



*Returning
Christmas*

a short story

Emily Conrad

*"They would return
Christmas itself, if they
could. They just don't know
who to return it to—or
what their refund would
be."*

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With dark hair, green sweater and a toned build, he was Santa's opposite in every but one. As he made his way around the glittering ballroom, he doled out gifts from a large sack.

He would have no gift for her, so Gwen lowered her eyes to spare them both embarrassment. She'd only recently signed away an absurd portion of her paycheck for a lease and hadn't met any of her neighbors before the Christmas party. Even an hour into it, she'd done little more than brush shoulders with the other tenants as she wandered the room. She never should've come.

"Gwendolyn." Instead of rushing through the three syllables of her name, the man's warm voice pronounced each one as if he had all the time in the world for her.

Her eyes ticked to his face. Had he learned her name off the intercom by the front door? Friends called her Gwen, but she wouldn't correct him. In his mouth, her full name rang with a richness that suggested, however incorrectly, she fit in among the poised and well-to-do neighbors.

He squeezed her hand. "I'm Maddox. Seven twenty-four."

When he released her hand to dig around in his bag, Gwen swirled her champagne glass. Alcohol never had much draw for her, but she'd needed something to hold on to. She was glad

for it now as the ovals of a hundred other tenants' faces turned her direction, some more blatantly watching Maddox than others.

She forced her shoulders down and back. "I chose it for the view of the bridge."

"The bridge?" He paused his rummaging to raise his eyebrows. "Isn't your side of the building petitioning to tear that down?"

Gwen's face burned. She would never fit in here. "It makes me think of London."

"One man's trash is another man's treasure. And speaking of treasures"—with a flourish, he presented a small box wrapped in gold paper—"I hope you find this to be one of them."

She waited. Surely he'd retract it, a cruel joke on the new, mousy tenant. But he didn't. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"It's not about deserving. It's a gift."

"You shouldn't have." And she meant it.

"But I did." He held the package ever closer, and she had no choice but to take it.

Gwen glanced around for a place to set the drink. How could he afford a gift for everyone? It had better be something silly, cheap. She'd just spent hundreds on gifts for her family. That, coupled with rent and other bills, had her bank account sulking. No extra remained to buy a gift in return for this, whatever it was. She stepped toward a table to free her hands, but Maddox signaled her to stop.

"Not here."

A couple entered the room, and he excused himself to trade gifts with them, leaving Gwen to study her present. As she turned the box, the curls of the bow tumbled over her fingers and drooped toward the floor. The wrapping was so beautiful that the gift inside must be... Must be something he hadn't meant to give to her.

“I see you’ve been gifted.”

Gwen looked up.

The speaker, a woman in black, nodded at the box in Gwen’s hand. “Since you’re a woman, it’ll be the customary diamond necklace.”

Gwen gaped. Customary? Diamond?

The woman rolled her eyes. “Maddox will give them to anyone, won’t he?” She shook her head with something like disgust. Then she smiled slyly, refocusing her large eyes on Gwen. “Next year, it’ll be about the same, value-wise.” Gwen’s older brother had once used the same tone to convince her a monster lived under her bed. “The following year depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you give him. He gives you two years to get the hang of his formula. Once things get going, he doubles the value of the gift you gave him the previous year. A beautiful system.” The woman cackled.

“I don’t even know him.” She turned to catch up and give the gift back.

“Someone did that once.” The woman gripped her shoulder. “He left immediately and mailed the rest of our gifts. Mailed them. Delayed them for *days*.”

Gwen spun back. The last thing she wanted was to give the tenants a reason to hate her. “What if I don’t give him anything? Will he stop?”

The woman’s face went slack. “I don’t think anyone’s ever tried that.” Her eyes drifted, and she lifted her chin and waved at a woman across the room.

She was losing the chance to finally meet a neighbor, so Gwen stepped a little closer. “I’m Gwen.”

“Charlize. Nice meeting you.” She sauntered away.

Gwen wandered the room until she managed to insert herself into conversation with a single man named Phil and a married couple, Rachel and Richard. They laughed off Gwen's encounter with Charlize.

"She thinks she's a queen because she runs the tenant association." Rachel waved her hand at the glitter of the party around them. "This is her handiwork."

As she spoke, Rachel's eyes followed Maddox, who had finished trading gifts and was making his way toward the exit. When the door swung shut behind him, Rachel and the two men at the table picked up their belongings and stood.

Ten o'clock hadn't yet come and gone. Given the open bar, why weren't people staying until the alcohol ran out?

Phil picked up his gift from the table. "You should come with us tomorrow."

Rachel glared at him.

"What's tomorrow?" Gwen bent to look for her purse on the floor. No rush to find it, since the no-name brand would do nothing to make friends here.

"We always go to the mall. Exchange the gifts."

Her chin jerked up. "Exchange the gifts?"

Phil shrugged and nodded.

"Don't judge us." Rachel's smooth manicure dug into the supple leather of her designer purse. "I happen to know someone this year is getting a pair of Jet Skis."

Gwen narrowed her eyes. What was the relevance?

"We return the gifts so we can use the money toward the gift we'll give Maddox next year." Richard's blunt explanation left Phil looking sheepish and Rachel seething.

Gwen sat back in her chair. If refusing the gifts saddened Maddox, returning them would likely enrage him. She smiled to the others, who waited for her decision. “I’ll have to pass.”

She moved the tablecloth aside and spotted her purse. By the time she stood with it in hand, Rachel and Richard were already a table away, headed for the door.

Phil had stayed behind. “It’s ridiculous, really. The cost of the gifts goes up and up.” He shook his head, and they started toward the door. “Rachel and Richard played the game, and they’re in over their heads. She doesn’t see it that way, but the only way they can afford to keep it up is by returning what he gives them.”

“So what’s the point? If they don’t get to keep it...”

Phil opened the door for her. “She keeps some of the money.” They crossed the hall, and he pressed the button to call the elevator. “The rest goes toward his next present. Every year, she gets a couple hundred to keep while she still gets to give huge gifts to Maddox, making her look like she has more money than she does. It does wonders for her status around the building.”

The doors dinged and opened.

Gwen gave him a sideways glance as she pressed the button for her floor. “It sounds like you don’t approve.”

“Well...” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “If he gives me something I don’t like, I’ll exchange it.” The elevator stopped on his floor. “Anyway, merry Christmas.”

When she made it to her apartment, Gwen slid the ribbon from around the gift. After cutting the tape on the gold wrapping, she unfolded the paper and opened the box. Three diamonds dangled from a white gold chain on a bed of velvet. She pressed a hand on the dining room table for balance.

She couldn't keep this. Now that Maddox had delivered all his gifts, it would inconvenience no one for her to return this to him.

He would be disappointed, but it was ridiculous, like Phil said. Someone going through life in such a ridiculous way was bound to be disappointed.

She would march up to 724 in the morning. She would knock and, when he opened the door, she would put the box in his hands and firmly tell him, "No, thank you."



A year later, Gwen checked her appearance six times before she left for the Christmas party. Her looks weren't the problem; in college she'd come to terms with being plain. Her nerves were because she'd not bought anything for Maddox.

His three-diamond necklace glittered at her throat. Over the past year, it'd become one of her favorite possessions. Maddox's game was too expensive to play, but she was a good person. Didn't she deserve a nice gift once in a while? Wasn't it about time God sent her a little blessing?

Maybe, maybe not.

She'd upped the work she did in the community and at church, just in case.

After the demanding hours she put in at the job that earned her this wonderful apartment, she was spread thin with volunteering at soup kitchens and outreaches. But she loved coming home to this place, and she loved the sparkle of this necklace. Unfortunately, the apartment and necklace couldn't cure the bags under her eyes.

The sixth time she stood before the mirror, she touched the necklace, then lifted her chin and rode the elevator to the ballroom, armed with her stack of greeting cards.

The scene set by Charlize, the tenant association president and head of the Christmas party committee, dropped Gwen's chin back down. Extravagance marked the ballroom. Instead of last year's string trio, a small band played on the stage, and a man in a turquoise cummerbund sang into a mic. A pair of ice sculpture swans spread their wings over the buffet table. She gripped her cards tighter and crossed the room to join a cluster of her neighbors.

Conversation centered on how little snow had fallen this year. They nibbled on hors d'oeuvres.

The man from the fifth floor predicted a brown Christmas.

The woman from 206 argued it would mostly be a grey Christmas, since, after all, they lived in the city.

A couple of them eyed the door, and the others followed suit. Conversation petered out as everyone watched for Maddox to arrive.

At nine, he arrived to a quiet room that burst into a party when the attendees spotted him.

Gwen's nerves danced until he approached. Then the jitters turned ugly and stabbed her lungs.

"Still enjoying the view of the bridge?" He held the gift sack over his shoulder casually, as if everyone walked around with matching loads.

Still recovering her breath, she nodded.

His eyes dropped to her neck, and he smiled, showing the start of crow's feet. Gwen touched the diamonds. Maybe she shouldn't have worn the necklace. What made her think she deserved it or that her charity work would matter one ounce to her neighbor?

He reached into his bag and gave her a present the size of a department store clothing box.

Gwen accepted the gift and offered a card from her stack. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Gwendolyn.”

That night in her apartment, Gwen opened the wrapping to find a wool coat and a silk scarf. The perfect fit and colors made her turn twice in front of the mirror, but afterward, she returned the gift to the box.

Maddox would demand this back after he opened the card.



In mid-January, Gwen wore the coat for the first time. When she stepped into the elevator, Maddox waited there, also on his way down.

He smiled as if he didn't notice how red her face had become, though the mirrored walls of the elevator revealed the color to be as striking as the coat was beautiful.

“I'm glad to see you wearing it. After your thank you note, I'd have to be suspicious if I saw you going out without it.”

“Suspicious?”

“Some of the others send notes, too, believe it or not. And then the next day...” He stared at the wall. “Some people would exchange any gift for something they could earn or buy, or for something more convenient. They would return Christmas itself, if they could.” He offered Gwen a regretful smile.

“No one would return Christmas. It's too much fun.”

Maddox's tight smile stayed in place. “You'd be surprised. They just don't know who to return it to—or what their refund would be.”

Maddox was just too strange. Perhaps he was losing it. Thankfully, the doors slid open to the lobby.

“You’ll see.” His voice followed her as she stepped onto the marble of the lobby.

May as well stay on his good side. “It’s a beautiful coat.”

He managed a genuine smile before she hurried away.



The following year, the invitation to the annual Christmas party announced a black-tie dress code. Gwen found a gown at a thrift store, probably some teenager’s discarded homecoming attire. The ivory satin, when accompanied by the diamond necklace, would satisfy the requirements of the party.

Gwen clasped the chain around her neck and scooped up her cards. As compliant as she’d been to the dress code, the cards were an act of rebellion: Charlize had dubbed this gathering a “holiday” party, so Gwen chose cards that said “Merry Christmas.”

The elevator delivered her to the second floor where she met Heather, a friendly neighbor she’d convinced to accompany her to the party.

The women entered the ballroom and found Charlize had upgraded the decor to match the dress code. A large dance floor accompanied the band and the ice sculptures. Also, each of the chairs, which hadn’t been shabby to start with, were covered with cloth and decorated by large, red bows tied behind the backs. Out the windows, cars cut through new, wet snow. The two women took a seat at a table.

“He sounds like a weirdo to me,” Heather said.

The January conversation with Maddox in the elevator had been weird, but Gwen had seen him since, and he’d managed some absolutely sane small talk. Still, she couldn’t explain him and wouldn’t try.

It was for the best that she'd kept back her opinions because, when Maddox entered the ballroom, he'd brought with him yet another surprise. This year, all his golden gifts matched in size and color.

Heather lifted her hand to shield her mouth while Maddox was still twenty feet off. "White tie is fancier than black tie, isn't it? He outdid Charlize."

Maddox wore a black tux, but his shirt, vest, and bowtie were all white. Gwen smiled. So she wasn't alone in undermining Charlize tonight.

As he stepped up to the table, he greeted both women by name. He presented one gift to Heather, then one to Gwen. "I hope it's a treasure."

Gwen's smile broadened at the familiar line.

He wished them each a merry Christmas and moved on.

Heather cocked an eyebrow. "So I'm guessing this isn't a necklace. I moved in a year too late. Unless you think it's something better?"

Gwen took one box in each hand. They seemed to be the same weight. Too big for jewelry, too small for clothing. A card nestled under the bow of Gwen's but not Heather's.

"Well, anyway..." Heather sipped her wine. "He really lit up when he saw you."

"It's not like that." Gwen fiddled with the card. If only she didn't have to wait until later to know what it said.

She passed the time in conversation with Heather until Maddox neared the door to leave. The party-goers sat perched and ready to break up for the year, but Charlize, in her elaborate black gown, swept back into the room.

"A Bible?" Her voice trilled like a piccolo. "A Bible?"

All conversation ceased, but the band continued to play. Gwen strained to hear Maddox's response over the music.

"The gifts I've given this year are the most valuable I have to give."

"Then you're either a liar or a lunatic. Perhaps both. Either way..."

A musician, perhaps distracted by the outburst, hit a renegade drum, and the sound popped through the ballroom. Maddox staggered like Rachel, who danced drunk in Richard's arms. Charlize had been right; he took refusals of his gifts hard.

Too hard. He dropped to his knees and braced a hand on the floor. The music stopped, and Gwen rose to her feet.

The pop hadn't been a drum. Charlize's hand hid in the folds of her gown.

"It's all a sham," Charlize shouted. "He tricked us into giving him costly gifts. His apartment upstairs—it's all packed away. He's running off with everything we gave him!"

But Maddox didn't run anywhere. He rolled onto his back, the crisp, white shirt crimson.

Charlize turned her face to look down at him, her chin sharp against the black shoulder of her dress. Her glare turned back to the stunned room. "Consider *that* when you decide what calls to make."

Silence. And then Charlize's gown rustled like ocean surf as she fled.

Gwen sprinted around the tables and dropped beside Maddox, ivory satin pooling around her. She laid her hand on his black lapel. When he didn't respond, she leaned her ear to his mouth. No breathing. She couldn't do CPR, not with all this blood, not with this kind of wound.

"Maddox, if you can hear me, thank you." She gripped his hand. "Thank you, and I'm so sorry."

This man didn't deserve to die alone. He didn't deserve to die, period.

She whipped her head toward the other guests.

Heather held a cell phone to her ear. Between the two women, a sea of shocked and frozen tenants stared not at her, but at Maddox, as they'd always done. Gwen searched their faces for one who cared. Some were doctors. Respected surgeons.

“Help!”

Like watching a glacier give way to erosion, one guest and then another and then most—all?—shifted their gaze from the bleeding man to the golden gifts he'd bestowed.

“Help!” The word tore from Gwen's lungs.

A pop. A piece of tape, popping free. Paper crinkled as a tenant loosened the wrapping. More guests followed suit, unwrapping the gifts.

She leaned farther over Maddox and prayed that he was already gone because if he wasn't, this would surely kill him. Crimson flowers of blood bloomed on her dress.

By the time the police arrived, only Gwen, Heather, and a hundred crumpled sheets of golden wrapping waited in the ballroom with Maddox's body.

When law enforcement allowed Gwen to leave, she returned to her apartment, her strappy heels as heavy as cinderblocks. Charlize and the others should've taken her to the bridge they hated so much, thrown her off, and watched her drown.

The police had arrested Charlize, but no punishment could undo to the horror of the crime.

Gwen would move. She couldn't stay here. It didn't matter what it cost to break the lease.

As far as she had seen, she and Heather were the only ones to leave the ballroom without opening their gifts, all Bibles. The fact that he'd included a card with her package this year had

been intriguing before, but now, it shimmered as a lifeline. A note from Maddox. She slipped the card from under the ribbon of the gift.

Maddox had written in gold ink that shone in the light.

Gwendolyn:

Your neighbors have short-changed themselves year after year, refusing gifts in packages as beautiful as diamond necklaces and custom-made coats. They never suspected the additional value included with those gifts! Imagine how they would have treated gifts in puzzling, ugly, or sharp-edged packages.

I have waited for years for someone different.

But even you, Gwendolyn... Can you accept a gift you have no hope of earning, no matter how many hours you serve at the noblest of causes?

True gifts cannot be earned, but they can be refused in a myriad of ways. The gift in this box is no different.

Merry Christmas,

Maddox

She stared. The necklace and the coat were packages for something else? She slid her feet from the weights of her high heels and lifted the skirt of the stained gown to ease the way to the dresser where she kept the necklace's box. The velvet cushion dropped into her hand, and flat beneath it lay a one hundred dollar bill, folded around something else. Other one hundred dollar bills. Ten, in total. One thousand dollars.

She turned to the hook where the coat hung. With her seam ripper, she severed one thread along the bottom hem of the lining and then another until ten stitches had been broken, just enough to peek inside. More bills, all hundreds, formed a secondary lining under the silk,

carefully tacked to the wool without leaving evidence on the coat's exterior. She'd have to remove all the silk to see how much was there, but at the moment, the latest gift pressed more heavily. The gift he'd given his life to give.

She returned to this year's gold-wrapped box and opened the package to reveal a Bible. She flipped through the pages and discovered one highlighted verse.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

She stared toward her window, her view of the bridge. After a moment, she flipped through the Bible again and found a single word—gave—highlighted in John 3:16.

Gwen slept little that night. When the sun touched the sky in the morning, she took the elevator to the top floor—Maddox's floor. Pounding echoed down the hall. She rounded the corner and stopped. Richard, at Maddox's closed door, clutched a Bible identical to hers. He backed up and raised a foot as if to kick in the door, but a man dressed in the building's grey uniform appeared from the stairwell. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Not unless you can unlock this."

The man pulled a key from his pocket, slid it into the lock, and swung the door wide. Richard stalked in. A silent moment passed before he marched back to the hall. "It's cleared out! Empty. Where's everything from last night? We gave him a *boat*! And he gives us this?" He shoved the Bible forward, and the man flinched. "This is ridiculous. A *boat*! He won't be using it now."

"Richard, correct?" The man took a white envelope from his pocket. "I was instructed to give you this. But to get it, you must return to me the Bible he gave you."

Richard narrowed his eyes, tilted his head, and slowly made the trade. He flipped open the envelope and looked inside. His shoulders dropped. “Fine.”

The man turned to Gwen as Richard left.

“What was in the envelope?”

“Paperwork and keys to a boat, I believe. I’m sure there’s something for you, too. He left a very long list.” The man pulled a packet of papers from his back pocket and unfolded it.

“So he never intended to leave with all the gifts, like Charlize said?”

“Shall I check for your name?”

Gwen shook her head, clutching the Bible. “I won’t trade this. I came...” Why had she come? To say goodbye? “Will there be a funeral?”

“I’ve heard no such plans. His family isn’t local.”



Three days later, a squeal echoed across the marble lobby as Gwen returned from apartment hunting.

“Paid?” Rachel stood in the doorway of the building manager’s office. “Paid in full for life? When did he do this?”

Beginning with her feet, Gwen’s entire body grew heavy. These days, in this building, the pronoun “he” rarely stood for anyone other than Maddox.

Grinning at whatever answer the building manager supplied, Rachel turned and hurried for the elevator. As she crossed nearby, Gwen raised a leaden hand. “What’s going on?”

“Before he died, he paid our rent. The whole building. None of us have to pay rent as long as we live. Can you believe it? Unbelievable.”

Gwen stared as Rachel floated away.

The apartment manager confirmed Rachel's story. "He loaded up some kind of fund with money, and the rent is paid out of the interest." The man took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "But you're 428, aren't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"He didn't cover yours. The only one. I don't know what you did to him."

In a stupor, Gwen returned to her apartment, clutched a pen, and hunched over a sheet of loose leaf.

Maddox –

They despised you. They watched you die. I wish you had known that before you took care of them this way. Though I don't know why you kept me out of the arrangement, I appreciate being set apart from them. I want no share in their lives, and I would continue my plan to leave this place, regardless of rent payments.

I wish I could thank you for the gifts you've given me, specifically the reminder to accept my salvation as a gift. I have been a believer for years, yet still struggle in that area. Thank you.

This place is not the same without you. My comfort is that if you were a believer, you are in heaven, and there you must've had the merriest of Christmases.

Gwendolyn

Though the letter would be returned to her undeliverable and unopened, she mailed it to his old apartment in the name of closure.



A month later, a golden envelope slid out from among her bills. She turned it three times before tearing the seal to reveal a golden card, like the one Maddox gave with her last gift. The handwriting inside matched down to the shiny golden ink.

Dear Gwendolyn:

The riches I've shared are not my own; they belong to my father. For a time, he has chosen to bless many, regardless of their response to him or to me. However, the day is coming when this will not be.

Life on this earth will never be free of troubles. However, in light of your letter, my father has granted that I may give you a new life. You will find a key and an address to your new home enclosed.

Though the season is past, allow me to end with this:

Merry Christmas,

Maddox

A key and a slip of paper rested in the crease at the bottom of the envelope.

London.

The address was in London. Gwen sank to a seat by the window that overlooked the bridge.

She'd seen his body taken away, covered with a sheet. She'd given the police a statement. She'd watched police tuck Charlize into the back of a squad car. Yet he'd written her back?

The money from the necklace box would cover the ticket, the money from the coat, other expenses.

What would happen when she arrived, what would be done with everything she left behind, she couldn't say, but she would go, and she wouldn't look back.



Emily Conrad is a writer and blogger who lives in Wisconsin with her husband and two rescue dogs. She loves Jesus and enjoys road trips to the mountains. Her debut novel is underway with Pelican Book Group.

Subscribers to her email list receive access to “A Thing of Beauty,” a short story about beauty, scars, and love. **Read the opening of the story in the pages that follow!**

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Excerpt from “A Thing of Beauty”

by Emily Conrad

“Arabelle is taking it personally.” Emmerich’s soft-spoken words startled Naomi and pulled her paintbrush from the canvas before her. He hadn’t been to her studio in weeks. If she’d expected him, she would’ve worked on this particular painting elsewhere. Arabelle’s calls must’ve prompted this visit, wedged between his rehearsal and tonight’s performance.

The red smudge from her last stroke added depth and detail to a bough of the bare oak tree on the eight-foot-tall canvas. Twice before, she’d considered this painting complete. This would be the last time if today was the day Emmerich was to see it.

His footsteps, as low and soft as his voice, advanced across the studio’s dented wooden floor until his lean torso pressed against her back with familiar warmth and strength that would’ve melted her if she weren’t so nervous for his reaction to this piece.

“Is this for the show this weekend?” He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, then his chest stilled as his breath paused. He must’ve noticed the photo she’d been using as her inspiration. “Why do you have that?”

She laid her hand over his forearm, her skin shaded olive, his as pale as a healthy person’s could be. “Call it jealousy. I wish I could dance with you like Chloe does.”

On the canvas, the oak twisted with grace. Flaming red sunset clouds rippled above the branches like a ballerina’s airy skirt, a loose imitation of Emmerich dancing with his usual partner as pictured in the photo that lay next to her palette of paints.

Creating it had connected her to him and his art—ballet. But now that she was finished and he stood behind her, shadows crept into the room. In picking which photo to use as her inspiration, she’d sorted through image after image of him and Chloe entwined together in such passionate, emotional poses that Naomi’s face had throbbed.

She and Emmerich had been dating for two years, but they limited their physical relationship out of respect for God and marriage. Emmerich’s onstage intimacy with Chloe made everything harder. Naomi could only create art while Emmerich got to be it, and with another woman.

He stepped closer to the canvas, and his admiration of the painting dampened her jealousy. He’d never given her a reason to doubt his faithfulness, and her art seemed to have the same effect on him as watching him dance had on her. Besides, they’d talked of marriage as a certainty. Someday—soon, she hoped—he would propose.

His eyes jumped back and forth across the painting as if to memorize each brushstroke. She folded her arms and smiled. He’d come here to plead Arabelle’s case—that compassion for

someone who’d frustrated him on numerous occasions was a brushstroke of his Creator, another reason to love him.

When he finally turned his gaze on her, his eyes shone with moisture, a first in their relationship.

His throat shifted, another swallow. “Is this going in the show?”

When she nodded, he lifted his face to see the top of the painting, then stepped back as his eyes combed down the canvas.

“But it won’t be for sale.” If he had reacted poorly to it, she would’ve put a price on it, but she’d never part with it now. If he wanted it, she’d give it to him on the spot. If not, she’d keep it in her own apartment. He’d feel closer that way, even when he traveled.

“So if you’ll paint me, what is it about your sister?”

“I paint nature, not people.” Her brushes clicked as she gathered them. “The publisher wants a portrait, and even if I could convince them to leave it up to me, Arabelle would see something like this as an insult.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Impossible.” He took a deep breath, eyes trained on the painting. “This is the best compliment anyone has ever paid me.”

He deserved the compliment. The lonely years as a boy who loved ballet and the intense competition had forced on him a humility that endured.

Anyway, the piece had been filtered through her, so though the larger picture represented his stunning abilities on stage, each detail told a story about her.

At the sink, she turned the faucet and watched water leach color from the bristles. If she painted her sister, the brushstrokes would tell a story of betrayal, neglect, and disrespect.

“Arabelle doesn’t want to see that much of me. I told her people that. Whoever it was that called at first.” Enough people swirled around Arabelle’s modeling career that they remained nameless and indistinguishable. More now than ever because a book publisher was involved. “I imagine that’s why they had her start making the calls personally.”

And when Naomi didn’t answer, Arabelle took to calling Naomi’s soft spot, Emmerich.

“She may miss you. At a certain point, success without meaningful relationships is lonely. It was for me before I met you.”

Like a spotlight had been flipped on the memory, she saw Emmerich, standing among the brilliant colors of the botanical garden the day they first met. She’d come for inspiration for her paintings. Him, for a glimpse of nature on a rare day off. If Arabelle felt the same kind of loneliness they’d endured before that day, she had a knack for hiding it. “They’re making a coffee table book about her. She’s hardly alone.”

“She’s aging, Naomi. We all are.”

Thirty-one-year olds shouldn’t have to say such things, yet statistics on dancers’ careers weren’t encouraging.

He smiled as he drew nearer and kissed her forehead. “You were wise to choose a career you can continue into your old age.”

She set her brushes to dry. Maybe that was the benefit of creating art rather than living it out. But unlike Emmerich and dance, modeling—the way Arabelle did it, anyway—was ego, not art. “I was twelve when she got her first gig. Arabelle and Mom became inseparable, but I had to start walking to church because God and I hindered to her career. I guess Mom eventually did, too. When she got sick, Arabelle couldn’t be bothered to come home.”

Not even for the funeral.

“All of it left me scarred, I guess. Why would I paint her now for a project like this?”

“Because love matters more than scars.” Emmerich ran his hand through her hair, long and silky straight. If she’d been a blonde like her sister and not a deep brunette, maybe the talent scout would’ve noticed her instead.

Well, no. More than her hair had played a role in that. Naomi was also too short, her cheekbones too nondescript. Besides, she didn’t want Arabelle’s life, where all kinds of ugliness were endured in worship of one fading form of beauty.

“You’re ready for your exhibit, and I’ll be traveling. Call her, set up a time next week.”

She frowned.

He squeezed her hand. “Don’t miss your chance to heal some of those scars. Family’s important, and you might be able to show her what real beauty and love are.”

“Jesus?”

He nodded.

She didn’t doubt his commitment to the faith they shared—another reason she loved him—but if family were truly important to him, what did it mean that he hadn’t proposed?

When she sighed, he bent his head, kissed her lips, and stepped away. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

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