

## Chapter 1: The Tree

If you paid attention, you could see how the wind shaped the landscape. No matter how many times the dunes changed, I was always surprised, yet I was glad that some things never changed. As much as I loved the desert sun, its rays could be overwhelming, and my favorite pastime was to sit beneath our favorite tree.

“What kind of tree did you say it was again?” I asked.

“It should be a magnolia, but I've never seen it bloom so I can't be certain. It might be a little too hot here,” he answered.

I didn't care what type of tree it was, but I cared that he cared. We would spend hours talking, laughing, and staring off into the distance. At first, we were nothing more than friends, but eventually I started to see him as something more. For a while, everything was perfect and I thought I no longer had to feel alone. I finally had someone who loved me in this world and that one day I would have a family.

“How was your book? anything interesting?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, “We should see the ocean sometime.”

“Sure we can,” he said with some doubt.

“You know I worry about us sometimes. Tensions are rising and I wonder if we will always be close.”

“Even if something did happen, it will be okay,” he said.

With a worried expression I asked, “Are you sure?”

“You overthink too much, you know. You see this tree behind us? “

I nodded.

“Judging by its size, it's been here a while. It will continue to do so. It's resilient, like you and me.”

I smiled and leaned against him.

“Do you love me?” I asked and looked into his eyes.

He paused for a moment and said, “Yes, I do Marcos.”

Looking off into the dunes my mind trailed off... Did he hesitate? No, I must be overthinking.

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Now here I was beneath the very same tree only now I am alone. Taking a deep breath, I took a seat and gazed upon these beautiful yellow berries. I don't remember their name, but he once told me they were

poisonous, but I wondered how they tasted. Maybe they're sweet, or sour. So beautiful, I thought and plucked one. Maybe he was wrong, or better yet maybe he lied.

"What are you doing?" I heard a voice ask.

## Chapter 2: The Garden

I thought that if I worked hard enough, we would be together again, and for the next decade or so that is exactly what I did. At first, I would count the weeks, then the months, and eventually the years, but never once did I lose hope. After what seemed like an endless war, we were finally free from our oppressors, it was only a matter of time for his return. I was wrong to believe that after all these years he wanted the same thing and all I was left with, was this empty garden or at least that is what I thought.

In front of me stood a boy who could not have been older than ten. He was slim and with a dirty face. His brown hair is slightly overgrown.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Were you really going to eat that? You know it's poisonous, everyone knows that" he said.

"Of course, I know that I'm not stupid" I snapped back, "I was simply looking at it."

"What is that plant doing here anyways?"

"We are in a garden, what else is there?" I was definitely not in the mood for so many questions.

"There are many plants here, most of them edible and the ones that aren't are definitely not poisonous."

"I don't know then, someone must have brought it, now will you answer my questions?"

"There is so much food here and I really like that tree I haven't seen one like it anywhere else"

"You like Magnolia?"

"Ohh that's what it's called? Does it also give fruit?"

"No, it does not, but it might give flowers someday," I said.

"I hope so! Anyways I should go I will see you tomorrow."

I raised a brow "See me tomorrow? Sounds like you plan on coming back. How are you going to get past the guards?"

"The same way I got past them today!"

And with that he disappeared into the bushes. I did not think much of it, surely he would not come back, yet he did, day after day. He always came with so many questions, and for the first time I started to feel less lonely. It was strange to me, I had spent years collecting plants. From the wisteria that wrapped around the pillars to the lilies in the ponds yet nobody had ever asked me a thing, almost if I had built the garden for someone else.

### Chapter 3 Growth

I remember what it felt to be alone. To have to count on yourself for everything, to have no one to hear your troubles, only the stars to comfort you in your sleep. I wondered if someday someone would care about me.

“Did you not like the book I gave you?”

“No, it's not that it's just I don't understand many of the words.”

“I used to love reading when I was your age. It made me feel less lonely, and the more you read the more you will understand.”

“Do you ever still feel lonely?”

I took a deep breath and replied, “Yes I do.”

“Did you ever not feel lonely?”

“A long time ago, but that doesn't matter anymore I guess some of us are meant to stay alone.”

“Why don't I come live with you? That way you won't be all alone.”

I laughed, “What are you saying? What would your parents say with you talking like that?”

“I don't have parents, I don't know my dad and my mom is now gone”

I don't know why I didn't see it sooner, maybe I did not want to see it. The boy who stood in front of me was all alone. He was just like me, an orphan who could only count on himself.

After a moment of silence, I said

“It's not that simple you know, but why don't you spend the night in one of the empty rooms and first thing tomorrow morning I'll see what I can do, and if all goes well you can stay.”

“What if it doesn't go well? I don't want to leave this place”

“Don't worry everything will be okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

I asked for his name to which he said his friends called him Ray, short for Rayden.

#### Chapter 4: The Sea

First came the yellow, then came the orange. Not long after the reds, the purples and the blues would take their turn. I used to be fascinated by the colors and by the stars that would later litter the sky. One, two, three, four... so many maybe one day I will count them all I thought. I remember it used to get cold at night, but just sometimes if I waited long enough the sky would streak and I would close my eyes and make a wish.

“What did you wish for?”

“That’s not how it works if I tell you, it’s not going to come true you know.”

“Maybe, but if you don’t tell me, I can’t help you make it come true,” I said with a smile.

“I’ve been thinking, it’s almost been a year since you came to live here. How would you like to celebrate? We can think about it as your birthday?”

“Celebrate? as in throwing a party ?!?”

“No no, I don’t like parties... I was thinking more of a vacation? How would you like to visit the ocean?”

“You mean the ocean?! With actual water ?!?”

I chuckled “I don’t know of any ocean without water. I guess you better start packing your things if you want to go.”

“I will when I wake up, good night!!” and with that he scurried back inside.

I laid down and continued to look at the stars. I don’t remember myself being this excited for something, it was almost as if once again I was that kid that would run around and pretend the sand was my ocean. I was not that kid anymore, but he was. It might be too late for me, but not for him.

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“That is so much water !!!” we screamed in unison.

For a couple more minutes we continued to stare off into what seemed like another world. We ran, we splashed, we even built a sandcastle. Oh, how much fun it was. It's been a long day I thought. We laid on the sand and started in awe at the glimmering water.

“Did you enjoy the trip, because I did?”

“Yes! Thank you, dad.”

Did he just call me dad? I was definitely not a fan of surprises, but I had to admit this one put a smile on my face. Moments later there it was again. First came the yellow, then came the orange, not long after the reds, the purples and the blues took their turn. Only this time I couldn't see the stars nor the sky streak. My vision became blurred, but that did not matter, why would I wish for something I already have.

“Are you crying?” he asked

“No, I got sand in my eyes.” I said

## Chapter 5 Hour Glass

I used to think I had all the time in the world, now I see how funny time can be. Some may say time is cruel, it tends to speed up in times of joy only to slow down in times of grief. Either way here I was running out of it. It would seem that just yesterday my son and I had wandered into the sea and in the blink of an eye that was in the past. Now my little boy has grown up, but I do not look back with regret; rather, I am grateful for the time we spent together and to think it almost did not happen.

“Father, how are you doing this morning?” he asked.

“I have brought you some books you might enjoy.”

I could see the sadness and his eyes, yet he tried so hard to appear strong.

“I am sorry father, the Magnolia has started to wither, but all is not lost. Remember the flower we saw? It gave seeds, we can start all over and plant a new one.”

“I don't think I have enough time for that.”

“Please don't talk like that, I don't know what I would do without you, I was nothing before I met you, you saved me, you gave me a purpose.”

“No, it was you who saved me. I seem to recall a young boy asking me how a certain plant got into my garden. I just wish I had more time, but I want you to know you are the greatest gift life could have given

me. My only regret is that I can no longer protect you. Promise me that you will take those seeds and plant a new tree. And when you sit beneath its shade you will remember me.”

“I promise, just please don't leave me.”

“I'm glad I got to see you grow up and become the man you are, I couldn't be prouder.”

“And I couldn't be more proud to be your son,” he said and began to cry.

“So old yet you cry just as bad as when you fell and broke your arm as a kid,” I said, and he chuckled.

“I love you dad.”

“I love you too Rayden,” I said with a smile.

And with those words echoing through my ears, I could finally close my eyes. In the end someone did love me just as much as I loved them, and I would say all the pain was worth it because in the end I had a family. It was not too late for me.