

# Love Burned She Rose Unscathed Novel

## Love Burned Chapter 121 - 130

Chapter 121

The crowd seemed to swell with anticipation, their excitement palpable.<sup>8</sup>

With a puzzled expression, Leda wondered aloud, “Why isn’t it going the way I thought it would?”}}

Equally bewildered, Roseanne exclaimed, “Help! That isn’t what I expected, either!”}

From within the crowd, Murray’s exclamation got lost amidst the buzz, a testament to the unexpected turn of events.<sup>8</sup>

Clutching the few roses she gathered, Millie felt her eyes brim with tears of frustration.

“Are these people blind? Millie cursed in her heart.)

And to think, Roseanne hadn’t even worn that sleek black bikini she had initially donned, opting instead for a one–piece swimsuit that did her no favors. Yet, Murray seemed utterly captivated by her.!!

Adorned with a wide–brimmed sunhat with a light–colored ribbon bow, Roseanne exuded an effortless elegance. The simplicity of her attire became something chic and sophisticated the moment she put it on.<sup>B</sup>

Her mere presence turned heads, drawing the attention of every man around. Yet, she seemed oblivious to the stir, engrossed in conversation with Leda, her occasional smiles enough to make anyone’s heart skip a beat.!!

“Upset?” Corley appeared beside Murray, a smirk playing on his lips as he caught the latter’s glare. “She was never yours to claim.”

Murray clenched his fists but remained silent.”

“She shines brighter than you realize, making it impossible for you to hide her allure,” Corley continued, his gaze returning to Roseanne with undisguised admiration.

Then, turning to Murray with a slight smirk, he added, “Regretting you lost your rose? But she’s no longer yours.”

A surprise punch was thrown at Corley, stopping just a hair's breadth from his face. Watching the fist, Corley narrowed his eyes. "Not every time do you get a chance to make things right."

Murray forced a smile. "Right. But did you forget I'm the one who nurtured that rose? I've watched her bloom into what she is today. Her beauty, life, and everything bears my imprint. We've been together for six years. Do you even know what she loves or hates?"

Murray's tone was mocking. "She's mine. Our bond is inseparable. You're living in a fantasy if you think otherwise."

For the first time, Corley's disdainful stance wavered as he regarded Murray sternly. He knew Murray was right. Over the years, Roseanne had had countless opportunities to leave but chose to return to Murray each time. Undoubtedly, her feelings for him ran deeper than Corley had imagined.

Witnessing the two men's intense rivalry over Roseanne, Millie clenched her teeth in envy.

'Why does it seem like Roseanne is the only woman in the world to them? Millie wondered, 'What does Roseanne have that I don't?

...

Ultimately, Roseanne emerged as the belle of the ball, garnering the most roses. All eyes were on her as if her presence alone illuminated the entire scene.

Down below the stage, Leda was whooping and waving like crazy, taking tons of pictures of Roseanne.?

The event host, a young girl with golden locks and sparkling blue eyes, her skin kissed by the sun, announced with a bright smile, "Congratulations to this beautiful lady for becoming today's most beloved Rose Queen! Now, let's reveal the mystery prize!"))

A small, exquisitely wrapped box was handed to Roseanne.

"Open it now?" Roseanne asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Absolutely! Let's have everyone witness this moment together! Three, two, one!"

As the countdown reached its end, Roseanne untied the ribbon and-

## Chapter 122

A snake shot out of the box! Its body was striped with alternating bands of white and black, its tail slender and pointed, unmistakably a venomous serpent!!

Roseanne's instincts kicked in, and she dropped the box instantly. But the snake had launched into the air, baring its fangs as it lunged at her.<sup>3</sup>

The host nearby had turned as white as a sheet, clutching the microphone and screaming at the top of her lungs.

Chaos erupted on the spot. Everyone backed away, trying to distance themselves from the danger.

But Roseanne didn't have that luxury and could only watch in horror as the snake flicked its tongue, aiming for her wrist.

Just then, two figures leaped into action almost simultaneously. Being closer and quicker, Murray yanked Roseanne away before Corley could reach her.

But in doing so, he left his neck exposed to the serpent.

"Watch out!"

"Be careful!"

Roseanne and Millie both shouted out together.

The former was safely in Murray's arms, while the latter charged forward, using her body to shield Murray. Thus, the snake's bite landed squarely on Millie's calf.)

"Ah!" Millie winced in pain and slumped to the ground.

Murray's pupils dilated with shock. He pushed Roseanne aside and rushed to inspect the bite on Millie's leg. It was a poisonous bite! "Babe.." Millie's eyes filled with tears. "It hurts so much..."

Murray gritted his teeth, pulling Millie into his embrace. "Why would you do something so foolish?"<sup>8</sup>

Despite the sweat from pain covering her forehead, Millie smiled weakly. "At least you're not hurt..." Mumay pressed his lipstic

fine."<sup>2</sup>

tightly, deeply moved as he held her hand, his voice rough, "Don't worry. The doctor will be here soon. You'll be

Millie's gaze faded, her voice growing weaker. "I know, I've always trusted you. So, don't worry too much about me. For your sake, I'll get better.

She passed out before she could finish.

Holding Millie limp, Murray panicked, shouting, "Doctor, where's the doctor? Call an ambulance. Help!

Only then did the medical team arrive, leisurely laying down the stretcher and moving Millie onto the helicopter. Only the hospital in Whitestone Bay had the antivenom for snake bites.

Without a second thought, Murray followed them.

Leda watched the scene unfold and couldn't help but roll her eyes. Thinking she's in some tragic lo

fool to fall for it."

story. Only Murray would be such a

Glancing sideways at Roseanne, Leda saw her standing dumbly, watching the helicopter fly away, her eyelashes quivering before she looked down, hiding her disappointment and heartbreak.

Claiming indifference yet having loved, it was difficult for Roseanne to remain unaffected. Roseanne had witnessed the urgency, panic, compassion, and worry Murray had shown.!

"Anne?" Leda wrapped an arm around her, concern evident on her face, "Are you okay? Didn't get too scared, did you?"

Roseanne snapped back to reality, shaking her head slightly. "I'm fine."

Leda seemed to sense something, her worry growing.

Roseanne tried to force a smile, but each attempt was more strained than the last. After a moment, she finally spoke, "Leda, let's head back.

"Okay.

"Don't worry. I'm okay." Within seconds, she was back to normal. "I was just thinking it's good for him," she paused, murmuring, "Better than before.

Roseanne hoped Murray had found the one he loved this time and would cherish her

Having witnessed everything, Corley struggled to suppress a smirk."

Murray was officially out of the game from that moment on.

## Chapter 123

Millie was in good health and received the vaccine in time, quickly turning the corner from danger. After a thorough check-up at the hospital, confirming no critical issues, they returned to the island.

Just in case, Murray arranged for a doctor to go with them to take care of Millie.

In the room, Millie lay weakly on the bed while the doctor was checking on her!

Murray stood by the bed. Several times, he thought about stepping out for a smoke, but then Millie said, 'Babe, I'm scared...'

"Please don't leave me alone, okay?"

"What if another snake comes to bite me? Oh no...I.

Remembering how Millie had risked herself to save him, Murray's heart softened. "Okay, I won't go. Just cooperate with the doctor's check-up."

"Hmm." Millie nodded, her eyes brimming with tears.

After the check-up, the doctor removed the IV and left

Left alone, Millie tried to sit up. Murray reached to help her, and she leaned into him, resting against his chest. "Babe, my leg hurts, Do you think itll scar?"

"It won't. The doctor assured us.7

"But it hurts..."

"The doctor has just applied the medication on it. Bear with it a little.

While talking, Murray's mind wandered. He remembered when Roseanne had twisted her ankle during a college track meet but insisted on finishing the 800-meter run. Afterward, her ankle was so swollen that she couldn't walk properly.

Murray had taken her to the hospital, where the doctor scolded her for being reckless, nearly damaging her bone. Yet she didn't complain, just a faint redness around her eyes.

Murray had called her foolish, saying she shouldn't have run in the first place and thinking she should have stopped immediately!

But Roseanne said, "I wouldn't graduate if I didn't meet the requirement. I had to grit my teeth and get through it! Besides, it hurts so much. Why are you still scolding me?"

“Babe? What are you thinking about?” Seeing he hadn’t responded, Millie propped herself up and shook his arm.

“What did you say?” Murray snapped back to the present, looking down at her.

“Just... I heard it’s hard to avoid scars, no matter how good the medication is. Will my leg look terrible then?” The thought of having two snake bite marks on her leg made her frantic.

Perhaps because Millie had saved him, Murray was patient this time. “How could that be? Trust in modern medical technology. And even if there is a scar, plastic surgery is an option...”

Before he could finish, Millie suddenly hugged him tightly around the waist and mumbled into his embrace, “Would you hate me if I got a scar?”

Murray froze, unsure how to answer, then heard her cooing. “Even if you despise me, I won’t leave you. I love you. I’ll always be by your side, forever and ever.”}

A complex look flashed in Murray’s eyes as he lifted his hand, gently stroking Millie’s hair, but found himself at a loss for words.

After a while, he spoke, “Thank you. If it weren’t for you, that snake would have bitten me. Whatever you want, say it. I’ll do my best to fulfill it

“You don’t need to thank me.” Millie suddenly looked up at Murray, her gaze sincere as if he were her entire world, “I’m more than willing

to do i

“I know you still have Roseanne in your heart.. but it’s okay. I don’t mind. I believe you’ll only have me in your heart and eyes one day. You protect Roseanne, and I’ll protect you.”

Chapter 124

“I love you just like you love Roseanne. You yearn for her, unattainable as it might seem, and I year for you that way, too. If you ask me what I want, I only want a chance to be with you,” Millie said softly, her eyes brimming with sincerity and an unmistakable humility. Murray felt a tug at his heartstrings. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of you from now on. I won’t let you get hurt again.”

Millie smiled with a sweetness in her voice, “I know. I’ve always believed that.”

Murray’s embrace tightened around her, yet unease lingered in his heart, unexplained.

The event had barely concluded when a mishap occurred, prompting the hotel staff to spring into action swiftly. Since the accident involved personal safety, the manager didn't hesitate to call the police.

The officers arrived and conducted their inquiries among all involved that night. As expected, they didn't unearth much, eventually attributing the incident to an accident. After all, snakes were a common sight, with the hotel backed by a tropical forest.<sup>8</sup>

"But venomous snakes? That's rare, isn't it?" Leda interjected coldly.

"Well..."

"And on a beach crowded with people? Even rarer, right?"

The police exchanged looks of uncertainty while the hotel manager was at a loss for words.

my friend has faced a threat to her life on this island. Just wait. It isn't over! Come on, Anne, let's

Leda scoffed. This is the second time my

go!"

With that, she stormed off with Roseanne.

"Relax. It's not worth it, Roseanne said once they were away from the crowd.

Leda hit the ceiling. "You were nearly hurt, and you're still so calm? It's like I'm worrying for nothing, huh?"

Roseanne smiled. "Victory doesn't come from a single battle."

"What does that mean? Do y

you have a plan?" Leda was curious.

Roseanne shook her head, "No."

Leda was speechless.

"This series of incidents, Anne, I'm worried. What if something else happens..."

"I have a plan for that, Roseanne said.<sup>8</sup>

"What plan?" Leda blinked.

“Guess.”

After the scare and hardly eating anything, Roseanne and Leda felt their hunger kick in. They headed to the restaurant for a hearty meal. After eating, Leda left joyously for a date after receiving a call

Instead of returning to the room, Roseanne walked along the coast to the north.

She saw the twinkling lights along the path a few minutes later, and a spicy scent wafted through the air, reminiscent of seasoning. Was it barbecue seasoning? Did Maldor Beach have their barbecue food?”

Following the scent, Roseanne arrived at a shop named Aroma’s Antique Corner, Was it run by someone from home?

Expecting a restaurant, Roseanne was surprised to find an antique shop. The owner was seasoning chicken wings, explaining the delicious aroma.

The shop was small and easily surveyed at a glance. Aside from the old stuff near the door the shelves were packed with cool little knick–knacks.

Suddenly, a small, somewhat stem yet endearing figurine caught Roseanne’s eye. It was no bigger than a hand, but the craftsmanship was exquisite. It was lifelike, from the creases in its shirt to the gold–rimmed glasses perched on its nose.

Chapter 125

When the shopkeeper saw Roseanne, he could tell she was from Faeland. When encountering someone from his homeland, his demeanor instantly grew warmer. “You’ve got a good eye, young lady. I’ve handcrafted these sculptures myself. They’d make perfect gifts to take back home.”

With a smile, Roseanne Inquired about the price before saying. “Okay, could you pack them up for me?”

“You got it!” the shopkeeper said while packaging the sculptures and slipping a postcard into the bag. “If there’s anything you want to say but can’t, write it down here.”

Roseanne pursed her lips, thinking it unnecessary as she had nothing she couldn’t express, but it seemed rude to refuse a gift.

Back at her hotel room, and after a shower, Roseanne noticed the gift bag on the table. She pulled out the postcard, which featured a stunning seascape of Maldor Beach, and tossed it onto the table. It was of no use to her anyway.



The following morning, Corley went to the restaurant right on time, only to find no sign of Roseanne. Only Leda was there, having her breakfast alone, a cup and a salad on the table.

“Good morning, Mr. Sullivan!” Leda greeted him with a smile, having noticed him circling the place thrice. “Looking for someone to have breakfast with?”

Raising an eyebrow, Corley pulled a chair and sat across from her, “Morning, Ms. Reynolds.”

“Morning.

Corley glanced at her cup. “That milk looks good.”

Leda corrected him. “This is coffee.”

An awkward silence ensued.

Leda sipped it and asked, “Is there something you wanted to say. Mr. Sullivan?”

Dropping the act, Corley got straight to the point “Where’s Roseanne? I haven’t seen her

Leda asked him back, “Looking for her for something special?”

“Can’t I see her without a reason?” Corley’s patience wore thin.<sup>3</sup>

Leda couldn’t help but laugh. “Are all you finance guys this free toward the year–end?”

She had sensed something was off since Corley showed up on the island. His constant attempts to start conversations and show interest in Anne were too obvious. His intentions were loud and clear!!

Corley replied, “Not free. Very busy.”

“Then why take a vacation?”

“Because someone I wanted to see is here.”

As the conversation turned serious, Leda put down her fork, her smile fading. “What are your true intentions with Anne? If I’m not mistaken, you and Murray were like brothers, right?”

“Fair lady, fine gentleman. The intentions are too numerous and complicated to explain,” Corley said cryptically.

Leda was silent.!!

Corley admitted, "Murray and I fell out."

Leda nodded, "I can see that. Is it because of Anne?!"

Corley was silent. His silence was more like admission.

Leda burst into laughter. "Serves him right! That jerk Murray had it coming!"

Corley was puzzled by her reaction. "Seriously?"

After her laughter subsided, Leda finished her coffee, wiped her mouth, and said, "Okay, I understand. Then, I wish you success in winning the lady's heart?"

"Thanks for the good words, Corley nodded slightly.

"I'll leave you to your meal then," Leda said as she stood up.

Corley urged, "Wait. You haven't told me where the lady' is.

Leda checked her watch. "At this time, she's probably... boarding a plane?")

Corley was stunned. Little did he know, Roseanne's solution was to return home

"There's only so long you can play the thief before getting caught, right? If this island's vibe doesn't match mine, it's back home for me!"

## Chapter 126

As Corley left the restaurant, he missed bumping into Murray, coming in for breakfast 8

Murray frowned slightly. He glanced around discreetly, not spotting Roseanne anywhere.

"Babe, looking for something?" Noticing his surveying gaze, Millie asked knowingly.

Murray looked back at her. "You shouldn't have insisted on coming over with that injury on your leg."8

"I could have had breakfast in bed, but I've stayed in for too long. I need some fresh air, or else I start to feel out of breath," Millie said, sticking her tongue out playfully!

Murray hummed softly. "What do you fancy for breakfast?"

"A sandwich and some milk, thank you, babe

Murray had searched all four diners on the island by

by noon and still hadn't seen Roseanne. He strolled along the beach in the afternoon with no luck, either. At night, he spotted Leda, but still no sign of Roseanne

It was even weirder that Corley seemed to have vanished since that morning. Could it be that Roseanne and he went on a date? The thought made Murray restless. He stood up, paused, and picked up Millie's shawl hanging on the back of the chair.

It was a regular piece bought on the island. Nearly everyone had one, including Roseanne.

He approached Leda. "Roseanne left her shawl with me at noon. Here, take it to her."

On a date with a handsome guy, Leda got caught off guard and blurted out. "Noon? How's that possible? She's already back...."

Oops! Realizing her slip-up, Leda said defensively, "Murray, trying to trick me into spilling beans?"

His gaze turned sharp. "Anne went back home? 8

Leda rolled her eyes. "None of your business.

Murray nodded. "It seems like she did head back."W

After getting his answer, Murray took off

There was no need to guess. If Roseanne had left, Corley must have been gone with her.

Leda cursed herself for being so talkative!!

As Murray walked, he pulled out his phone and called Maurice. "Book me the next flight back home."

Maurice replied, "Right away, Mr. Sherwood. Will the lady come back with you?"

It was better to ask and avoid making the same mistake twice

He hesitated.

"Babe, I just heard from the waiter that there's a cruise setting sail the day after tomorrow. They're having a captain's dinner on board. Let's sign up, shall we? It could be fun. What do you think?"

Millie wrapped her arm around his. "Since I can't travel back now with my condition, why not just enjoy ourselves a bit longer?"

Murray paused.

Maurice asked on the phone. "Hello? Mr. Sherwood, are you there?"

"Cancel the booking for now?"

"Okay."

Noticing the phone, Millie apologized, "Oh, were you on a call? Sorry, I didn't see that. Hope I didn't interrupt."

Murray waved it off. "No, you didn't."

Her face lit up with a smile. That's great. The doctor said my wound is doing fine for now. No signs of infection.

Mentioning the injury softened Murray.<sup>8</sup>

"A cruise it is, then? Please? I've never been to a captain's dinner before." She cooed, and her voice was as sweet as lychee gelatin.

Murray found himself nodding. "Okay, we'll go."

"Mua! Thank you, babe."

At nine in the evening, the flight landed on time at Lumina City Airport. As Roseanne stepped out of the terminal, the familiar chill, mixed with bits of ice, hit her face, making her sneeze instantly!!

## Chapter 127

Knowing the dramatic change in temperature from her previous destination, Roseanne pulled out her long down jacket before the plane landed, wrapping herself up.

Yet, it was a miscalculation. A freezing rain had fallen a few days ago, leaving icicles hanging from trees and telephone poles. They looked light and fluffy, but once they landed on you, it didn't take long for your wet clothes to turn into ice.

The street was normally busy, but in the freezing cold of winter and late at night, traffic was whizzing by too fast for her to flag down a

taxi.

Shivering, she took out her phone to check the ride-sharing app, What was supposed to be a five-minute wait three minutes ago had turned into half an hour.

She glanced at the map, glowing red, showing the driver stuck some distance away. As she debated whether to cancel, a car slowly stopped beside her.”

The window rolled down, revealing a familiar face with gentle, clear-cut features. Owen was wearing a deep grey turtleneck sweater, the outline of his Adam’s apple partially visible. From Roseanne’s angle, his profile seemed cast in shadow, adding warmth to his otherwise aloof demeanor.

“It’s hard to get a ride around here at this hour. I’m heading home, too. Hop in.”

Once inside the car, noticing Roseanne was cold, Owen cranked up the heating to the max.}}

Remembering he had a heat pack in the glove compartment, he handed it to her. “Warm up with this for now.”

Roseanne felt her hands were no better than ice sticks. With the heat pack and the warm air circulating inside the car, she gradually felt life seeping back into her

“Thanks. I thought I would freeze to death at the airport: Roseanne sniffled, recalling how Leda had offered to arrange her a driver. Not wanting to bother anyone, she declined, not anticipating the struggle to find a ride from the airport.

Owen glanced at her. “There’s a significant conference in town, so there’s a bit of a traffic clampdown, including the ride-shares. That’s why it’s hard to find a cab.”

Roseanne had a lightbulb moment. “No wonder there were so few taxis on the road, I thought I had landed in another world.”

Turning toward Owen, she asked, “And you? How come you’re here at the airport at this hour?”

Owen explained, “A family elder was returning home, and I came to pick her up. But she was tired of waiting and took a cab before I arrived.“?

After receiving a call, he started heading back, only to see Roseanne standing in the cold because of a glare in his rearview mirror, prompting him to turn around.

Roseanne nodded, not prying further.

At a red light, Owen asked, “Feeling warmer now?“}]

“Yeah,” Roseanne bit her lip, slightly embarrassed. “I’ve spent a few days in the tropics, and suddenly, I’m not coping well with the cold

here.”

“I brought you a little something.” She remembered something and opened her backpack.

Owen was momentarily stunned. “A gift?”

“Yes, for you and Ms. Payne. Both of you.” Roseanne said, handing him his share, “When I saw it, it reminded me of you.”

Owen checked out the little statue wearing a shirt and pants, with gold-framed glasses sitting on its nose, holding a book.

The expression was supposed to be serious, but the exaggerated yet adorable proportions of the body made it look rather humorous.

After a brief silence, Owen commented, “Really? Aside from us wearing glasses, I don’t see much resemblance.”

Chapter 128

Roseanne beamed, defending her choice playfully, “Come on, it does look like you if you squint a bit.”

She shook the little figurine, and Owen couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well, maybe not so much now.”

In the end, Owen accepted the gift and thanked her.

Roseanne said, “No worries. The light’s green...”

When she got home, it was the early hours of the morning. Before leaving, Roseanne had ensured her apartment was spotless and arranged for a cleaning service to come by while she was away. It was as if she had never left.

After taking a shower, she lay in her soft, large bed, inhaling the scent of her body wash, blissfully closing her eyes. Indeed, no matter where you go, there’s no place like home.

Meanwhile, Owen was still awake. He was at the final stages of the experiment’s first phase, recently swamped with work, barely squeezing in the time to make it to the airport.

Thus, he planned to shower, change clothes, and return to the lab. As he put on his shoes in the entryway, he saw the figurine Roseanne had given him.<sup>8</sup>

Upon entering his apartment, he had placed the little figure on a shelf above his shoe cabinet, surrounded by books. He suddenly smiled, admitting that it did indeed resemble him.

In winter Lumina City was blanketed in a heavy snowfall, turning the world outside Roseanne's window into a pristine white wonderland. Past eight in the morning, neighborhood kids had formed groups to build snowmen. The playful shouts and the cries of street vendors filled the air with a vibrant community spirit.

While heading out for grocery shopping, Roseanne noticed a line of snowmen of varying heights and designs neatly arranged. The largest one looked dazed, with two nutshells for eyes and a pink plastic pinwheel on its head, somewhat reminiscent of a cartoon character.

Roseanne had walked past it but doubled back, embedding a cherry from her basket as its nose. Stepping back to admire her work, she nodded in satisfaction.

At the market, she found some fresh, affordable beef ribs, perfect for making spicy beef strips, with the rest ideal for a stew, complementing it with some sweet, crunchy carrots.

Knock.

Roseanne heard someone knocking. She whipped off her apron and went to check it out.

It was the neighbor from the third floor. All smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Hey, Anne, you in? My daughter-in-law gave birth to a baby girl a few days ago. We'll have the baby baptized in the church at the end of the month. Here, this is the invitation for you,"

The neighbor had always looked out for Roseanne, seeing her living alone..

Hearing the good news, Roseanne felt genuinely happy for her. She thanked the neighbor and fetched some of her homemade oat cookies and beef jerky to give in return.

The neighbor was surprised and delighted, and she protested, "Oh, it's very kind of you. I didn't expect anything back."

Roseanne replied, "It's just something I whipped up myself, hardly a return gift. I just wanted you to try them and see if they taste good."

Seeing her insistence, the neighbor didn't argue further.

“Oh, by the way, your next-door neighbor, Mr. Reynolds, he’s always out early and back late. I’ve tried a few times but never caught him in. Could you give him the invitation for me?”

Remembering she still had to take chicken soup to her daughter-in-law in the hospital, the neighbor hurried off.

Roseanne looked down at the invitation in her hand, puzzled. If she remembered correctly, Owen wasn’t exactly fond of those occasions, was he?%

## Chapter 129

At ten in the evening, the snow began to fall silently again. Owen closed his umbrella, shaking off the accumulating snowflakes, which soon melted into water droplets.

The lab had faced many issues, one problem after another. Even for someone as seasoned as Owen, it was starting to take its toll.

As the end of the year approached, the festive spirit grew stronger. He hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in days. However, with the lab data finally corrected to safe levels, and considering it was almost time for the holiday season, he decided to give everyone a few days off.

Fumbling for his keys, Owen was about to unlock his door when he heard the door behind him open.

A cozy, yellow glow washed over the floor and onto him, lighting up the dim corridor.

Roseanne’s voice was like a warm ember in the cold winter air. “Mr. Reynolds, you’re home early today. Mrs. Thompson on the third floor. had a granddaughter and sent over the invitation for the baby’s baptism this afternoon. I’ve got yours here. Give me a moment, and Ill grab it for you.”<sup>2</sup>

Owen, whose senses were usually sharper than most, felt his mind lag a half beat behind at the sound of her clear, gentle voice. It wasn’t until a small basket was pressed into his hands, filled with several perfectly round cupcakes and a jar of her homemade beef stew, that he snapped back to reality.

It took him a moment to respond with a deep, slightly hoarse “Thank you.”

A cold breeze swept through the hallway, causing Roseanne to shiver. Tve warmed up the stew and cupcakes for you. Eat them while they’re hot. Il close the door now.”

“Okay.”

The brief light was out, and the door closed once again.



Owen entered his apartment and turned on the light, finding the usually spacious room cold and silent.!

Feeling weighed down, he rubbed his temples and opened the beef stew. The aroma of beef mixed with hints of rosemary and softened carrots filled the air. He took a bite, finding the seasoning just right. Glancing at the cupcakes, he hesitated but eventually had one with the stew: Surprisingly, it wasn't bad.

Soon, he felt warmth spreading through his body. He lounged lazily on the couch, letting his thoughts drift, his mood gradually lightening 3

His phone buzzed a few times on the table.

Without even checking, he knew who it was.!

He had always been abroad in the past years, missing every family gathering at the old house. This year, with plans to stay in the country long-term, attending family gatherings was inevitable.

Sure enough, after ignoring the morning calls, the evening brought a barrage of messages.

Picking up his phone, he saw most were from his mother, probing and caring, with a few from siblings asking various questions.!

Only one message was from his father, echoing his mother's sentiments but urging him to come home. Owen replied to each, promising to finish his work as soon as possible.

Owen put down the phone, and his gaze fell on the empty stew jar with only two pieces of carrot left. Suddenly, he thought about going home in a few days. When he saw Roseanne again, it would probably be after the holidays. Would Roseanne stay in Lumina for the holidays?8

Owen had contemplated returning the stew jar to Roseanne several times but could never bring himself to knock on her door.

Unbeknownst to him, Roseanne was already packing her bags, heading to the train station. For six years, she hadn't gone home once.

Hovering over the ticket purchase on her phone, she hesitated for a long time, exiting and re-entering the app, only to finally press the buy button.

There were some things she couldn't avoid forever. She had to face them eventually.9

At eight in the morning, Pinehollow's largest farmers' market was buzzing with activity, a lively scene unfolding as locals mingled, catching up and shopping for their daily needs.)

"Mr. Cole, here for your fish fix again?" a voice rang out amidst the commotion.

"Indeed. Got any salmon today?"

"Sure. I saved some just for you..." The middle-aged woman spoke while skillfully weighing and descaling the fish. "All done."8

Norris Cole pulled out his smartphone, asking, "How much do I owe you?"

The middle-aged woman said, "Oh, don't worry about it. Just take it. On the house! My boy Ike hasn't exactly been a walk in the park for you..."

"That won't do. You're running a business here. How can I not pay?" Norris promptly made a payment of \$30 in cash.?

He was always generous.!

Stunned by the payment, the woman protested, "Oh, how can I accept this..."

Nomis replied, "I'd feel bad not paying. Anyway, I need to pick up some green onions. You take care now."

"Wait, Mr. Cole..."

Nomis stopped in his tracks. "Yes? What's up?"

"Erm," the woman fidgeted with her apron as she said, "I heard Horizon Future Middle School has slots for recommending students for the physics competition. Winning the gold medal at the international level could secure a spot at prestigious institutions like Kingswell University or Twilight Peak Academy!"

Nomis nodded. "Yes, there are recommendation slots.

The woman asked again, "Do you think Ike stands a chance?!"

There was a brief silence before Norris replied, "Hazel, first, you must understand the essence of these competitions. It demands a higher level of knowledge than what the students are used to, a real challenge."

"The school has slots for various subjects, typically reserved for students who excel distinctly in one subject, showing both superior academic skills and a knack for competitive thinking

Growing anxious, Hazel interjected, "But Ike's grades are excellent. He's consistently ranked in the top 20 in his grade. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Let me explain," Norris continued patiently. "Rankings are based on overall performance. It's the individual subject rankings that truly matter. Moreover, the school has decided on the nominations for this year's competition. So, there's not much I can do."

"I see. Well, never mind then," Hazel replied, trying to mask her disappointment.

"Okay then, I'll leave you to it. Take care.

Hazel smiled. "You too, come back anytime."

However, as Norris walked away, Hazel's demeanor changed, and she muttered, "All this chatter about subject rankings. My like is great at everything. But he's pretending he's powerless, saying the decision's already been made like he can't do anything about it. What a phony" "Hazel, who are you talking to? Saw something upsetting? a neighbor inquired, having overheard parts of the conversation. "I saw Mr. Cole heading over there. I was trying to ask him about Amanda's studies."?"

"Don't bother. Ike doesn't qualify for the physics competition." As if your daughter was any different, dabbling in physics, chemistry, and computer science.

The neighbor asked, "What happened?"

"It's all because he's got a daughter who made it to Kingswell University. He can't stand the thought of someone else's child shining, too,"

Hazel scoffed

The neighbor disagreed, "Now, Hazel, don't be spreading rumors. Mr. Cole's not like that"

Hazel didn't let it go. "I don't care what he's like. By not letting my like in, he's showing he can't stand to see anyone else succeed. So, what if his daughter went to Kingswell? She hasn't been back for years and must have forgotten her folks. Acts like they're too good for

"I also heard his brilliant daughter dropped out of grad school and isn't working. So much for superiority."