiled back.

It was such an ordinary moment.

Yet something about it stirred me deeply.

For one reckless moment, I caught myself imagining a future I had no right to imagine.

A future where scenes like this were no longer borrowed moments...

but home itself.

As we gathered around the dining table, Mom looked at Amy and Susie with the excitement of an artist about to create her next masterpiece.

"I've already decided," she announced with a smile. "I'm designing the wedding outfits for both of you."

"You girls are truly fortunate," Vicky laughed. "Mom designed all our outfits for Aunt Betty's wedding. She practically lived with the tailors until every stitch was perfect. On the wedding day, people spoke more about our clothes than the ceremony itself."

Mom dismissed the compliment with a wave of her hand.

"Enough now. Eat before everything gets cold."

Amy listened with quiet fascination, smiling as she imagined what lay ahead.

Lunch ended amid cheerful conversation. Once Amy had finished helping Mom in the kitchen, I called out to her.

"Amy, we'd better leave. The sooner we deliver these invitations, the sooner we'll be back."

"I'll be ready in two minutes, sir," she replied before heading upstairs.

A few minutes later, we were on the road again. Sam drove while I occupied the passenger seat. Amy sat behind us, gazing through the window, her eyes wandering across the mountains and valleys bathed in the golden afternoon sun.

"What are you looking at?" Sam asked.

"This place is breathtaking," she replied softly. "I want to remember every little bit of it."

Her words stirred something within me. I wanted to show her every corner of my hometown.

"If we're done early," I suggested, "why don't we take Amy to Parker's Hill?"

"No."

Sam's answer came so abruptly that both Amy and I looked at him.

"It's not a good idea."

"Why?" I asked. "We've been there countless times."

"The altitude is too high."

I laughed lightly.

"Since when has that ever bothered you?"

"It isn't safe, Will."

His unusually stern tone caught me completely off guard. Sam had always loved Parker's Hill. Why he opposed it so strongly now was beyond me.

"But the weather is perfect," I insisted. "None of us is sick enough to worry about a little altitude."

The words escaped before I could think.

Sam fell silent.

So did the rest of us.

The journey continued in uncomfortable quiet.

Our first stop was Uncle John's house. After handing over the invitation and exchanging a few pleasantries, we headed towards the Topkins' residence.

The familiar pink-and-white bungalow stood exactly as I remembered it. Even after twelve years, it remained one of the most distinctive houses in town.

Back in school, Becca Topkins had been one of our closest friends. We had studied together, competed together, and spent countless evenings preparing for examinations.

One memory, however, remained etched more deeply than the rest.

During our preparatory examinations, a group of us had gathered at her house for an overnight study session. By midnight, everyone except Becca and me had fallen asleep. We continued revising over cups of coffee until dawn.

When I finally awoke, I found her asleep with her head resting gently on my arm.

Later that morning, she asked if we could speak privately.

With remarkable honesty, she confessed that she had fallen in love with me.

Becca was intelligent, graceful, and kind. Any young man would have been fortunate to have her by his side.

Yet my heart remained silent.

I cared for her deeply...

just not in the way she deserved.

Refusing her was one of the most difficult conversations of my youth.

Fortunately, time healed what rejection had wounded, and we remained good friends.

"Sir..."

Amy's gentle voice drew me back.

"We're here."

I looked through the windshield.

Becca's house stood before us once again.

Only this time...

twelve years older.

And so were we.

I had done my best to let the past remain where it belonged.

It had been nearly twelve years since I had last stepped into the Topkins' residence.

Sam rang the doorbell, and within moments Uncle Joe opened the door.

"William! Sam!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up. "Look at you boys! It's been far too long."

He embraced us warmly before placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I heard you're teaching now."

I smiled.

"Yes, Uncle."

"I always knew you'd choose a profession that served people. There's nothing nobler than shaping young minds."

His words humbled me more than they pleased me.

As we stepped inside, Amy quietly admired the framed photographs lining the walls. I noticed her pause before one particular picture.

"Sir..." she said softly. "Is that you?"

I followed her gaze.

It was an old school photograph.

Standing beside me was Becca.

"Yes," I smiled sheepishly. "It was taken just before I left town for university."

Amy studied the photograph for a moment longer before footsteps echoed through the hallway.

"There you are!"

Becca walked in with the same effortless confidence I remembered from years ago. She had changed with time, becoming more graceful and self-assured, yet her smile remained exactly the same.

"Sam!" she laughed, hugging him before turning towards me.

"And William... after all these years."

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"You haven't changed much."

"I could say the same about you," I replied with a smile.

"Though I hear you've become quite the entrepreneur."

She laughed.

"Someone had to prove our teachers wrong."

Before I could reply, her attention shifted towards Amy.

"And who is this lovely young lady?"

"This is Amy Elizabeth Mason," Sam answered. "She studies at William's school."

Becca smiled warmly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"You too, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" Becca laughed. "Please don't make me feel older than I already am. Everyone calls me Beck."

Amy smiled shyly.

"Then... nice to meet you, Beck."

"Much better."

She motioned for us to sit.

"I'll be back in just a minute."

As she disappeared into the kitchen, Amy looked towards me.

"You've known her for a long time, haven't you?"

"Since school," I replied. "She was one of the quietest students in class."

"And one of the kindest," Sam added.

A few moments later, Becca returned carrying a tray.

"So..." she said, settling into her chair. "To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?"

Amy handed her the invitation.

Becca looked at the envelope curiously before opening it.

Her face lit up almost instantly.

"Oh my goodness!"

"They're finally getting married!"

She laughed delightedly.

"I always knew Victor and Rachel would end up together."

She looked towards us with a grin.

"This deserves a celebration."

Before anyone could object, she disappeared once more and returned carrying a bottle of wine and a set of glasses.

Amy hesitated.

"I don't usually..."

"Oh, don't worry," Becca interrupted with a playful smile.

"One toast won't hurt."

Amy looked towards me.

I simply smiled reassuringly.

A moment later, all our glasses were raised.

"To new beginnings," Becca said.

"And to beautiful unions."

Our glasses met gently.

The afternoon had only just begun.

After spending nearly an hour reminiscing and catching up, we finally rose to leave.

"I suppose we'd better get going," Sam said, glancing at his watch. "The wedding will give us enough time to sit together properly."

"I'm holding you to that," Becca smiled.

She walked us to the gate.

"It was wonderful seeing you again, Will."

I smiled.

"The pleasure was mine, Beck. I'll see you at the wedding."

Turning towards Amy, she added warmly,

"And you... thank you for coming. Do visit again."

"I'd love to," Amy replied. "Thank you for making me feel so welcome."

"Oh please," Becca laughed. "At least you had the decency to visit me. These two usually need a formal invitation."

She pointed accusingly at Sam and me, drawing laughter from everyone.

A few moments later we were back on the road.

This time I deliberately chose the back seat beside Amy, leaving Sam to drive.

"So..." I smiled.

"Now tell me honestly."

"If you could go anywhere around here before we leave..."

"Where would you choose?"

Amy looked outside.

"I don't know."

"I've heard Parker's Hill is beautiful."

"It is," I replied almost instantly.

"Then that's settled."

Before I could say another word, Sam interrupted.

"No."

His answer came so sharply that Amy looked up in surprise.

"We're not going there."

I frowned.

"And why exactly not?"

"It's too high."

I laughed.

"We've climbed that hill a hundred times."

"This isn't about us."

His grip tightened around the steering wheel.

"It's not safe."

I stared at him, genuinely confused.

"Sam... what on earth has gotten into you?"

Without another word, he pulled the vehicle onto the roadside and switched off the engine.

"William."

His voice was calm now.

"Come outside."

I followed him a few steps away from the car while Amy watched us anxiously through the window.

Sam folded his arms.

"Listen carefully."

"I've never stopped you from doing anything."

"But I'm asking you now."

"Not Parker's Hill."

I shook my head.

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't."

"Then help me understand."

He lowered his voice.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't my secret to tell."

Those words only frustrated me further.

"For heaven's sake, Sam..."

"This is ridiculous."

"You've been behaving strangely ever since I mentioned that place."

He looked away.

"I have my reasons."

"And I have mine."

"Amy wants to see it."

For a long moment neither of us spoke.

Finally Sam sighed.

"I won't stop you."

"But if anything happens..."

He looked directly into my eyes.

"...you'll understand why I was against it."

Without another word he walked back to the vehicle.

The drive resumed in complete silence.

Nearly forty minutes later we reached Parker's Hill.

The mountain breeze carried the fragrance of pine and wildflowers. Tiny streams danced over smooth rocks while the valleys below stretched endlessly beneath drifting clouds.

Amy stepped out slowly.

She looked around in complete wonder.

"It's..."

She struggled for words.

"...beautiful."

She wandered quietly among the wildflowers, gently brushing her fingertips across them as though trying to preserve the memory of each one.

Watching her smile...

watching her forget, if only briefly, the burdens she carried...

was worth every mile of the journey.

How desperately I wished I could give her a lifetime filled with moments like these.

I followed her silently.

She looked happier than I had ever seen her.

The shrill blast of a car horn interrupted my thoughts.

"If we don't leave now," Sam called from the driver's seat, "we'll be driving home in the dark."

Amy laughed.

"I'm coming."

She turned towards me.

"Thank you, sir."

"I don't think I've ever seen anything this beautiful."

I smiled.

"You've only seen the beginning."

We had barely resumed our journey when I noticed Amy shifting uneasily in her seat.

At first it was only a cough.

Then another.

Within moments she was struggling to breathe.

"Amy?"

She reached desperately for her bag.

"My..."

"...inhaler..."

Before I could react, Sam had already stopped the vehicle.

He hurried around to her side.

"In the front pocket," he instructed.

I grabbed the inhaler and handed it to him.

Supporting her gently, he administered several puffs before rubbing her back in slow circles.

"Easy..."

"Slow breaths."

"That's it."

The next few minutes felt endless.

Gradually...

her breathing steadied.

The colour slowly returned to her face.

"You alright?" I asked quietly.

She forced a faint smile.

"I'm sorry..."

"I spoiled the trip."

Before I could answer, Sam spoke.

"No."

His voice carried neither anger nor triumph.

Only sadness.

"This..."

he said softly,

"...is exactly what I was afraid of."

He looked at me.

"Now do you understand why I didn't want her coming here?"

I remained silent.

For the first time...

I realised this had never been about the hill.

It had always been about Amy.

"I'm fine, Doc," Amy said, forcing a smile. "Please stop worrying so much."

Sam looked at her for a long moment before shaking his head.

"Fine. Do as you wish. But I'm not driving any farther."

He stepped out of the vehicle.

I looked at Amy.

"Do you still want to go?"

She nodded without hesitation.

"We've come this far, sir. I'd really like to see it."

"You'll tell me if you feel unwell?"

"I promise."

Without another word, I slipped into the driver's seat while Sam reluctantly occupied the passenger seat. To ease the tension that had settled between us, I switched on the music.

Soft melodies drifted through the car as we continued the climb.

By the time we reached Parker's Hill, the sun had begun its slow descent. The entire valley shimmered beneath streaks of amber and crimson, as though the sky itself had caught fire.

Amy stepped out of the car and stood motionless.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

Then, almost to herself, she recited,

"Sunsets are so marvelous that the sun itself watches them every day in the infinite reflections of the oceans."

"Mehmet Murat Ildan," she added with a smile.

She wandered across the meadow, running her fingers over wildflowers and letting the mountain breeze play with her hair. Watching her smile so freely filled me with a happiness I had almost forgotten existed.

Sam, however, remained inside the vehicle.

I walked over to him.

"Look at her, Sam," I said quietly. "When was the last time you saw her this happy?"

He didn't answer.

"I know she upset you earlier," I continued, "but she's only trying to live whatever life she has left."

He sighed.

"I'm not angry with her, Will."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm just... tired."

After a pause, he nodded towards the hillside.

"Take her to the cave. She'll love it."

I smiled.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Amy ! I called out to her, as she was splashing water from the stream.

Come on here, I will show you something better.

She came to me, and we walked and made our way towards the cave. It was located down the slope. She followed me and at places I had to hold her by her hips and bring her down the level which I could easily jump and reach.

I had never held her so close. She smelled mist. And her body so supple against mine.

I held my emotions under control. This way... I directed. Stumbling and wobbling we reached the entrance of the cave, because the place was still an undiscovered tourist spot, very few people could be spotted nearby, moreover, since it was almost sunset time, the few of whom we could see were rushing to witness the beauty of the setting sun.

In short there was not a single human at the cave. I held her hand and she followed me patiently.

Wow! This looks just amazing! The petrichor and the fragrance of the wet rocks is making me go crazily in love with this place.

We walked and walked quite a distance. There were benches made out of rocky stones for the tourists at a distance of 1.5 kms. I thought we should take a break before moving any further as I was a little bothered about what had happened to her in the car a little while ago.

Hey Amy, why not relax for a few minutes and then move. I am tired, you see.

Is it so? I am not a bit exhausted, I can walk all night, this place gives me such positivity, I tell you it is just so exuberating.

Yes madam but we should get some rest else you will have a tough time with the lumbago tomorrow.

Oh Really?! I am not an oldie like you! (she giggled)

Yes yes young blood, I still want you to sit for a while.

Alright alright!

Amy sat upon one of those rocky seats across me, little did she know about the snakes in there. One of them hung down from the crest and off she leaped onto me. Her head nudging into my shirt and her fingers clenching my shoulders.

Cool cool! That's a harmless one, nothing's to be sacred of. See that's goin its way.(showing her)

Slowly she raised her head to witness what I told her. The snake went its way and her gaze returned to me. Her eyes so shiny and her palour so gentle. We were close, very very close, I had never held her that close ever before.

Tears welled up her eyes as they met mine for more than a couple of seconds.

She said, (her voice wavering)

“Thank you... for everything you've been to me. I cannot express how blessed I feel to have you around. You've become an inseparable part of my life, and I can't imagine it without you. I know I shouldn't be saying this, but I don't know how much longer I can keep these feelings to myself. You are the guiding angel I found when I wasn't even looking for one. The place you've taken in my heart is beyond words. I don't deserve someone like you... I really don't.”

Her temple rested against my chest, and I was certain she could hear the frantic pounding of my heart. Gently, I cupped her face in my hands. She looked as pure as the mountain stream beside us. Wiping away the tears that traced her cheeks, I kissed her softly on the forehead.

Her eyes remained closed, as though hoping the moment would linger. I wanted that too. Every part of me longed to hold her forever, yet I forced myself to step back. I couldn't bear to ruin what we shared.

But fate had other plans.

She caught hold of my shirt and gently pulled me closer.

“Just once,” she whispered. “Just this once.”

I surrendered to the moment. Running my fingers through her silky hair, I drew her close and kissed her gently. She trembled ever so slightly, and I held her carefully, as though she were the most fragile and precious thing I had ever known. She wrapped her arms around me, and for a little while, the world beyond that cave simply ceased to exist.

My lips gently moved from hers to her cheeks, moistening them I just drew back to the flavour of her breath. The

realisation was exhilarating, almost liberating when she raised on her feet to reach me better. I lifted her ~ we did not realise when the sunset and how dark it went outside the cave, the turmoil within us was way deeper than the darkness outside. All I wished was to propose to her, but then I quivered I could grab enough strength for that. What if I would lose her all at once? What if she denies? And the last thing I wanted that day would be to ruin those precious moments.

We kissed.

“A heaviness settled within me.

Had I crossed a boundary that should never have been crossed? Had I allowed emotion to overpower reason? Questions I could not answer crowded my mind, each one heavier than the last.

By the time we reached the car, Amy quietly slipped into the back seat.

The sound of the door closing stirred Sam awake.

"Oh! You're both back," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Hope you enjoyed the waterfall. I don't know when I drifted off waiting for you."

"It's alright, mate," I replied, forcing a smile. "I'll drive from here."

Without another word, I took my place behind the steering wheel, while the silence inside the car said far more than any of us were willing to.

“Oh okay!”

Sam quietly took the seat beside Amy.

She remained unusually silent. Every now and then, I caught her tear-filled eyes in the rear-view mirror. I avoided looking back, burying myself in the road ahead. The silence inside the car was oppressive. Even Sam, sensing something was amiss, chose not to speak.

By the time we reached home, darkness had settled over the valley.

Susie was waiting for us on the porch. The moment Amy stepped out, she embraced her tightly before leading her inside. Sam lingered beside me as I switched off the engine. "What's wrong, mate?" he asked quietly. "Everything seemed fine until you both returned. Did something happen?"

For a moment I hesitated.

"Nothing serious," I replied, forcing a casual smile. "She got into a small argument with another visitor over a bench. I stepped in, and she didn't appreciate it. That's all."

Sam studied my face for a second before nodding.

"I see."

"Come on," I said quickly, steering him towards the house.

"I'm starving."

After freshening up, I came downstairs, instinctively looking towards Amy's room.

Empty.

I checked the kitchen, hoping she'd be helping Mom.

She wasn't there either.

"They were here a little while ago," one of the housemaids said.

An uneasy feeling settled inside me. Where had she gone? Had she spoken to Mom? What if she regretted everything that had happened? What if she decided to leave tomorrow without giving me a chance to explain?

The questions refused to stop.
I stepped onto the porch.
Vicky was lounging on the swing, talking to his fiancée over the phone.
"Looking for someone?" he asked.
"Have you seen Mom?"
"She'll be with Dad. It's his supper time."
Of course.
That should have occurred to me.
Susie was already asleep, while Andy sat beside her reading softly from the Bible.
Amy was nowhere to be seen.
With growing apprehension, I climbed the staircase to Dad's room, hoping Mom might know where she was.
As I gently pushed open the half-closed door...
I was met with one of the most beautiful surprises of my life.

A Place at Home

A Place at Home

Meal times had always been the hardest part of the day for Dad.

His illness had robbed him of more than memory; it had stolen his patience. Most evenings he refused to eat, pushing the bowl away without warning and splashing soup across the table. Mom often changed her clothes three or four times before somehow managing to finish feeding him.

None of us dared go near him during meals.

No one except Mom.

That evening, as I quietly pushed open Dad's bedroom door, I stopped in my tracks.

Mom wasn't feeding him.

Amy was.

Mom noticed me immediately, but I gently gestured for her to remain silent. Hidden behind the half-open door, I watched.

Amy sat beside Dad with remarkable ease, a small diary resting on her lap. She would read him a few lines, smile, then offer him another spoonful. Her voice carried the warmth of someone reading to a child at bedtime. Every now and then she paused to ask him little questions, though she knew he would never answer.

To my utter amazement...
Dad did.
Not with words.
But with calmness.
He never once pushed the bowl away.
He never frowned.
He simply watched her, listening with an attentiveness I hadn't seen in years.
By the end of the meal, the bowl was empty.
Not a grain of rice remained.
Mom looked as surprised as I felt.
When Dad was comfortably tucked into bed, Amy quietly excused herself and slipped out of the room. Only then did I step inside.
Mom was still standing there, staring at the empty bowl.
"Willie..." she whispered, almost to herself. "I don't know what that girl has done."
She smiled, shaking her head in disbelief.
"Yesterday your father threw the spoon across the room before I could feed him. Today he finished everything."
She sat down beside the bed.
"For the last three evenings she's insisted on helping me. I told her not to. I warned her how difficult he could be."
Mom laughed softly.
"Do you know what she told me?"
I shook my head.
"If he gets angry, we'll simply begin again."
Mom's eyes glistened.
"She brought her diary every evening. She'd read a page, tell him little stories, laugh with him... and somehow your father listened."

She looked towards the bedroom door through which Amy had just left.

"I've spent years trying to calm him."

"She did it in three days."

I smiled.

"I'm his son, Mom."

"Even I hesitate before walking into this room at meal times."

Mom looked at me thoughtfully.

"Some people don't just enter a house, Willie."

"They quietly become part of it."

Her words stayed with me as we walked downstairs.

Amy was seated beside Vicky, quietly finishing her dinner.

Her cheeks were flushed, and every now and then she reached for a handkerchief.

"You've caught a cold," Mom said, touching her forehead.

Amy smiled sheepishly.

"I think the mountains are winning."

"They certainly aren't," Mom replied. "You'll be better by morning."

Before I could say anything, Sam looked up from across the table.

"See me before you sleep."

Amy nodded.

"I will."

After dinner, she followed him to his room.

The rest of us lingered at the table, chatting about the wedding preparations, but my attention kept drifting towards the corridor.

Nearly twenty minutes passed.

Vicky noticed my wandering eyes and smiled to himself but wisely said nothing.

When Sam finally emerged, he closed the door quietly behind him.

"How is she?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Just a bad cold," he replied. "I've started her on medication."

He paused before adding quietly,

"She has this irritating habit of looking after everyone else before looking after herself."

He smiled faintly.

"Someone has to remind her she's a patient too."

The words lingered with me long after he walked away.

I found myself glancing towards the staircase where Amy had disappeared.

It struck me then that, in just a few days, she had done what none of us had managed in years.

She had made my father smile.

She had lightened my mother's weary heart.

She had filled our home with a warmth I hadn't realised we'd been missing.

Perhaps Mom was right.

Some people don't simply visit a house.

They become its heartbeat.

The Weight of Silence

"Shut the door behind you as you come in!" instructed Sam as Amy stepped into his room.

"Sit here quietly and let me examine you first."

Amy quietly closed the door behind her and took a seat as Sam pointed towards the examination couch. Without saying a word, he checked her pulse, listened to her breathing, and clipped the oximeter onto her finger. The numbers on the screen made him sigh heavily.

"Amy," he began, removing the device from her finger, "this isn't something you can take lightly. Your oxygen levels have dropped again, and your pulse is nowhere near where it should be. I warned you before we left that this trip would be difficult for your lungs. Yet you keep pushing yourself as though nothing is wrong."

He leaned back in his chair, frustration giving way to concern.

"I'm trying to give you every possible chance, but I can't fight this battle alone. You skip your medicines, ignore your routine, and exhaust yourself caring for everyone else. Have you ever stopped to think what it would do to the people who love you if something happened because of your carelessness?"

Amy lowered her eyes, allowing him to finish before answering.

"I know you're right, Doctor," she said softly. "But if I spend every waking moment thinking about my illness, I'll forget how to live. Coming here has made Susie happier than I've seen her in months. She's smiling again... she's recovering... and I wouldn't trade that for anything."

She looked at him with quiet determination.

"I promise I'll be more careful from now on. I'll take my medicines on time, follow your instructions, and look after myself too. And..." she paused briefly, "...I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you at Parker's Hill. I shouldn't have."

Sam's expression softened almost immediately.

"I wasn't angry with you," he admitted. "I was frightened."

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then he asked quietly, "Can I ask you something? You left for the cave looking happier than I'd seen you all day, but when you came back... something had changed. What happened?"

Amy hesitated before offering a faint smile.

"Nothing serious," she replied. "I had a silly disagreement with someone we met there. It spoiled the mood a little, that's all."

Sam studied her face for a few moments. He knew she wasn't telling him the whole truth, but he also knew she wasn't ready to speak about it.

Instead of pressing further, he reached for his prescription pad.

"I've adjusted your medication," he said, handing her the tablets. "Keep your inhaler with you at all times, and don't ignore the warning signs again. I want you to enjoy your stay here, but not at the cost of your health."

Amy accepted the medicines with a grateful smile.

"Thank you... for everything."

As she reached the door, Sam called after her.

"And Amy..."

She turned.

"Even the strongest people need someone to take care of them once in a while."

She smiled gently.

"I'll remember that."

With that, she wished him goodnight and quietly left the room.

Under The Snow

Monday dawned with an unusual heaviness. The wedding was barely a day away, and the entire house had awakened before the sun. Every corridor echoed with hurried footsteps, laughter, and endless instructions. Decorations were still being adjusted, relatives had begun arriving, and the aroma of fresh flowers mingled with that of cakes and spices drifting from the kitchen.

Mom, as always, stood at the centre of the whirlwind.

"Will," she called out while carrying a tray of teacups, "don't forget to inspect the reception lawn. I've already spoken to the decorators, but I know they'll still miss something. This wedding has to be perfect. I want your uncles and aunts talking about it for years."

She laughed softly before adding with her usual conviction, "People think a house cannot run without men. Tomorrow they'll learn otherwise. Our help has always come from the Lord."

The warmth in her voice made everyone smile.

For the past several days, Amy had become her quiet shadow, helping wherever she was needed. Whether it was arranging flowers, welcoming guests, or assisting in the kitchen, she carried herself with such grace that even the servants had grown fond of her.

Mom affectionately brushed a loose strand of hair away from Amy's face.

"In about an hour the boutique will send your gowns. Both you and Susie must try them on immediately. My girls are going to look nothing less than angels tomorrow."

I happened to walk in just then.

Amy quickly wiped the corner of her eye before anyone noticed. When she looked at me again, the sadness had already disappeared behind one of her familiar smiles.

"Am I interrupting an important ladies' meeting?" I asked.

Mom laughed.

"We're discussing tomorrow."

"Then I hope I'm not too late."

Turning towards Amy, I smiled.

"So... are you excited?"

She nodded.

"I am."

After a brief pause she added quietly,

"I never imagined I'd be part of something so beautiful. Sometimes I wonder whether life will ever gift me moments like these again."

I frowned.

"And why wouldn't it?"

"This house is yours now as much as it is ours. Mom absolutely adores you and Susie. In fact, I don't think I've seen her this happy in years."

Amy looked towards Mom, who was busy instructing one of the helpers.

"I know," she whispered.

"She has made us forget we're guests."

A moment later she looked back at me.

"And... I'm sorry."

"For the way I behaved after Parker's Hill."

I smiled gently.

"I think I should be apologising instead."

She looked surprised.

"I've spent the last two days wondering how to speak to you."

For a brief moment our eyes met.

There was so much I wanted to tell her.

The words reached my lips...

and died there.

Instead I asked the safest question I could think of.

"How's Susie?"

Amy laughed softly.

"She's probably happier than the groom."

"Really?"

"Oh yes."

"She loves everyone here."

"And Mom?"

Amy smiled.

"I think she's adopted us already."

"And you?"

I found myself asking before I could stop.

"How are you?"

For a long moment she remained silent.

Then she answered in a voice so gentle it almost disappeared.

"Do you really need me to answer that?"

She looked around the bustling house.

"I've found a peace here that I haven't known in a long time."

Her smile slowly faded.

"If only..."

She never finished the sentence.

Instead, a violent bout of coughing seized her.

She doubled over, struggling for breath as one cough followed another. Her face flushed crimson while tears gathered in her eyes. Instinctively I rushed towards her, supporting her shoulders as she searched frantically inside the pocket of her coat.

"Inhaler..."

Before she could ask, I had already placed it in her hand.
She took two hurried puffs before leaning against the wall,
breathing heavily.
I handed her my handkerchief.
She nodded gratefully.
"I'm alright..."
But her trembling voice suggested otherwise.
Without another word she hurried towards the washroom.
Only after she disappeared inside did I notice the
handkerchief lying near the doorway.
I bent down and picked it up.
As I unfolded the white cotton, my fingers froze.
Tiny crimson blossoms had bloomed across it.
Blood.
For several seconds I simply stood there.
The laughter in the house continued.
Someone called for more flowers.
Children ran through the hallway.
Yet every sound around me slowly faded.
All I could see...
was that stain.
Fear tightened around my chest.
This wasn't asthma.

This was something far more frightening.

Unable to ignore it, I walked towards the washroom and stopped outside the closed door.

I almost knocked.

Almost.

Just then Vicky's voice echoed from the staircase.

"Will! Where have you disappeared? Dad's asking for you."

I turned abruptly.

"Dad's here?"

"He's been looking for you."

He studied my face.

"You alright?"

I forced a smile.

"Yeah... just give me a minute."

He shrugged and disappeared downstairs.

A few moments later the washroom door opened.

Amy stepped out slowly.

She had washed her face, but its colour had drained away completely.

She stopped when she saw me waiting.

"Sir..."

she said quietly.

"You didn't have to wait."

I slowly held out the folded handkerchief.

"Amy..."

My voice barely escaped.

"Whose blood is this?"

Her eyes fell upon the crimson stains.

For the briefest instant, every wall she had built around herself seemed ready to collapse.

"It's nothing," she murmured.

I shook my head gently. "No, Amy... it isn't."

She remained silent, refusing to meet my eyes.

"You've been coughing for days," I continued, my voice softer now. "I've watched you struggle to breathe... and now this." I held the bloodstained handkerchief between us. "Please, tell me what's happening."

Tears welled up in her eyes. She tried to smile, but it faltered almost instantly.

"Not today, sir," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Please... don't ask me today."

There was something in the way she said those words—something so fragile, so utterly defeated—that every question I had prepared dissolved into silence. She gently took the handkerchief from my hand, her fingers brushing mine for the briefest moment.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

Before I could respond, she walked away.

I stood there watching her disappear down the corridor, carrying far more than the little white handkerchief folded within her trembling hands.

An hour later, the boutique arrived with the wedding gowns. Mom fussed over Amy as though she were dressing her own daughter, carefully adjusting the veil, smoothing the folds of the gown, and stepping back every now and then to admire her work. She called everyone over, eager to show them how beautiful her girls looked.

The room filled with admiration and cheerful compliments. Laughter echoed through the house, and smiles lit every face around me.

I tried to smile too.

But no matter how hard I tried, all I could see was the crimson stain that had bloomed across a white handkerchief only a little while earlier.

The Wedding Day

The next morning, the house awoke to the joyful chaos of a wedding day. Laughter echoed through every corridor as relatives hurried about with flowers, gifts, and last-minute instructions. The kitchen bustled with activity, filling the air with the irresistible aroma of freshly baked delicacies, while soft music floated through the house, blending seamlessly with the cheerful conversations. Every corner radiated warmth, love, and anticipation.

Outside, the reception lawn was receiving its final touches. White and gold drapes danced gently in the crisp winter breeze, framing tables adorned with elegant floral centrepieces. Strings of fairy lights waited patiently for dusk, when they would transform the garden into a sea of shimmering stars. It wasn't merely a wedding venue—it was a celebration lovingly crafted by everyone who called this house home.

Soon, Susie was wheeled in by one of my cousins, dressed in a delicate pink frock with a tiny glittering tiara resting upon her curls. She looked every bit the little princess, her innocent smile drawing admiration from everyone around her. Watching her laugh so freely after everything she had endured filled my heart with quiet gratitude.

But my attention drifted elsewhere.

Past the gathering of relatives... past the bride...

There she was.

Amy.

She walked into the room wearing an ivory gown embroidered with delicate white blossoms. Her softly pinned hair framed a face that seemed to glow beneath the chandeliers. For one impossible moment, the entire room disappeared. I saw only her.

Every part of me longed to walk towards her, to kneel before her and tell her everything my heart had hidden for months. Instead, I remained rooted where I stood, admiring her from afar.

She looked around the hall until her eyes found Susie. The smile that bloomed upon her face was enough to still every restless thought within me. Somewhere between grief and healing, she had quietly become the centre of my world.

The wedding ceremony began.

Standing before the altar, Vicky and Saraa repeated their vows with unwavering sincerity, promising to love, honour and cherish one another all the days of their lives.

Without even realising it, I found myself silently repeating every promise—not for them, but for Amy.

There, in the quiet sanctuary of my own heart, I made a covenant before God.

Whether she ever knew it or not...

I had already chosen her.

When the priest finally pronounced them husband and wife, the chapel erupted into applause as Vicky kissed his bride for the very first time.

A smile escaped my lips.

Ours had come much earlier.

Without witnesses.

Without ceremony.

Yet somehow...

it had meant everything.

The celebrations continued well into the evening. Music, laughter and endless congratulations filled the house until, one by one, exhaustion finally claimed everyone. Mom escorted Dad upstairs, Vicky disappeared with Saraa, Andrea settled Susie into bed, and even Sam called it a night.

Only Amy was nowhere to be found.

An uneasy feeling settled over me.

I searched the drawing room, the kitchen, the verandah and every corridor before finally stepping into the garden.

There she was.

Seated alone upon the old wooden swing, bathed in silver moonlight, her eyes fixed upon the endless sky. She looked as though she were searching the heavens for answers only God could give.

I stood watching her for several moments, unwilling to disturb the fragile peace surrounding her.

Then her words from the previous day returned to me.

"I can't burden anyone else with this."

No.

Not tonight.

I wasn't going to let silence win again.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly walked towards her.

She sensed my presence and turned, offering me a faint smile.

"I'm getting complaints from the moon," I said lightly.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

"It says someone's trying to steal all its beauty tonight."

A quiet laugh escaped her.

"You always know what to say."

"I only speak the truth."

I sat beside her.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The silence between us felt strangely comforting, as though words would only diminish the moment.

Finally, I gathered the courage to speak.

"Amy..."

My voice carried none of its usual playfulness.

"I've been worried about you."

She lowered her gaze.

"I've watched you struggle these past few days... the coughing... the blood... and yet you keep pretending everything is alright."

She remained silent, gently tracing circles upon the wooden seat with her fingertips.

"I don't need explanations," I continued softly. "I only need you to trust me."

Her fingers tightened around the edge of her shawl.

"There are some things," she whispered, "that simply cannot be changed."

Her voice trembled.

"And watching the people you love suffer because of them..."

She paused, swallowing hard.

"...is sometimes more painful than carrying the burden yourself."

I reached across and gently took her hand into mine.

"You don't have to carry it alone anymore."

She closed her eyes for a brief moment.

"I wish it were that simple."

Then, as though afraid she had already revealed too much, she slowly stood.

"It's late, sir."

"We should go inside."

Before she could take another step, I gently caught her hand.

"Amy."

She stopped.

Without a word, I drew her back towards me. I wasn't letting this moment slip away. I was done with half-truths and silences.

She didn't resist.

The moonlight glimmered on her pallor, and the breeze carried her scent toward me. I leaned in, placing a soft kiss on her neck. She gasped softly, her body relaxing into mine, her defenses melting away. In a swift motion, she turned around, burying her face in my shirt, her hands clutching at the fabric as though it was her anchor. I held her, letting her know without words that I wasn't going anywhere.

We stood there under the starry sky, wrapped in each other's embrace, the world around us fading into nothingness. There were no words exchanged, only the sound of our shared breaths and the rhythm of our heartbeats. The silence wasn't empty; it was heavy with unspoken emotions, a quiet confession neither of us could fully voice.

The night around us seemed to hold its breath, leaving only the gentle rustle of the winter breeze and the steady rhythm of our hearts.

Still resting against my chest, Amy spoke at last.

"I love you, Will."

The words were scarcely louder than a whisper, yet they echoed through every corner of my soul.

"I've loved you for so long... with everything I have. But loving you has only made things harder."

I tightened my embrace ever so slightly.

She continued, her voice breaking beneath the weight of emotions she had hidden for months.

"These have been the happiest days of my life. You... your family... this home... you've shown me a happiness I never thought I deserved." She paused, drawing a trembling breath. "And that frightens me."

I gently lifted her chin until her eyes met mine.

"What frightens you, Amy?"

She looked at me for a long moment before lowering her gaze once more.

"I don't want to lose this."

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

There was a sadness in her smile that unsettled me.

"I do know one thing," I replied softly. "Whatever you're afraid of, you don't have to face it alone anymore."

Her eyes filled with tears.

Slowly, she raised a trembling hand and rested it against my cheek, as though trying to convince herself that I was real.

"I wish..." she whispered.

"What do you wish?"

Her lips parted, but the words never came.

Instead, she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around me once again.

That silent embrace said far more than any confession ever could.

I brushed away the tears that traced gentle paths down her cheeks.

"They're too precious to be wasted," I murmured.

A faint smile appeared through her tears.

Without another thought, I leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

She closed her eyes.

Moments later, she slowly raised her face.

Our eyes met.

There was no hesitation anymore.

No fear.

Only love.

When our lips finally met, it wasn't driven by impulse or desire alone.

It was every prayer left unanswered.

Every tear left unnoticed.

Every silent promise we had carried within us.

The world around us disappeared.

There was only the warmth of her hands in mine, the quiet trembling of her breath, and the certainty that some souls are

destined to find one another despite every obstacle placed in their path.

Time seemed to dissolve beneath the winter sky.

When we finally drew apart, she rested her forehead against mine, smiling through tears.

"This is the happiest day of my life," she whispered.

"And you," she added softly, "have become the greatest blessing I've ever known."

My heart had waited far too long to say the words it had rehearsed a thousand times.

"I love you too, Amy."

"I think I've loved you from the very day you walked into my classroom."

She laughed softly through her tears.

"I knew."

"You knew?"

"I hoped."

We both laughed, the heaviness between us lifting, if only for a little while.

Taking her hand in mine, I slowly led her back towards the house.

Snow had begun to fall.

Soft white flakes drifted lazily from the heavens, covering the garden in quiet purity. The swing where we had sat only

moments ago was already gathering a thin blanket of white, as though nature itself wished to preserve that evening forever.

We paused for one last look at the moonlit garden.

"It really is beautiful," Amy whispered.

"It is."

"But not as beautiful as tonight."

She smiled.

As we walked back together, our fingers remained entwined.

Neither of us knew what tomorrow would bring.

Neither of us knew how cruel fate could be.

But for that one perfect winter night, none of it mattered.

The world beyond those falling snowflakes ceased to exist.

There was only faith.

Only hope.

Only love.

And beneath the silent witness of heaven, two lonely hearts finally found the home they had unknowingly been searching for.

A Promise Before Tomorrow

Morning arrived quietly.

I woke to find Amy asleep in my arms, her face softened by the pale winter light filtering through the curtains. For the first time in months, she looked completely at peace, as though every burden she had carried had chosen to rest for a little while.

Careful not to wake her, I slipped out of bed and sat beside the window. My decision had never felt clearer.

I was going to ask Amy to marry me.

Not tomorrow.

Not someday.

Today.

She was the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and I refused to lose another opportunity because of fear.

Without wasting another moment, I called Becca.

"Beck, I need a wedding band. Urgently."

She laughed.

"Well, this sounds serious. Who's the lucky girl?"

"You'll know soon enough."

"Give me twenty minutes."

True to her word, the ring arrived within half an hour. I had also arranged for a small bouquet of fresh flowers. Nothing extravagant—just enough to tell the woman I loved what words alone never could.

A little later, Amy slowly opened her eyes.

She smiled sleepily.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, love."

She noticed the bouquet first, then the little velvet box resting in my hands.

"Will..."

I knelt before her.

"Amy, before you came into my life, I thought I understood what love meant. Then I met you, and I realised I knew nothing about it."

Taking her hand gently into mine, I continued,

"You've become my peace, my courage, and my home. I don't want another sunrise without you beside me."

Opening the box, I looked into her tear-filled eyes.

"Marry me, Amy."

"I want to share everything with you—your joys, your fears, your sorrows, your dreams. I don't want a future that doesn't have you in it."

For a brief moment, happiness lit her face.

Then it disappeared.

Slowly she withdrew her hand and walked towards the window.

Her shoulders trembled.

"I can't marry you, Will."

My smile faded.

"I can't marry anyone."

Silence settled between us.

Finally she spoke again.

"My days are numbered."

She closed her eyes.

"I've been living with a disease that medicine can only delay—not cure."

My heartbeat quickened.

"What do you mean?"

"My lungs..." she whispered, struggling to steady her voice.

"They're failing me, little by little."

The words struck me like a bolt of lightning.

Everything suddenly made sense. The blood on the handkerchief. Her endless coughing. Sam's constant concern.

Parker's Hill.

Every missing piece fell into place. She continued without turning around.

"I don't want to ruin your life. You deserve a future filled with happiness—not hospitals, medicines and heartbreak."

Drawing a deep, unsteady breath, she whispered,

"So... walk away while you still can."

I crossed the room until I stood beside her.

Gently, I turned her towards me.

"If you've finished," I said quietly, "then it's my turn."

She looked up through tear-filled eyes.

"I don't know what tomorrow holds." I don't know how difficult this illness may become."

"And honestly...I don't care."

Holding both her hands, I looked straight into her eyes.

"If I ever marry, it will only be you, Amy Mason."

"I don't want an easy life without you. I want a meaningful one with you. If the road ahead is difficult... We'll walk it together."

"If there are storms..."

"We'll face them together."

"If there is hope..."

"We'll fight for it together."

A tear escaped her eye.

I gently wiped it away before slipping the ring into her trembling hand.

"My promise isn't for the years you'll give me."

"It's for every single day we're blessed to have."

She stared at the ring for a long time before looking back at me. And for the first time since she had spoken those devastating words...hope quietly returned to her eyes.

Forty-Eight Hours

Amy's words still echoed in my mind when her fingers slowly slipped from mine.

Before I could react, her knees gave way.

"Amy!"

I caught her just before she hit the floor.

Her breathing had become frighteningly shallow, each breath shorter than the last.

"Stay with me... please stay with me."

She tried to answer, but no words came.

Within minutes we were racing towards the hospital. I don't remember the drive. Every traffic signal, every passing vehicle felt like an enemy stealing precious seconds from us.

The emergency staff took over the moment we arrived. Nurses rushed her onto a stretcher while doctors surrounded her, issuing instructions I could scarcely comprehend.

I stood frozen.

Helpless.

Sam appeared moments later, no longer my friend but Dr. Samuel Bright.

"Amy's lungs have collapsed under severe stress," he said, already pulling on his surgical gloves. "She needs emergency surgery."

"Do whatever you have to."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"This isn't a routine procedure, Will. Her COPD has already caused irreversible damage. Her lungs are fragile... her heart is struggling... and the surgery itself carries enormous risks."

He placed the consent papers before me.

"If we don't operate, we'll lose her."

My hand trembled as I signed.

"Save her."

He nodded once before disappearing behind the operating theatre doors.

The corridor suddenly felt unbearably silent.

One by one, everyone arrived.

Mom.

Vicky and Sara.

Even little Susie, confused by the panic around her, kept asking where her sister had gone.

Nobody knew how to answer.

Hours crawled by.

The clock became our greatest enemy.

Sometimes a nurse stepped out to say the procedure was still underway.

Nothing more.

Every passing minute felt heavier than the last.

Late into the night, the operating theatre doors finally opened.

Sam walked towards us, utterly exhausted.

For a terrifying second, none of us dared breathe.

"The surgery was successful," he said quietly.

Relief swept through the corridor before he raised a hand.

"But..."

The word stole every ounce of hope we had gained.

"She's far from safe."

He removed his spectacles and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Her lungs were in a far worse condition than we expected. The next forty-eight hours will determine everything. If her body responds, she'll have a chance."

"And if it doesn't?"

Sam remained silent.

That silence answered every question.

A little later he led me into the ICU.

Amy lay motionless beneath crisp white sheets, surrounded by tubes, monitors and machines breathing for her.

She looked impossibly fragile.

Nothing like the spirited girl who had laughed beside waterfalls only hours ago. I pulled a chair close to her bed and gently held her hand.

"I'm here, Amy. You don't have to fight alone anymore."

"If you can hear me...Come back."

The hours merged into one endless night.

Mom prayed quietly in the chapel.

Vicky stayed with Susie. Sam moved endlessly between patients, yet somehow returned every hour to check on Amy. Morning came unnoticed. I had never left her side. Just as the first rays of sunlight crept through the ICU window, I felt the faintest movement against my palm.

Her fingers.

They moved. Only slightly. But they moved.

My heart stopped.

"Amy?"

Her eyelids fluttered before settling once again. Sam, who had just entered the room, looked at the monitor and allowed himself the smallest smile.

"It's encouraging," he whispered.

"Don't celebrate yet."

"But don't lose hope either." I looked back at Amy.

For the first time since she had collapsed...

hope no longer felt impossible.

A Shared Miracle

Amy's recovery was slow but steady, her resilience shining through with every passing day. But as I spent hours at her bedside, there was another small victory that filled my heart.

Little Susie, whose own condition had taken a toll on all of us, was beginning to recover as well. Her treatments were taking effect, and the doctors spoke cautiously optimistic words that I clung to like lifelines. I could see it in her face—the glow of health slowly returning, the laughter creeping back into her small, beautiful world.

One day, as I sat by Amy's side, Susie toddled into the room, her tiny hand clutching a daisy she had plucked from the hospital garden.

“For Amy,” she said shyly, placing the flower on Amy's blanket.

Amy's eyes filled with tears, and she held Susie close, her frailty forgotten in that moment.

A New Beginning

Autumn arrived quietly.

The mountains had exchanged their summer greens for shades of amber and crimson, while a cool breeze carried with it the fragrance of pine and rain-soaked earth. Months had passed since the surgery.

Recovery had not been easy.

Amy still tired more quickly than most people, and there were days when even a short walk demanded more strength than she wished to admit. But she was alive. And every sunrise felt like a gift. That evening, we found ourselves standing once again upon Parker's Hill—the very place where love had first found the courage to speak. She slipped her hand into mine.

"I never thought I'd come back here," she whispered.

I smiled.

"Neither did I."

She looked across the endless valley where the setting sun painted the sky in hues of gold and crimson.

"I thought my story would end here."

"It didn't," I replied softly.

"It began here."

She laughed, wiping away a tear before it could fall.

Slowly, I reached into my coat pocket and took out the little velvet box I had carried with me all day.

"This ring has waited long enough." She looked at me in surprise.

"Amy Elizabeth Mason..."

"I don't know what tomorrow holds."

"I don't know how many mountains we'll still have to climb."

"But I know this...I want to climb every one of them with you."

Opening the box, I gently slipped the ring onto her finger.

"Will you marry me?"

Her answer came through tears and laughter alike.

"I thought you'd never ask."

I drew her into my arms.

"You realise," she smiled, looking up at me, "you're stuck with me now."

"I've been hoping for exactly that."

Beneath the fading autumn sky, I kissed the woman who had taught me that love is not measured by the number of days we are given...

...but by the courage with which we choose to live them together. For the first time in a very long while...the future no longer frightened us.

It simply awaited us.

Epilogue

"Love is not measured by the years we are given, but by the lives we change while we are here."

There are stories that entertain us for a season. And then there are stories that become a part of who we are.

This is one of them.

There are mornings when I still wake expecting to hear your cough from the kitchen.

Sometimes I still buy your favourite lilies before remembering there is no vase waiting for them.

Many have asked me why I chose to write these pages.

Some believed it was to preserve memories.

Others thought it was my way of finding peace.

Perhaps they are both right. But the truth is much simpler.

I wrote this because I made you a promise.

You once feared that your life would be remembered only for the illness you carried. You couldn't have been more wrong.

You will never be remembered for the disease that weakened your body. You will be remembered for the strength that inspired every heart you touched.

You taught me that courage is often silent.

That kindness is never wasted. That faith is strongest when life gives us every reason to surrender. Most of all, you taught me that love does not wait for perfect circumstances.

It simply chooses.

Every single day.

Even now, when I walk past a field of wildflowers or stand beneath an autumn sky, I still find myself looking for you.

Sometimes I almost hear your laughter carried by the wind. Sometimes I still reach for your hand before remembering that memories are all my fingers can hold. Yet I have never truly lost you. Because people like you do not leave. They live on in every life they have transformed.

In Susie's smile.

In my mother's prayers.

In the quiet strength you awakened in all of us.

And in every page of this book.

If one day, long after these pages have yellowed with age, someone remembers the name **Amy Elizabeth Mason** with a smile instead of sorrow...

then I shall know I have fulfilled my promise.

Thank you...

for teaching me that love is not about how long we walk beside
someone...

but about how deeply they remain with us after they are gone.

Until we meet again.

—**William**