

Chapter Nine

After

xxvi

After many days of monitoring, Oslo's been released to go home. Ocea pushes him through the exit in a wheelchair where the bright Summer sun warms his skin. It takes his eyes a moment to adjust as he's reminded what it's like to be blinded by its rays, only to cover his eyes with his hand a moment later. He finds himself stopped at the curb, Ocea locking in the wheels as she moves to stand beside him, resting her hand on his shoulder.

He looks down at his skinny limbs in disbelief. It's just another part of it, he figures. He sighs, as it's a reminder of all the work he has in store with physical therapy, not to mention all the catching up he has to do.

"I probably have some maturing to do." Oslo jokes with a depressed exhale.

"I'm sure there was plenty of time in those dreams of yours." She smiles as she squats to rest her legs, "Ossy, stay young, this world has enough maturity in it."

But none of it is as concerning to him as his mother. He's eager to see her after talking to her the other morning, but they didn't mention Oslo's father. Neither of them had it in them to say anything. He recalls,

"—Ossy." The old woman's voice creeps through the speaker.

"Yes?"

"You do know—" Her voice quivers.

"Yes, mama." Oslo breaks inside as he holds himself together.

A taxi swerves up to the curb as the driver hops out with haste. He and Ocea have an exchange as the two help lift Oslo into the back seat. As the driver struggles to fold the wheelchair in, Ocea offers her help as the two lift it into the trunk. Oslo stares out the window anxiously as the man opens her door. She slides into the middle seat, setting her bag in the empty chair next to her and wrapping her arm around Oslo's.

His nerves calm as she squeezes closer. She gives the address to the driver as he reminds her to put seatbelts on. She clicks both hers and Oslo's into place as they pull forward and out of the Hospital grounds.

As the two approach the turn onto the street, they both feel anxious. Oslo hasn't been to his house in twenty years, and Ocea hasn't faced her own house in over a decade. Tears drip down both their faces, both struggling between a smile and frown.

Oslo looks to the street corner as the taxi turns onto their street, remembering the last time he saw Ocea standing there on the last day of school. With shimmering faces, the car pulls up on the curb of Oslo's home with Ocea's mother waiting in his drive way. She waves.

Ocea leans over Oslo returning the gesture, "She's been keeping your mom company all these years."

He smiles as the driver opens Ocea's door to let her out. She runs and embraces her mom as the driver unfolds the wheelchair from the trunk. Their hug is brief as they run over to open Oslo's door.

"Oslo!! My dear!!"

"Miss Emily—"

She leans in embracing Oslo, desperately squeezing the air out of him as tears roll down to her smile, "Please, just Emily, Ossi."

Ocea and her mother help lift Oslo into his wheelchair. They thank the driver, handing him a handsome tip before he goes.

"It's been too long, darling Oslo." Emily kisses the top of his head.

"But Emily, I only just saw you yesterday!" Oslo laughs.

She chuckles, "What a morbid joke! But somehow, it does feel like it was yesterday."

"I guess time has a weird way of keeping itself." Oslo sighs as they roll him up the driveway.

He gets a glimpse of the oak tree in between their houses. His heart skips as he recalls all the good memories he has there. Ocea notices it too, turning and smiling with him.

The two women lift the wheelchair over the step at the foot of the doorway. Emily pushes open the cracked door to a luminescent and fragrant home.

“I couldn’t let your mother live with a lack of baked goods. Koji and I did our best to keep the spirit alive in this household!”

Oslo tears up, “Thank you. So much.”

As the three make it through the doorway, a creaking is heard down the hall. Just then, Sachiko stumbles against the door frame.

“Mama!” Oslo cries.

“Sachiko! You shouldn’t be out of bed!” Emily runs to grab her by her shoulder.

“Had to see my Oslo. If not hospital, I can make it through my own home.”

“Mom...” Tears melt from his eyes as Ocea pushes him down the hall.

Emily assists Sachiko down to her knees in front of Oslo as Ocea runs to and from the living room with a blanket, placing it under his mother.

“My son, am I dreaming?”

Tears blind Oslo’s vision as he quickly wipes them away, “No mama, I wish I was. I wish I could wake up and it all have been a dream. I wish I could be your eighteen-year-old boy again.” He falls into her arms.

“I want nothing more. But I am so happy you are here now. May I never lose you again.” She brushes his hair as he cries into her shoulder.

Ocea holds the back of the wheelchair. Tears gently roll down her face as she hides behind Oslo.

Sachiko looks up to Ocea, “My dear, Ocea. How beautiful you are. I am happy you are here now, too.”

Oslo lofts himself as he turns around, “Ocea, how long has it been?”

“It’s—” She shakes her head, “Too long...”

Sachiko interjects, “But she always call. We always talk on phone.”

Oslo’s pale hands touch the face of his mother. He feels her wrinkled skin under his bony fingers. The veins extrude from the skin and sink into her frail figure. Her short black hair grays just around the edges.

“You’re as beautiful as ever, mama.”

She smirks, “You’ve still got your humor, I see.”

“Mama!” He smiles, “I wouldn’t joke about such a thing.”

Emily, still holding Sachiko around her shoulders, “Why don’t we move into the living room? I have fresh scones made earlier this morning!”

Oslo’s mouth waters, “Real food...I forgot what it was—”

The aromas are heightened as he inhales, the warmth of the home hugs him tightly, and the memories that he holds here are still near. He looks around as Ocea helps him into his wheelchair and pushes him into the living room. The sun welcomes them, shining over the some old antique couch he grew up with.

“Ossy, would you like to sit on the couch?” Ocea smiles.

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

She lifts him out of the wheelchair by the shoulder, pivoting him over to the couch quickly.

“I must be light as a feather these days.” Oslo sighs.

“Oh no, I’m just very strong.”

“Ah, that must be it then.”

Ocea turns to help walk Sachiko into the room to her recliner chair.

“How’s that? Comfy?” Emily asks Sachiko.

“Very.” She replies.

“Good. Now, for scones!” Emily turns with glee to the kitchen just a few feet away. She lifts a rag off a pristine ceramic bowl that sits on the bar counter, grabbing a stack of plates next to it.

“You didn’t plan this *at all* did you, mom?”

“The very *very* least I could do for Ossy’s welcome party!” Emily lifts the bowl and plate in excitement as she places them on the coffee table, plating one scone per person.

She turns back to the kitchen, “Tea anyone?”

“Yes!” Ocea yells as Oslo and Sachiko nod, “Make that three!”

The three sit in silence for a moment as they hear Emily rustle around in the kitchen.

Oslo smiles at his mother, "I know it's been so long. And it does feel so long... But it also doesn't." He shuffles the scone around on the plate in his lap, "And even while it doesn't, I know I've missed you so much."

Tears form in his eyes, "And—and with dad—"

Sachiko interrupts, "He loved you. More than anything." She stares firmly into his eyes, "It was every day. Every day he say, 'Today is for *him*.'"

Oslo's throat clenches as Sachiko continues, "Even after accident. He always said he will do for you. Anything." She turns to Ocea, "Ocea, remember what we talk about on phone? In Ossy's side table."

Ocea nods with a smile as she puts her plate on the coffee table and runs upstairs. The two could hear her shuffling around above the kitchen, but before long, she comes running back down with a stack of envelopes in her hand.

"He had so much he want to say to you. He cried to me, he said, 'Please don't let Ossy go without him knowing these things.'" She points to the envelopes as Ocea hands them over to him.

"These are letters? From dad?" Oslo's mouth hangs open.

He looks down at the stack. Each one has a date. Oslo's birthday, many Christmases, and some dates in July, the same time they would take their family trips.

"He knew you love Ocea's letters, so he thought you enjoy these when you wake up."

"Thank you—" Tears drip down his face.

As one drop hits the top of an envelope he pushes the letters forward on his lap so he wouldn't get them wet.

He wipes his eyes, turning to his mother, "I can't wait to read these. But, I want to catch up with you, mama."

They continue catching up as Emily walks in with the tea. Their conversations are filled with tears and joy, laughter and grievances, and the never-ending desire to only want more time. They spend lunch together in the same place with Koji joining them on his break. They talk on into the afternoon. Ocea catches Sachiko up on her writing endeavors to her amazement.

“You author now?! Ooooooh” Sachiko looks at her impressed, “We always knew! We always knew this would come!”

Ocea laughs, “Not yet, not yet. Still adding the finishing touches.” She leans against Oslo, “Your son here must’ve become a writer in his sleep. He told me exactly how the book is going to end!”

“Is that right?” She gives the same amazed look at Oslo, “My son author too? Always knew this would happen. Too talented, too crazy to be business man like his father.” She laughs.

Oslo chuckles, “Ah, crazy yes, but author no. Just happy to be here at this point.”

Emily snaps, “You and that dark humor again!”

“What? It’s true!”

As the sun sets in the same living room, Koji returns home, stopping by Sachiko’s house first thing.

“Well, well. We’re all still at it in here, huh?” He walks in holding two bags of something that smells like heaven.

Emily stands to embrace her husband, “Where else could we be, baby?”

Ocea cringes, “Aren’t you too old to be talking like that?”

Koji interjects, “What you don’t call Oslo baby?”

The two on the couch blush as they bury themselves in their own embarrassment.

Oslo deflects, “So what’d ya bring me? HA HA. It feels like I haven’t eaten in twenty years!”

Emily sighs as she rolls up a newspaper, “Oslo I’ll swat you like a fly!”

Oslo sinks into the couch, “Sorry sorry! I’m still a little groggy from overslee—”

Before he can finish Emily’s smashing Oslo on the head as everyone laughs.

Koji plates the Yakiniku he picked up, giving Oslo a far too generous portion as he couldn’t even come close to cleaning his plate.

The sun has completely faded as the group continues to talk through the night. Sachiko is desperate to stay awake with her son, but struggles through her drooping eyelids.

Oslo places his hand on hers, “Mama, you should rest. I’ll still be here in the morning.”

As Emily and Ocea lift her out of her chair, Sachiko leans over and kisses Oslo on the forehead.

“Thank you for that, my Ossy.”

The ladies slowly step back into Sachiko’s room to get her ready for bed, leaving Oslo and Koji to themselves.

“I gotta tell you. The company has not been the same without your father.” Koji spins the glass of water in his hands, “I don’t know if anyone told you this, but he rose to the top. We became peers as vice presidents of our respective departments, and when he passed away our company honored him in many ways. We started a fund in his name.”

Oslo stares curiously, “A fund?”

“Yes well, we know he had a stroke but— He couldn’t face himself before that. He poured himself into Sachiko and his work after the accident but neglected his own health at the end of the day. So we started a fund to give for mental health.”

“That’s so kind. Thank you.” Oslo bows his head.

“Aye, no need to thank me. Your father was my best friend. He was my brother.” Beads form in Koji’s eyes as he struggles to speak, “I sit down in my library every night and reflect. I reflect on him, remembering the great man that he was. You too of course. You know, my daughter hasn’t come home in a very long time.”

Oslo stoops his head, “I know—I’m so sorry.”

“No, Oslo.” Koji leans in, “Not your fault. It could never be.” He leans back against his chair, “Not Ocea’s fault either. Nobody’s fault.”

Oslo adds, “Life just has its strange way of sorting things out, I guess...”

“That it does, Ossy. That it does.” Koji sips his water.

Emily and Ocea walk back in, visibly exhausted, yet ecstatic. They feel weightless. They feel happy.

“Well I don’t want to keep you all till morning! We should all get some rest.” Oslo concludes.

Emily remarks, “We’re fine! But goodness, let’s get you some rest!”

“Believe me, I’ve slept enough for all of us.” Oslo quickly grabs the throw pillow beside him to shield his face.

Emily scowls with a smile as the others laugh, "I'll let you off with that one, these tired arms are going to need some rest before having to smack you again tomorrow!"

Oslo drops the pillow, "Whew."

Emily turns to Ocea, "Darling, will you be staying with us tonight?"

She smiles, "I don't think taxis run this late anyways."

Koji leans over to Emily, "I'm not gonna tell her they do."

"Let's not!" She replies as Ocea laughs. "I've already made Ocea's bed anyhow. Oslo, let's take you upstairs and get you settled. Don't worry, I made your bed too."

Oslo smiles only for it to fade shortly after, "Thank you so much for everything, Emily. Taking care of my mother, father, and everything. And of course you too, Koji. Thank you both so much."

The two smile at Oslo as they gather to walk him upstairs. While Emily and Koji head home, Ocea hangs back to tuck Oslo in.

"Thanks for the help Ocea, I should be all set now."

"Of course. I've only been doing it for twenty years!"

As Oslo lays his head back they stare into one another's eyes. Gravity pulls them in. With so much power, yet they feel weightless. Oslo's heart pounds and Ocea's palms grow sweaty. Leaning forward, she drops her head into Oslo's chest.

"Goodnight! I can't wait to see you in the morning!"

Oslo hugs her tightly before letting her go. She stands, squeezing his hand twice.

"Goodnight, Ocea." Oslo gently wishes.

"Goodnight, Ossa." Ocea drifts out of the bedroom unwillingly.

She walks carefully on her toes, trying to avoid the creaks of the floor boards and staircase.

Minutes pass by as Oslo stares up to his ceiling, only to hear an all too familiar sound tap, tap, tapping at his window a moment later.

Oslo wakes to the sound of chatter down below. He stretches, rising calmly from his sheets as he sees his bedside clock blinking '11:56 A.M.'

He groans, "Oh dear god..."

He yawns, shifting his legs out of bed as he attempts to stand, completely folding under the weight of his body. Just then, the chatter downstairs quieted, followed by a rush of footsteps thumping up the stairs.

His door bursts open, "*ABOUT TIME!*"

Three boyish and charming men slide through the doorway, jumping at Oslo with joy.

"We had to wait twenty years for you to wake up only to have to sit downstairs for *how many hours??*" The shorter blonde man cries as the three men lift Oslo back to his bed.

Oslo, still dazed, "My god... Jay, Destin, Peter!"

Jay kneels in front of his bedside with tears in his eyes, "Welcome home brother."

Oslo embraces the three men at once, "I don't know who this is weirder for. Me or you guys—You're suddenly old men!"

"Yeah, yeah! You're pretty old yourself!" Destin pats Oslo on the back.

Jay places his hand on Oslo's knee, "We visited you often. We'd get together every few months, fly in from wherever we were just to come see you."

"We were leaning on a miracle the whole time. It never got easier, Ossy." Peter bashfully adds.

"Man, how you've all grown. I can't believe it." Oslo shakes his head, "Well, what's happened? Are you all married with kids now?"

Destin pats his shoulder with a smile, "Before we get into it, we better bring you downstairs, Ocea's been itching to see you all day!"

Oslo blushes.

Jay lifts him by the arm, "Yeah, about Ocea! She's as pretty as ever, eh?"

Oslo's face turns bright pink, "I guess some things never change, even after twenty years. I mean look at all you! I mean, you look old as hell but you sure act the same!"

“Ah!” Jay laughs, “I’ll take that as a compliment my friend.”

The guys all assist Oslo down the steps where he finds everyone else. Mother, Ocea, Emily, Koji. Ocea’s off in the kitchen rummaging around trying to find something to do with herself, while all the ‘adults’ are in the living room chatting with coffee. They greet Oslo with a good morning as Ocea drifts back into the living room to greet him.

There are empty chairs from the kitchen circling the coffee table where the boys have been sitting, but Oslo’s seat on the couch remains open. They gently drop him down to his seat as they return to theirs. In the meantime, Ocea ran back into the kitchen to pour some coffee for Oslo, warming a leftover Scone with it.

“Here, bit late for breakfast but I’m sure you’re hungry.” She hands the pastry and coffee to him, sliding into the couch seat between him and Emily.

Oslo takes the pastry gladly, taking one large bite after another. The warm bits crumble and collect on his lap.

“How’d you sleep, Ossy?” Sachiko asks.

“Oh, good Mom. Thank you.” He mumbles through the scone.

Peter chuckles, “Eat up, we need to get some meat on your bones! Look at you, you’d think they could stuff you up in your sleep.”

“The man’s not a turkey, Peter.” Jay remarks.

“Yeah, what’s the plan health-wise, Ossy?” Koji asks, “Physical therapy, anything else? Nutritionist?”

“Yeah, that’s right. PT, Nutrition, and uh, guess I’ll be seeing a counselor as well.”

Koji nods, “Good. Very good. There’s a lot to process.” He gestures to everyone in the room, “And we’re all here to help you do that too. It’s gonna take some time.”

“Thank you, It’s not been easy... Coming back to reality. One day I’m at the beach with my family, the next I’m waking up in a hospital. Twenty years older.”

Ocea places her hand on Oslo’s thigh, leaning against his side.

He continues, “But—Enough of that talk. It’s too early for all that! What’s the plan for today?”

The day continues much like yesterday, sitting on that couch and catching up with everyone. Jay lives in New York now, he’s been working at a modeling agency for the past fifteen years. He started as an intern and quickly rose to the top. He now

manages several teams overseeing various campaigns. He still lives alone in his two-bedroom loft apartment in Manhattan.

“You’ll have to come up and visit! The city’s great. The people, food, everything. You can stay in my spare bedroom! It’s kinda empty right now but I’ll fix it up before you come!”

Peter moved down to Atlanta after college where he works as a software consultant for a Fortune 500 company. That same company is where he met his wife when he was twenty-eight. They got married and started a family one year later.

“Sorry they couldn’t make it, one kid had a swim meet, another had some campout experience thing, I dunno. But we’re gonna come back out soon to see ya! Or you could come out to us? We’d love to have you!”

Destin lives not too far away in Raleigh where he works as a lead game designer for a very successful company. He’s been dating around but has had a hard time connecting with anyone in particular. He’s been talking to one promising woman who shares a lot of the same interests.

“Her name’s Michelle. I really want this one to work out... It’s just been such a drag, man.” He huffs, “It’s been a hard time out here the last twenty years lemme tell ya... But it’ll all work out. I’m sure.”

The whole crew did end up going to NC State as they said they would, though Jay transferred his Sophomore year to NYU. They all stayed connected through Oslo despite him being away for so long. Ocea made sure of it too.

By the end of the weekend, the guys had to say goodbye for now to return to work. They decided they were all going to get together for a trip as soon as Oslo’s back on his feet. Oslo embraces them one by one, squeezing each other tight, and saying see you soon. Peter and Destin take off in the cars to their respective cities. Emily offers Jay a ride to the airport with Ocea and Oslo tagging along. As they pull up to the drop-off, Jay steps out of the car with the single backpack he brought.

He walks up to Oslo in the back passenger side window, where he’s sat in the back, “I love you, brother. I can’t believe you’re with us again.”

“I love you too, I’m glad to be here. And thank you for coming out all this way.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Never have.” Jay leans in, squeezing Oslo tight. “See you soon, my friend!”

Jay steps off through the automatic doors as the car window rolls back up and Emily drives off.

“I never really got to know them in high school, but I’m glad I know them now. Such wonderful people.” Ocea remarks.

“They’re the best. It’s hard to believe they’ve come around so often to see me.”

“Every few months.” Ocea laughs, “I wouldn’t stop pestering them about it either. Gave me another project to keep myself busy!”

“What about all your friends from high school? Have you kept up with them at all?”

She sighs, “Not terribly. There was Esty, we kept up for a little bit. She’d check in on me but wouldn’t really show up. I did see her just a couple of months ago though. She just wanted to catch up; she’s off in Nashville now with her many boyfriends...” Ocea laughs as she shakes her head.

“Yeah, Est-y, I remember her. She was interesting.”

Emily yells from the front, “That’s a good word for her!” she makes a sudden turn, “O—I uh, thought we could make a stop on the way home. Does that sound okay?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Just back at your place, right, honey?” Emily asks.

“Yep, that’s right.”

The car pulls up to the curb, just outside the front door to the apartment building.

“All right, take your time, I’ll wait here!”

“Oh—Mom, it’s five minute drop-off zone. Just go on home, we’ll take a taxi back.”

“You and your taxis—Fine! Here’s some money for it.” Emily grabs her purse shuffling through her wallet.

“Mom, it’s fine I got it—”

“Shh shh” Emily throws two twenty dollar bills in Ocea’s face.

She sighs “Alright, mother...”

“Love you, sweetie. Come home safely!”

“Will do.”

Ocea grabs the wheelchair from the trunk and helps Oslo into the seat. She pulls him up over the curb as they wave bye to her mother.

“This is cool.” Oslo looks up in amazement.

Ocea chuckles, “It’s not bad! I enjoy it at least.” She continues pushing him through the door, past the lobby, and onto the elevator.

“I just had to grab some of my things, but I thought it’d be a good opportunity to show you the place! Maybe grab some movies for tonight or something.”

“Did something happen to streaming while I was out?” Oslo remarks.

“No, no! *But* I have grown juuuust a little obsessive with collecting certain things.” She blushes, “I’m sure you’ll appreciate it. But I do have streaming if we can’t find anything you like!”

“I’m sure I’ll like whatever you got for me!”

The elevator stops a moment later. They slide out and over to her apartment door where she scans a small disk on a pad to get in.

“Fancy”

“Thank ya”

She pushes Oslo into the dark and cold space. Ocea keeps the lights out most of the time, she doesn’t spend as much time there as she thinks she should.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Drink? Like *drink drink*.”

Ocea laughs, “Yes, drink drink. You *are* over twenty-one now, you know! Not that that has stopped anyone before...” She shrugs, “But you know. Anything?”

She parks Oslo in the living room and kicks off her shoes, turning around into her kitchen.

“Whatever you like, I’ll take!”

“Very well!” She slides in her socked feet to the fridge, opening it to a bunch of beer bottles.

She grabs a tall can set in between a random assortment of beer. It reads ‘*Plum Cheesecake Sour*’.

“This is a special occasion so I’ll break out the big guns—” Ocea sets out two small glasses. She taps the lid of the tab, popping it to a fizz.

She walks into the living room extending a glass, “Here ya go.”

“Oh, thanks—” Oslo takes a sip of the purple bubbly substance. His head jolts back as he smacks his tongue. “That’s—*ahem*—Really something. I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“Do you like it?” Ocea smiles in excitement as she sits in the couch corner right in front of him.

“S-sure, what is it? Is this beer?”

“It’s a sour! Plum Cheesecake! The first time I had it I was like ‘*Oslo has to try this he’s going to love it!*’” She throws back half her glass. “I’ll grab the rest!”

Ocea runs to the kitchen grabbing the can, “I’m so glad you like it!”

“Yeah, of course. You’ve always had great taste!” Oslo nervously laughs.

“Here, let’s move you into the couch. You’ll be much more comfortable.” Ocea sets her glass and beer can on the coffee table, lifting Oslo’s arm over her shoulder as she supports his back.

“This is a lovely place, Ocea. The view—Well kinda reminds me of the hospital view.” Oslo says as Ocea lowers him into the couch corner.

She pushes his wheelchair to the side, taking a seat next to him.

“Yeah, I do love it here. I get a good rate since I’ve been here for so long...And maybe because my dad knows the owner of the unit.” She grins humorously.

“That’s great! Gotta use your connections.” Oslo sips his beer, jolting his head back.

The room sits still for a moment. Ocea swigs her sour as she looks out the window behind her.

Oslo’s head jolts, though not from the beer this time. He finds himself somewhere else. Somewhere familiar. He can see Ocea sitting there by a gilded window. Wood framed. Dust falls through the air, casting small shadows over the wood table they’re sitting at. The air is warm, the wind is calming, and the birds chirp. The faucet drips, and all he can think about is farming for a moment. Until, Ocea turns to face Oslo, and they’re back in her apartment.

“What’s with the face?” She smiles, looking a wide-eyed Oslo in the eyes.

“Oh—I’m sorry—I think I just remembered something. Like a dream I had.”

“A dream? You remember a dream? Last night or in the coma?”

“I don’t know...It’s kinda like when we were in the hospital, and I remembered the quote from your book. It’s a blurry vision of something. You looking out the window just now took me somewhere else.”

“Sounds like your dreams are coming back to you in pieces.” Ocea curls her legs on the couch, inching closer to Oslo.

He stares off into space, “Yeah. It’s strange. Y’know, my dreams are more than half my life. I would hope to remember *something*.” He turns to Ocea, “Maybe when I read your books it’ll all come back to me.” He boyishly grins.

Ocea places her hand on his lap, “We’ve got our whole loves, Ossy. I’m sure it’ll come back to you.”

She slowly drops her head down to his shoulder, sliding her cheek to rest on his chest.

“You know, Ossy. In some ways, this feels like a dream to me.” She takes her arm and wraps it over his torso.

Her voice quivers, “I didn’t think this day would ever come. I lived a nightmare for twenty years—and I know. I know I did it to myself.”

“Ocea, it’s not your—”

“Not the accident. Choosing you.”

Oslo leans away for Ocea to look her in the eyes. Her hand slides down to his leg as he places his hand on hers.

“Ocea—“ Oslo doesn’t know what to say. His face shows uncertainty, sadness, guilt, confusion.

“Of course the first couple of years were expected. I wanted the coma to be short, and there was some promise of that early on—” Her face turns red, “But by the second year I knew this could be the long haul. But I buckled in. I made a conscious effort to prepare the world for you. Prepare my life for you to come back into it.”

She wipes her tears as she sniffles the dripping snot back into her nose,

“I chose you over life. And, Ossy, it was so hard—” Oslo droops his head down as Ocea catches his face in the palm of her hand, lifting his eyes to hers, “And so worth it. Your twenty years of dreaming created a dream for me. A dream that so pales in comparison to any other. To have you back in my life, once and for all.”

She continues, “And now it’s me. I’m dreaming. I’m the one dreaming, Ossy. You’ve made it all come true.”

“When you opened your eyes, you saved me.”

Hearing those words crushed Oslo. For all the times he wanted to save her, never would he ask for it to be like this.

“But Ocea—It wasn’t me. For all we know, if you weren’t there for me, I’d still be out. I’d still be asleep. If you didn’t call to me, it could’ve been over for me a long time ago!”

Ocea laughs hysterically. She covers her face with her hands as she laughs and laughs.

Oslo, confused, “Wh—What?!”

She lifts her head up, wiping away tears, “When will you accept defeat? I’m no hero, Ossy.” Ocea takes a deep breath, “Maybe what this shows us is...” she looks away as her hand slides over his.

“What?”

She loosely slides her fingers in between his, “Maybe it tells us that we’re better together.”

His face relaxes. He thinks about the times they were together. The games, play pretend, and the joy they’d bring each other. The midnight pebbles at the window. Her letter to him.

He thinks about the times apart. High school was a blur. He was depressed. There wasn’t a day he didn’t think about her, nor a night he didn’t dream about her.

“We are better together.” Oslo tightens his fingers around her hand as she does the same. “Ocea, I saw you in my dreams. I know I did. And one day I’ll remember them. I’ll tell you all about them—”

She places her hand on his chest, “But for now—”

His hand on her face, “We be—”

Their lips fall into the others. Softly overlapping, they hold their faces together as if it would be the last time. Their hearts beat as one, breaking through their chests, tight, as they forgot to draw a breath.

Their lips click as they release from one another. Their hearts pound so hard they shake with every beat.

“I-” Oslo’s voice shakes, “I—”

Ocea falls into his face, “I love you too, Ossy.”

They fall against the arm of the couch. Ocea lays over him as they hold each other with the moonlight laying across their bodies.

As they kiss, they beg for this moment to never end.

The fire is warm. The night is cold. Snow rests on the tips of grass outside with no sound but the crackle of the fireplace. Oslo sits in a plush red armchair as he unfolds a piece of paper and adjusts his reading glasses,

You're not here at the moment but we are. We are so happy to have you as our son. And I know you would have gone to do amazing things in this life. And for that, we celebrate this day. Your mother and I took a trip out to the summer vacation home just on our own this time. We wanted some time away and to reflect on the gift that life has given us. I wanted to tell you that, even as you sleep, you are changing our lives for the better. Without you, my life would have very little meaning. I am so glad to call you my son. I wish I could repay you for giving me the greatest gift of all, being your father. But I can't. All I can do is sit here and pray you come back to us one day.

I love you. So much. I'm sorry I didn't tell you that enough.

Happy Birthday, Son.

Love, your dad.

Oslo sighs as he drops the letter to his knees, taking a deep breath and wiping his tears away.

He folds the letter back into form and slips it into an envelope. He pushes against the arms of the chair, lifting himself as he turns to a bookshelf in the back of the living room. From a wall of books, he pulls a tall brown box labeled *'from dad'*. He pulls the lid off, returning the envelope marked *'happy 30th'* to the top of the stack.

The sound of a vinyl spinning emits from the other side of the room, though Oslo doesn't notice it.

A hand reaches over his shoulder, turning him around as jazz music plays.

"Oh—What a beautiful woman in my living room." Oslo remarks.

Ocea wraps her arms over his shoulders as they start to sway to the music.

“Who, me?”

“That’s right.” Oslo smiles through his beard.

“Surely, you must be seeing through the waves of wrinkly skin, messy grey hair, and thick, wide-eyed glasses, to some beautiful woman behind me?”

Oslo smirks, “No, no. I know who I’m talking to. It’s you, my darling.”

She smiles, “Well—You must be my husband, Ossy, then.”

He laughs, “I would hope you wouldn’t be dancing with some sweet talking stranger!”

The two embrace as they share multiple kisses.

Thumping footsteps roll through the other side of the house before meeting at the living room doorway.

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I interrupting?” A slender blonde woman stands in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “I can come back later!”

“Oh, don’t look at me! Your mother was putting on the moves!” Oslo throws his arms into the air.

“EW!” The woman cries.

“Oh, please! Your father apparently wants to spend his birthday weeping and tormenting himself rather than cheerful in the arms of his lover!”

“Again—EW!” She shuffles quickly over to her father, embracing him at his side. “But I’m sorry dad please don’t cry.”

Oslo laughs with every bit of his chest, “Trust me, Sylva darling, I’m fine. It’s just something I like to do each year.”

“Grandpa’s letters—Torment is right! You shouldn’t be doing that to yourself!”

“Trust me, darling. Despite what it appears I do enjoy it.”

Ocea walks to the kitchen doorway, “Alrighty, the jazz is on, the table is cleared, and dinner is ready to be served!”

Oslo, Ocea, and Sylva join one another at the outdoor table. The lighting is low and the wind is chilled, as they weren’t used to being at the summer vacation house this time of year.

“I might go grab my coat! You guys want yours?” Sylva asks.

Ocea nods her head no with a mouth full of wine.

“No, we’ll be okay sweetheart.” Oslo confirms.

As they sit in the crisp air, they look down the old pathway filled with sand, sticks, and stones.

“You remember going out there all those years ago?”

“Do I? This place traumatized me—The both of us! Remember?”

Oslo shrugs, “You’re right, you’re right. Just trying to be romantic.” He rubs his hand over hers. “I know this wasn’t your ideal place to be, but thank you for making an exception just this once.”

Ocea smiles reluctantly, “It may be the last time we can make it out. And it didn’t feel right to never come back here.” She rubs her arms, “Call it the last demon I need to slay before I go!”

Oslo laughs for a moment before Ocea’s words start bouncing around in his mind.

“Hm—Maybe I should’ve had her bring my coat for me—Hey, Sylva!” Ocea shouts.

Oslo continues to contemplate, “Slay demons...”

“Yeah—You know the term.” Ocea takes a swig of wine.

“I do—” Oslo’s brain rattles. Wiggles. Shakes. A tremor, more like. The words he wants to formulate don’t. The sound of slime and twisting of goo gurgles through the sides of his head. A mass grows in Oslo’s mind. His head feels like air is being pumped into it and his skull is expanding feet from his brain. His vision is shaky as he faintly hears Ocea crying, yelling for help.

One moment he’s sitting, preparing for his birthday dinner with his family. The next, he finds himself lying in an all too familiar bed.

He hears some words being directed at him. *Welcome back. You’re okay. Mild stroke.*

“W-where’s my family?” The old man murmurs through his crusted lips.

As the kind nurse attempts to explain, Oslo can focus on anything but sound. He blinks in and out of a sleepy state. Memories come and go, flashing through his mind as he blinks. Though, he’s unsure what memories they are exactly.

“Sir? Sir?”

Oslo shakes, rubbing his eyes and turning to the nurse, “I’m here—Yes, I’m here—It’s really me, I’m alive! I’m alive!” He yells in victory.

The nurse smiles, “Sir, I’ll go grab your family. The doctor’s already briefed them on your stroke.”

Oslo’s eyes widen, “What? Stroke? What stroke?”

The nurse’s face turns grim, “Oh, yes, sir. As I said, you suffered a mild stroke. But you’re fine now, just rest easy and I’ll go grab your family.”

“Yes, Ocea, Sylva. Please, bring my family to me.”

The nurse nods with a smile as she walks out the door to the pasty white room. Nothing but a few seconds later, his family comes rushing through the door.

“My darling—“ Ocea leans into the bed with her embrace, leading with several kisses.

“You okay, dad?” Sylva asks with tears in her eyes.

“Sweetheart.” Oslo reaches his hand out to her. She quickly takes it, pulling herself closely to the bed.

“I’m okay.” He smiles without a doubt.

Ocea side-eyes him, “You know you just had a stroke, right?”

“Sure sure.” He waves his hand dismissively, “More importantly my dear—” He leans toward her with wild eyes, “It’s all come back. Memories decades old. I don’t know how or why, but it’s all come back!”

Ocea, bewildered by the look on his face, “What, dear? What memories?” Before Oslo could speak, her eyes widen with a gasp that reaches to the pit of her stomach, “From your coma!”

The two laugh in excitement as their faces light up.

“Well?” Ocea begged, “What happened?!”

“Well... I can’t say I see it all. It’s all in a bit of pieces. But there’s something there, and that’s a start.”

Ocea squeezes his hand, “O-Okay. That’s good?”

“Of course! Yeah I think so... You see, There’s this... Grey substance. I remember touching it. Grabbing a hold of it and it—” Oslo thinks for a moment, staring off into space, “It moved me places. I could see different worlds.”

Sylva runs to the other side of the bed grabbing Oslo's other hand, "What else?! What kind of worlds?"

Oslo stares blankly for a moment, focused on each corner of his brain. He searches every pocket, looking for the moments he was just shown minutes ago.

"I...I think it's slipping again."

He drops his head back into the pillow, "...It's gone."

Ocea leans her head into his shoulder, "I'm sorry, my love."

"It's alright... A few more strokes and I might get the whole picture!"

Ocea and Sylva simultaneously smack both of Oslo's arms,

"DAD!"

"OSSY!"

His laugh turns into a cough as his face sinks again, "Sorry, I shouldn't be so morbid."

Oslo remains in the hospital for a few days so the doctors can monitor his progress. While it was a mild stroke, Oslo expressed his concern to the doctor,

"My father had a stroke around the same time. He didn't make it."

The doctor assures Oslo of his progress. He remarks warning signs, though Oslo insists it all came about at once.

While many mysteries of the stroke linger, Oslo is released to go home. The family is reunited again at their house outside of Charlotte to make up for Oslo's lost birthday dinner.

Sylva drops a large bowl of glistening karaage chicken in front of Oslo as the finishing touches to the table setting.

"This looks wonderful, my dear. Thank you for doing this once again!"

"Of course, dad!" Sylva smiles as she takes her seat at the circular table.

The three pass many bowls between each other to fill their plates. Just like the vacation home, Ocea has a jazz record playing in the living room around the corner. The lighting is dim with a few candles lit, and the air in the room is peaceful and relieved at the close call they just experience.

The sound of chewing and plate scrapping resonate at the table before Oslo clears his throat to say, "Sylva."

“Mhm?” The stuffed mouthed girl responds.

“Have you read your mother’s book—”

Sylva interrupts, “Which one?”

Oslo smirks, “—Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow.”

She sits cross legged in the wooden chair, slowly sinking her face to the side of the table, “Suuuure.”

Her parents roll their eyes as Ocea pats her hand, “It’s okay, I don’t expect you to honey.”

Oslo continues, “Well, that was the first book she ever finished. It took her twenty, twenty-five years?”

Ocea nods, “closer to twenty-five.”

“It took her another three or four years just to get it published. Just a year or two after you were born, might I add—”

“Wait, really?” Sylva turns to her mother, “I thought you’d been some revered, famous, spectacular author *all* your life?”

Ocea rolls her eyes, “First of all, *famous* is a stretch—”

“Umm okay tell that to the award shelf and your millions of followers?”

“*Anyways*—I tell you about Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow because that is the very story that was not only inspired by the undying love your mother has for me,” Ocea rolls her eyes as Oslo continues, “But it also inspired the very house we sit and eat in in this very moment.”

“Wait, really? That’s cool—You’re *just now* telling me this, why?”

“Well—” Oslo pauses as he stares down to the table, chopsticks in hand, “I was just thinking. About how I’m now older than my father was when he passed.”

Oslo’s throat tires as he fights back tears, “And the only way I’ve been able to spend time with him is with these letters of his. You see, the conversations I have the opportunity to have with you, he didn’t get to have with me. And I don’t get to tell him I love him.”

Ocea rubs his shoulder as he continues, “So I just want to be able to tell you things about my life before I go. Because, we never know when my time is up.”

“Dad, don’t say that!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but it’s true.” He clears his throat, “But the house, the house as described by your mother, is an exact replica of the house in the meadow.”

“*Deep and dark* meadow? Kinda creepy, no?”

“Maaaybe you can read the book and find out!” Ocea teases.

“You know what, I’m not much of a reader, but for you mom. Anything!”

The night is still in their house in the meadow. The fields of crops in their backyard sing with the gentle breeze that dips into the curvature of the earth. The clouds disperse as the bright stars shine down on the grand victorian style home.

Far from that of a shack, as described in Corea’s meadow. Oslo may have exaggerated that one.

While Sylva agreed to stay long enough to see her family through the weekend and ensure her father’s health, she has to be returning to school the next morning.

She packs her car with her luggage and kisses her parents goodbye. Warm cup of coffee in hand, she puts the gear in drive and climbs the steep dirt path up and out of the meadow.

When she arrives to her dorm and lays her luggage out on the floor, she finds a curious little package bunched up in between her clothes.

To: my Sylva.

From: your Father.

She eagerly tears the package open, revealing an envelope and a book. ‘*Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow*’. But behind that, slips out another book about the same size.

‘*Oslo and the Deep Red Sea.*’

She chuckles, “Surely he didn’t write his own book. And put his name in it??”

She looks further, revealing the writer was not her father, but a Japanese children’s author. She quickly flips through the book before turning over to the envelope and tearing it open.

Sylva,

Two books near and dear to me. One was the one we discussed by your mother. The other happens to be the book I was named after. While a namesake, yes, I've found many profound guidances in this story that I hope you may find in it as well. As for your mother's book, all the more. I hope our passion for stories can guide you in this strange world as you become an adult. It's a world I didn't have to face until I was thirty-eight. Unfortunately, you're going to be there a lot sooner than I had to. But do not be afraid, we are always with you. And we will forever love you.

*your father,
Oslo*

Sylva wipes tears away, "Way to make me ugly cry at school, dad." She hugs the books and letter, "I love you too."

"So, so much."

It was only a couple months later as Summer was right around the corner, Sylva picked up her phone in the midst of class only to hear the words she dreaded more than anything.

She ran from class, without a care to stop by her dorm, she drove two hours back home as fast as she could.

"Ocea, dear."

"Yes, my love?"

"I think I remember."

"What's that, Ossy?"

"The dreamscape."

Oslo lays with his head sunken into the pillow. His words are jumbled and his speech is mumbled. The only thing he can ever keep his eyes focused on are Ocea's.

He continues, "Those dreams I had all that time ago."

"Yes, yes darling. Tell them to me. Tell me more." She chokes up.

Oslo speaks on, detailing the dreamscapes he saw. The wild colors and beautiful songs that Ocea would speak. He remembers his friends, how they would come by in his dreams as well to check in on him. The dreams that reflected the books Ocea read to him. The dragons, the dancing, the tribes. He recalled the beautiful adventures he had, and that they were not painful, but beautiful. And how he faced his greatest demon of all: Himself.

“Ocea, you gave me my dreams. I couldn’t have seen such amazing things all those years if it wasn’t for you.” Tears drop from Oslo’s eyes, though his face remains a blank stare to the ceiling, “I remember how you would call out to me. ‘*Ossy, ossy, follow my voice.*’ You would say.”

Ocea cracks a smile. A sorrowful laugh as she remembers all the moments she would whisper those very words to him at his bedside.

“I did say that, Ossy. I did.”

Oslo turns to her again, “Now, Ocea—” He mumbles, “Follow the sound of mine.”

Ocea breaks, clenching onto his chest as tears and snot run down her face.

Oslo pleads, “Follow my voice, Ocea. May you hold our daughter close. May you be her guiding light. Guide her, as you guided me.”

Ocea grips onto him in a room of darkness. Nothing but them and the bed he lays in exists. Nothing but the sorrow and joy they’ve shared all their lives. Nothing but the one true companion that they’ve been to one another. Ocea clings. Begging. Pleading.

“Ocea.”

“Yes, my love?”

He murmurs, “Do you remember, the oak tree?”

Ocea nods, “Yes, of course.”

“Do you remember all those wonderful times we had? The forest...Yes. The forest. That was in my dream too.”

“Really?” Ocea forces a smile through her wallowing, “Wh—What happened there, Ossy?”

“You remember that dragon? The great black dragon...”

“Yes, of course.”

“I...I finally did it.” Oslo smiles.

Ocea begs, “Did what?”

“I killed the dragon.”

Ocea laughs.

“You did it, baby. You did it.”

“I sa-Saved...”

“ocea—”

The room fades into nothingness. Nothing more than a chilled air between Ocea and the ground she now sits on. She weeps. She weeps.

She weeps.

She weeps.

Nothing more.

The phone shakes in Sylva’s trembling hands as she’s pulled on the side of the road. The words that hold far too much gravity and crush the innocent soul of the young girl. The words breach her calm mind to create a never ending storm. The evil words that bring meaning to her fragile and finite life.

“He’s gone.”

Gone.

As Ocea and Sylva are packing up the house in the meadow, Ocea dusts off an old wooden box she had never seen before, sitting to the side of their bedroom bookshelf.

She unlatches the golden hinges and lifts the lid to reveal a small booklet. The cover reads, “*My Book. by Your Oslo*”

Ocea gasps as she covers her mouth. She lifts the booklet into the light to reveal it’s tattered edges and grainy hardcover.

Without further hesitation, Ocea rests her back against the bookshelf and opens the first page.

For my Ocea,

You never ceased to inspire me, and while my creative dreams didn't come to fruition, my greatest dream of all did.

Marrying you.

You wrote the most beautiful stories and we made the most beautiful baby. I lived a wonderful life. You gave me the greatest childhood, the greatest dreamland, and the greatest 'retirement'.

In this book you'll find my one true story. I wrote this throughout the last couple of years, hoping that one day I'd finish it and get to show it to you. Well, it isn't quite finished, but I'm hoping you'll understand.

Ocea. The sound of your name gave my life meaning. The call of your voice shook my soul. Maybe my life was cut short like my fathers, but know that there wasn't a single thing that I would change. If I had a million more chances at life, I would choose to fight through a coma to get to you every time.

Ocea, I'll be waiting. Preparing a meadow for you.

Love, your Oslo

Sylva walks in to find her weeping mother curled on the ground. She runs to comfort her, finding the booklet with the letter inside. With her mother's head on her lap, she picks up the booklet. As she's preparing to open the first page, she looks down to see her mother crying with the most brilliant smile on her face.

Sylva opens to the letter, turning it to find a table of contents with two bold words prominently scribbled at the top of the page,

Ocea's Dreaming

End.