

Alberto headed toward the laundry, head down, like a scaredy fawn. He opened the door, squeezing his head inside, followed timidly by the rest of the body. The girl behind the counter stared at him, perplexed, yet welcomed him with a cordial smile.

"Good morning, how can I be of help today?" she asked with a jolly voice.

"Hello, I came this morning to drop off a coat, but you ran out of paper for the ticket. You told me to come back this afternoon to get it," answered Alberto, stumbling over his words.

The girl frowned and pursed her lip. "I don't remember your visit. Could you tell me what type of coat it was?"

"It was a black double-breasted coat."

"Could you be more specific? I have five or six of those."

"No, it's just a regular black coat, nothing fancy."

The girl looked at the row of coats lined behind her.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember your visit," she repeated, vaguely mortified.

Alberto took a long breath. It always ended like that.

"Maybe you remember the woman who was with me. Tall, red hair, green eyes, raspy voice..." he recited in one breath.

"Ah, I remember her! Such a beautiful woman, you are one lucky man!" exclaimed the girl.

"She's my mother," he cut short. Alberto spit those words in the girl's face like pieces of chewed food. She blushed and disappeared in the back for a second, emerging with a ticket in hand.

"Here's your number, the coat will be ready by the end of the week," she said, avoiding his stare. Alberto grabbed it and left the laundry, mumbling a goodbye.

Rain was pouring outside. He slid the hand with the ticket into his pocket, holding it tight. It was imperative it remained dry.

Once in front of the elegant front door, he knocked a few times with a dolphin shaped door knocker. His mother had a passion for those animals. "How I wish you were a dolphin, Alberto, you would be ten times more clever!" she joked from time to time. She then burst into laughter and patted him on the head, like a dog.

The door opened and his mother stood in the doorway in all her perfection: tall, lean, shiny red hair in an elegant bun, skin marked by delicate wrinkles that slightly betrayed her true age. She smiled at him, showing two rows of white teeth.

"About time. I was wondering if you were dead," she said, all venom, yet still smiling.

Alberto crossed the doorstep and showed her the ticket out triumphantly, expecting to be thanked. She turned the ticket around a couple of times.

"I knew it. Can't you see that it's all wet and unreadable? Are you expecting me to go to the laundry with this wrinkled thing? You should have put it in a safer pocket, you idiot."

She called the maid and commanded her to pick up the coat when ready, then headed to the kitchen. Alberto followed her.

"I hope she won't return with the wrong coat or I'll send her back to Ecuador or the Philippines or to whatever Third World country she comes from." She took a deep breath and her angry expression softened all of a sudden.

"You want a sandwich now, Alberto," she twittered.

It wasn't a question. His mother never asked, she just delivered orders or insults.

She took jam and butter out of the fridge to make the sandwich.

Alberto hated jam and butter, even more so he hated the crustless bread she always used.

He tried to tell her once, at ten years old. Her reply was: "That's nonsense. You've always loved it. Now shut up and eat, your mother has a headache."

Now at thirty-four years old, he was still forced to gulp down jam and butter sandwiches.

He started eating. The slimy consistency of the sandwich made him nauseous. He looked at his mother.

Her red hair, falling from the bun, lay on her chest, creating weird shapes on her pearly white dress. The resemblance to splatters of blood flashed in Alberto's mind for a moment. He swallowed the last piece of bread and grabbed the plate to wash it, but his mother caught his arm.

"Don't even think about it, you're going to leave scratches. I'll have the maid wash it."

She yanked the plate out of his hands.

"You can go to your room. I had it tidied the way you like it."

Once again, not a question. Alberto trudged up the stairs. His mother's angry yell came from the kitchen.

"Quit dragging those damned feet! Walk like I taught you to!"

Alberto huffed, but reluctantly picked up his feet all the way up the stairs. He opened the door to his room, longing for a sleep, despite it being only four o'clock. As usual, the bed was made as *she* liked it, covers tucked under the mattress and a million useless decorative pillows.

He sat on the edge of the bed and removed a board from the floor. He wanted to hold his greatest treasure: a huge stamp album. Alberto nurtured a passion for stamp collecting for as long as he remembered. It was the only aspect of his life that his mother didn't get access to, since she didn't know it existed. That album was his piece of heaven: he personally selected every single stamp, organized it with his personal arrangement method and even chose the binding and its color: black leather, with red embroideries on the edges. It cost him a small fortune, but it was worth every penny. He remembered the position of all the pieces by heart and checked every day that his mother didn't find it and rearranged them. Every time he smelled it, the crushing weight of his mother's presence grew a little lighter. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, just to make sure everything was still in place.

As he always did, he smelled the cover and hugged it like a teddy bear. Leafing through the pages, he finally relaxed for the first time since that morning: everything was as he left it. He put it back in its hiding place, carrying it with both hands like a baby. His mother passed by the door, on the phone.

"Sure, dear, don't worry, I can do it if you want. My pleasure. I can bring it tomorrow when I'm at the hospital. No no, don't worry, really, I'm delighted to do it...yeah, yeah, sure..."

Her voice faded down the hallway. The doorbell rang and Alberto stood up to answer it.

The moment he opened the door, his heart skipped a beat: it was Beatrice.

"Hi Alberto, I didn't think you would be here! I was looking for Barbara." she greeted him, glowing.

Alberto's mouth dried immediately. "H-hi Beatrice, come in. I'll call her." he stammered.

Red-faced, he moved to let her through and her strawberry smell filled his nostrils.

That smell reminded him of the sandwich he had eaten earlier, and he couldn't help but think that if the same sandwich had been prepared by Beatrice, it would have tasted heavenly.

Without daring to look at her, he escorted Beatrice to the living room and pointed to the luxurious leather sofa. He went upstairs to call his mother.

"She said she'll be down in a minute, she's on the phone." he said back in the living room.

"Oh, all right, thank you." answered Beatrice.

Silence descended between them. The clock ticked. Tick, tock, tick, tock

*Say something Alberto*, he thought to himself.

He stood on the doorstep, stiff like a toy soldier. If observed closely, under the few blonde hairs that covered his cranium, one could see the gears turning inside, desperately searching for a witty remark to impress Beatrice, who was quietly checking her phone, unaware of the storm of thoughts raging in Alberto's mind.

She raised her eyes from the phone and smiled at him. "So, how are things going with the new job?"

Alberto was startled. He blinked a few times to collect himself and cleared his throat.

"Good." he answered dryly, smiling back. Beatrice nodded, waiting for him to add something else, but in vain. Alberto still stood frozen on the doorstep, feeling more and more like an idiot for not saying something wittier.

"Good." repeated Beatrice.

"Good." repeated Alberto.

"What do you say we switch it up?" she teased.

Alberto laughed and finally felt the tension leaving his body.

"I'm guessing you're happy to work closely with your mother, she's such a resourceful woman." she continued.

Alberto slumped. Every conversation always circled back on his mother. Always.

"Yes, I'm very happy to work with her." he said between his teeth. He couldn't bring himself to say anything else for the following ten minutes. He just stared at his shoes, still on the doorstep. For once, his mother's arrival was a relief, ending that moment of deadly embarrassment.

"Hi Beatrice, sorry to keep you waiting, I was in the middle of a phone call. I bet Alberto cheered you up with his charisma."

"Don't worry Barbara. The party planner sent us an estimate for the charity event. I was wondering if we could take a look at it together. I'm not good with budgets." answered Beatrice, pulling a stack of papers from her bag.

"This charity event will end up costing more than what we will make out of it. Good thing we work for the pediatric ward, and not for geriatrics! Let me see the estimate." replied Barbara, grabbing the papers and reading them "Less terrible than I expected, maybe we can get a discount. Let me talk to the party planner, I know how to handle people like him."

"Thank you, Barb. The ward would be lost without you. Alberto, your mother is truly awe-"

Beatrice didn't finish the sentence, because when she lifted her head to speak to Alberto, he wasn't there.

He quietly went to his room and took a Maalox and half a sleeping tablet. He dragged himself to the bed, falling asleep in an instant.

*Everything... is about her*, his last thought before falling asleep.

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Monday morning. It was still raining when Alberto left home to go to work. He pulled the hood up to protect from rain.

He was on time for his shift. No one greeted him. No one ever greeted him, even though he had worked there for six months. He went into the locker room to put on the uniform. He was about to take the shirt off, when Barbara slammed the door open without even knocking, as she always did.

"Get moving, there's already work to be done. Third floor, room five, now."

Alberto nodded and changed as quickly as possible. In the elevator, he wondered what he was going to deal with that day. Blood, feces, vomit? None of the possibilities was tempting, but deep down that job made him feel useful. In its own small way, it helped the hospital.

Maybe it was the only good thing his mother had given him in his entire life. He didn't like to owe her something, but if this was the price of finally feeling useful, he was willing to pay it.

Beatrice stepped into the elevator with two nurses on the second floor. Alberto pushed himself against the wall not to be seen, but she was too busy checking charts to notice his presence anyways. They all got out on the third floor, but went in opposite directions.

Alberto lingered for a second outside the elevator, taking in the strawberry scent she had left behind. He always wondered how she could smell so good despite the tiring shifts. The only stupid answer he could think of was that good people just smell good. He snapped out of his thoughts when someone hit the back of his head. It was Barbara.

"Do you want a coffee, you idiot? Maybe a croissant?" she hissed, fuming. Alberto kept quiet and followed her inside room five.

"Luigi had frequent episodes of diarrhea last night. His condition is getting worse, but he's stable for now. He's downstairs for some exams, hit me up when he's back in the room. And call his parents, I need to talk to them as soon as possible." said Barbara, entering the room.

"Alberto, clean this mess before Luigi is back."

She snapped her fingers at him and pointed to the dirty bed.

"Ok, Mom."

She frowned.

"I'm doctor Oreste when we are here, *even for you*. Get to work."

Alberto blushed furiously as she left the room.

Still red, with his stomach turning, Alberto began cleaning the feces that the patient had smeared all over the bed.

*This poor kid exploded in a pool of shit*, thought Alberto, half disgusted, half moved to pity.

"Aren't you done yet?"

Barbara had come back.

"I can't find my gloves."

"Alberto, you're in a hospital. Take another pair of gloves from somewhere and move those skinny legs. Luigi is almost done with the exams."

Alberto obeyed and started working faster to satisfy his mother's request, while she was scrutinizing his work from the doorway. Meanwhile, she kept giving him orders on how to clean this and that. At the umpteenth mistake, she scoffed and took over.

"Give this to me, moron. Can't you see you are scratching the floor? I could fire you from this job as easily as I got you hired."

She cleaned the floor perfectly in a matter of seconds, put the sheets in a sack and gave it to Alberto to take to the laundry. At that moment, a wobbling Luigi entered the room dragging an IV.

"Hi Luigi dear, how are you feeling? Your bed is almost ready, despite somebody else's ineptitude. Let me fix it for you." said his mother with kindness.

Alberto watched the scene slumped in a corner, without even trying to reply. It would have been useless. His mother always treated her patients better than she had ever treated him. He watched her make the bed with fresh sheets, plump up the pillow and help the kid get in bed, before squeezing his shoulder.

"Do you like the bed like this?" asked Barbara.

Luigi nodded and thanked her.

"Good! Everything is going to be all right. Now rest, when you'll feel better, we'll see what to feed you with." she whispered.

She turned and noticed Alberto, still standing in his little corner. Before leaving the room, she scolded him in a hiss.

"What are you still doing here? Get out of my face. You're not useful anymore...not that you ever were anyways."

Alberto stared at the children, fighting the growing envy inside him. He found the strength to leave the room, pushing the cleaning cart so fast that nurses were forced to dodge him. Only one question was flashing through his mind: *why am I the only one she hates?*

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The shift ended at midnight. He was exhausted. Barbara made him run from room to room to clean up all the worst disasters, sparing him no insults and cutting remarks in front of everybody.

Back in the locker room, he lay down on one of the benches, covering his eyes with one arm. He savored the quietness, flecked by the noise of rain. No sound of his mother's voice, no silly laughs from the nurses, no children crying. Only one sound could lift his morale up: Beatrice's voice. She was passing by the locker room. He changed fast to catch up with her, ignoring the fact that he couldn't express a coherent thought in front of her. He just needed to see her face.

He fell into step beside her. Luckily, she was alone.

"Hi Al! Where did you come from?"

"From the janitor's lockers."

"Ah, I see."

The conversation died before it even began. She went back to her phone, typing frantically. They walked together to the end of the hallway. The embarrassment grew step after step. Beatrice lifted her head from the phone and smiled at him. Alberto realized that he had been waiting to see that smile for the whole day; his knees trembled a little. Then, an epiphany.

"How is the organization for the charity event going?" he asked.

*Took you long enough*, he scolded himself. His inner voice terribly resembled his mother's. He shook his head to remove the thought and focused on Beatrice's face. It was all that mattered, in that moment.

"It's going smoothly, we found the location, the catering and a special guest! Invites still need to be sent, but Barbara is haggling on the price. Without her..."

"I'd love to be your date for the charity event." sighed Alberto, without thinking. He regretted it a second after. He didn't even know why he had said it, whether to avoid hearing Beatrice praise his mother, or out of sheer exhaustion after the long day. He couldn't stand to look at her, too petrified at the thought of reading disgust, hate, or worse, mockery in her eyes.

"Yes, I'll come with you."

The world shone with a whole new light. Alberto locked eyes with her: it was like staring at the sun, but she was far too beautiful not to stare.

"I'll have to buy a new dress, I didn't know I'd have a date!" exclaimed Beatrice, delighted.

"You'd look good even with a trash bag," he replied.

*Alberto, what the fuck are you saying?*

She chuckled. "I disagree, but thanks anyways. I'll give you my number to decide on the time."

They exchanged numbers. His hands trembled while saving Beatrice's number. He couldn't believe it.

She had a crush on Beatrice since Barbara took her under her wing and she started coming to their house. To give credit where credit's due, Barbara had a good nose for talent: if she thought that Beatrice was worth her time, it meant that she truly was.

It wasn't love at first sight. After their first encounter, Alberto was ready to hate her guts. The favorite sport of the Oreste's family was mistreating Alberto; as impossible as it may seem, every guest that passed from their house felt pretty at ease with that habit. But Beatrice never accepted that tradition, even if Barbara offered her many occasions. Alberto was well aware that she was way out of his league, but he hadn't expected her to treat him like a human being. Day after day, she carved a small space in his heart with kind words, selfless gestures and displays of respect. When warmed by a vague optimism, Alberto dreamed she acted that way because she reciprocated his feelings. When even vague optimism was

scarce, he convinced himself that Beatrice's heart was just naturally good and she was kind toward everyone. Regardless of how much optimism inhabited his body, he felt unable to live without her presence. He was sure the world would have stopped making sense without Beatrice in it, reciprocated or not.

The way back home, that day, was surreal.

*Am I still living my shitty life, or am I living somebody else's?*, he asked himself looking at Beatrice's contact. His gaze moved on his pale and thin hands, fingers so long to make the phone look like a toy. He passed one hand between the few hair he had, trying to comb them; a couple of blonde hair got stuck between his bony fingers. He was taking them out with a hint of bitterness when he realized it was his stop. He got off the bus with the usual scaredy fawn step.

On the boardwalk, he suddenly saw his reflection in a window. He was still feeling that weird alienation, but even with that his first thought looking at himself was: *you are a monster*. The sense of euphoria from before slipped away like honey on a greasy teaspoon. He had no more doubts: the voice he heard inside his head was his mother's. He felt as if he were seeing himself for the first time ever, as if his body had been somewhere else until that moment. All he saw was his ugliness, even after someone deigned him of positive attention.

*No one will ever love you*, piled it on the voice. It was always her, his mother, who ruined everything, even when she wasn't present.

He ran home and rushed off to his room, ignoring the maid who followed him around with the daily mail. He slammed the door in her face without even apologizing; he would apologize the next day. He picked up his stamp collection for the usual ritual: browsing it, sniffing it, hugging it, but nothing gave him relief. In desperate need of calm, he rummaged through the night stand to look for sleeping tablets and swallowed half a tablet without even drinking water. Broken, he laid his head on the pillow, waiting for it to take effect.

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The door slammed open all of a sudden and Alberto nearly had a heart attack. The sound of Barbara's high heels filled the room, as she wandered the room.

"Alberto, are you still sleeping? Have you seen my charger?" she asked, moving all the books from the bookshelves.

"I just came back..." he moaned, trying to tell his heart to stop beating so fast.

Barbara stopped for a second, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. She was already put together: a touch of mascara, nude lips, a hint of highlighter, hair perfectly coiffed.

"It's noon, dear. I have a lunch appointment, tell me where the hell the charger is so you can go back to vegetating in bed."

"Why should I know where your charger is? Ask Lupita."

"Who?"

"The maid."

"Her name is Lupita? I always called her Lolita. I guess that's why she looked confused when I asked her if her parents read Nabokov."

She marched out of the room, screaming the maid's name still wrong. Alberto got out of the bed, stretching; he felt bones cracking.

*Maybe I should gain some weight, go to the gym.*

He was already picturing how embarrassing it would be to flaunt his TV-remote-lifter physique in a gym, when he realized that the stamp album was still on the bed, in full sight. His heart skipped several beats, fatally near to a real heart attack: did his mother see it? He wasn't sure. He gulped.

While panic was seeping into his bones, his mother must have found the charger and gone off to her lunch. He rushed to hide the album, careful not to scratch it. He bit his lip, torn: there was nothing else he could do, only hope that Barbara didn't see it. Not really convinced, he dressed and went downstairs to eat.

The following days went by under a lucky star: Beatrice smiled at him every time they met in the hallways, Luigino's diarrhea explosions became sporadic and Barbara was ignoring him for whatever reasons. He even bought a new rare stamp that was now hidden in the sock's drawer, waiting to join the others. Alberto didn't know what to think of his mother's behavior, but chose not to question it too much: better ignored than tormented. It was like being on vacation.

The charity event was next week and Alberto's euphoria grew in direct proportion with his anxiety. He decided to take a day off to buy a present for Beatrice. He never took a day off once in his life. What was the point when you had no one to spend it with?

His mother entered the kitchen while he was eating breakfast, ready to go to the hospital. Alberto greeted her, but she didn't answer and looked right past him, straight to the coffee maker, as if he was made of glass.

"Lolita? Lolita?" she called, riled. The sound of the maid's hasty steps came from the hallway. "Lolita, did you use the product that I gave you to clean the floor of the entryway? It's full of scratches and stains. I know that in the Philippines you have no idea what rose marble is, but it's not a good reason to ignore my instructions."

"Mom, Lupita is Mexican..."

"Also, Lolita please remember to go get some groceries, I left the list and the money on the living room table. If you try to skim, I'll send you back to the slums you came from." she barked, striding out of the kitchen.

Lupita was obviously a regular immigrant, but his mother didn't care. Alberto sent her a sorry look, as he always did.



After finishing breakfast, he went upstairs to get dressed. He wanted to change his style a bit that day, but his closet had only t-shirts and old jeans. He was about to wear a random outfit, when from the bottom of the closet, almost hidden, emerged a nice white linen shirt with blue buttons. He didn't even remember where it came from, but he clearly remembered that he never felt at ease wearing it. That day, though, it was exactly what he needed. He looked at his reflection: the blue buttons matched the blue of his eyes. He never realized that. Last week's crisis was water under the bridge.

He had decided to buy a necklace for Beatrice. Actually, Alberto didn't care for jewelry: he considered it ephemeral ornaments. Barbara, instead, was crazy about them, especially earrings and necklaces. She had hundreds of them, of any shape and color, so many that she had installed a panel against the wall just to be able to hang them all. Nobody could touch her sets, nor move them or look at them. *Like my stamps*, thought Alberto bitterly. For Beatrice, he was willing to set aside his aversion for jewelry. It would have been an easy sacrifice if confronted with the lovely grasp he felt in his heart every time she smiled. He had no idea how to choose a necklace, so he let his gut feeling guide him. He wandered around the city center, until he saw it in a jewellery shop: a thin string of white gold, sprinkled with small emeralds of the prettiest green he had ever seen. It took him the time to imagine Beatrice with that necklace on to run inside to buy it, without even looking at the price. No scaredy fawn walk this time: he entered the shop with all the confidence he could muster, smoothing the linen shirt and even daring to make a joke.

"I assume this is a present. Do you want me to wrap it for you?" asked the shopkeeper, after putting the necklace inside an elegant green velvet case.

"Could you also add a note?"

"Let me guess...is it for your mother Barbara? She often buys from us and I recognize her taste. This would go wonderfully with her complexion."

Alberto's smile froze, but he didn't lose his cool. *Fuck you, mom.*

"No, the person I'm giving this to is less than a thousand years old, she'll wear it with much more grace than my mother. Don't worry about the note, I'll take care of it." he answered sharply. This left him with a new sensation. He felt invincible. The shopkeeper fell silent and spoke again only to greet him.

On the way back, Alberto spotted a bouquet of flowers outside of a florist shop, arranged in a beautiful color composition. The corolla was big, with many small petals with gradients of pink, purple and orange, whose disposition resembled a mandala. The florist noticed his interest and explained that those were dahlias, a flower symbol of gratitude. Alberto bought one with apricot petals.

When he came home and handed her the flower, Lupita's eyes shone, but she had no time to say anything because Barbara arrived, still complaining about the dirty floor. The maid ran into her room to hide the flower and went back to the hall to endure the scolding. For once, though, when she went back to work, her expression was a bit more serene.

The day of the charity event felt like it would never come. Alberto agreed with Beatrice to meet at eight at his house.

The workday was exhausting: Luigi's health got so bad that vomit added to diarrhea, which Alberto had to clean up. One of the other janitors was on sick leave, so he had to cover more than one ward at the same time.

He managed to get home by seven, just in time to take a shower and wear his tuxedo. He was buttoning the suit when the doorbell rang.

"Lolita, open the door!" yelled his mother from the bathroom. No answer. The doorbell rang again. "LOLITA, OPEN THE DAMN DOOR."

Alberto ran downstairs to avoid half an hour of Barbara complaining about the maid, the Philippines and the Third World.

Behind the door was an unknown man.

"How can I help you?" asked Alberto, confused. The man revealed a flashing row of white teeth, so square and perfect that they seemed sculpted from marble. An intricate pattern of wrinkles formed at the corners of his mouth, hinting that those teeth had less than half of the man's years.

"You must be Alberto. Barbara told me so much about you! I was dying to meet you, I'm Amilcare." he answered, holding out a yellowed hand. His voice was scratchy on the vocal cords, like a cat holding onto a tent.

Alberto shook his hand, but couldn't resist asking the question that was hammering his head.

"Who are you?" asked Alberto.

"I'm Barbara's lover."

An image flashed through Alberto's mind: a naked, wrinkly Amilcare, smiling with his very young teeth, lying on a bed of rose petals. He shivered in disgust.

"Amilcare, honey, is that you? Did my idiot son leave you in the doorway?" tweeted Barbara from upstairs.

Alberto moved to the side to let him through. Amilcare stepped inside limping and stopped in front of the stairs, clicking his heels. He tapped one leg with his knuckles, just below the right knee, producing a dull sound.

"Mahogany, best quality. They don't make them like this anymore."

Alberto chose not to ask why he had a wooden leg instead of a prosthetic one, or why it was made of a heavy wood like mahogany, or even why he had lost it in the first place.

He went back to his preparations. He was almost done, when the doorbell rang again, at eight o'clock. It was Beatrice. Alberto heard Amilcare's grating voice handing out coy compliments. He ran downstairs to snatch her from Amilcare's yellow claws. He squeezed between the two while Amilcare was bragging about the quality of the wood.

"Why not use a prosthetic?" asked her in confusion.

"Oh no Beatrice, look at the time! We're late! Sorry, Amilcare, we have to leave." interrupted Alberto, pushing her out of the door.

"What the..?" she exclaimed once outside.

They walked to the car, chuckling, while Alberto told her about Amilcare's leg. A lamppost lit Beatrice and he realized how breathtakingly beautiful she was. He wobbled a little, dazed, and leaned on a parked car to avoid falling. The thought of spending an entire evening with her hit him like a rock, but it didn't hurt, quite the opposite instead. After absorbing the shock, he remembered the present he had for her.

"This is for you," he said, handing her the velvet case.

Beatrice's eyes sparkled. "You shouldn't have!"

She covered her mouth with a hand, and caressed the green rocks.

"Alberto, it's beautiful." she whispered. He smiled with satisfaction, then took it out of the case and put it around her neck.

He couldn't resist. "*You* are beautiful," he whispered.

He bit his tongue. Unexpectedly, Beatrice took him by the hand. He had always imagined how soft her hands were, so he was taken aback by how coarse her skin was instead. Her grasp was solid, though, one that wouldn't let go for anything in the world. There was no need for words: they walked hand in hand, while Beatrice kept stroking the necklace with her free hand.

"Your hands are so soft." she said, surprised. Alberto chuckled.

Beatrice's car stopped in front of a huge staircase, leading to an equally huge and elegant building. A crowd of sophisticated-looking people filled the entrance. Alberto swallowed his saliva, nervous.

*Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe she'll be embarrassed to be seen with me. Oh God, what do I do, what do I do?*

Beatrice grabbed his hand again, with no hesitation. Alberto looked at her face: she was glowing. No sign of embarrassment, disappointment, resignation. Just pure excitement. A bit of tension left his body, but he couldn't hide his scaredy fawn step. Beatrice led him to a group of guests at the bottom of the stairs.

"Good evening doctors! Do you remember Alberto, Barbara's son?" She greeted them with a big smile. The whole group returned the greeting politely, except for a woman who approached him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry for you, my dear" sighed the woman. Alberto looked at Beatrice in search of explanations, but her expression had changed, pure fury in her eyes.

"Take your shitty little jokes somewhere else, Mara." she growled.

"Jokes? I'm serious. I can only imagine the torture to live with a snake like Barbara."

The woman called Mara spotted Alberto's confused expression. She moved her gray curls aside and extended a bony hand.

"I suppose I should introduce myself before insulting your mother. Doctor Mara Scarpecci, pediatric surgeon. Your mother and I go way back, we have known each other since she was a mediocre student who fucked her anatomy professor."

"What about you fucking the microbiology professor?"

Barbara was standing tall as a statue, in a flashy silver dress. Amilcare was right behind her, with a hand on her hip and a lit cigar between his lips.

"My Barbara was a young tiger" he cawed, moving the cigar from side to side. Barbara ignored him. She was staring at Mara with intensity and Mara was staring back with a sarcastic smile.

"Only because you already fucked the farmacology professor." Mara clapped back.

Alberto scratched his neck, uneasy. He was about to ask Beatrice to get inside, when he felt a grip on his arm. It was her, dragging him on the stairs, jaw contracted in anger.

At the top of the stairs, she left his arm and punched the wall, out of the blue.

"I *hate* that whore. She never fails to discredit Barbara in front of me, who the hell does she think she is?"

Alberto was shocked. He had never heard Beatrice curse or insult anyone. His mental image of her cracked a little. She was about to charge another punch, when he blocked her and held one of her coarse hands in his.

"You wouldn't want to ruin your precious surgeon's hands" he said "I'm sure my mother wouldn't want to break your fingers because of doctor Scarpecci."

She relaxed in his hands.

"You're right. It's just...your mother is such a wonderful woman, I can't stand people tearing her down."

Alberto resisted the urge to contradict her. He didn't want to awaken her fury again.

"Can we focus on our night, please?" he begged her instead.

She stood there, breathing heavily through her nose.

"All right...but if I catch her talking smack about Barbara again, I'll punch her stupid horse face."

Even though there were still many people outside, the ball room inside was packed. Since his mother was involved, Alberto imagined a very sober event, with champagne flutes, oysters and soft jazz. Instead, the place looked like a nightclub: there were pink and blue lights all around the room and the ceiling, the catering tables were pushed aside to leave space in the center, probably as a dance floor. There was also a dj booth, where a girl with blue and pink hair was inviting guests to dance with vague enthusiasm.

"What a shitty night." she mumbled by mistake in the microphone, before pushing it away with a huff.

Beatrice's forehead vein was throbbing. She was staring at the dj and the colored lights in disgust.

"What's all this stuff? Where are the white linens and the waiters in livery we agreed on with the party planner?" she growled.

"It's not that bad. Granted pink isn't my favorite color, but..." he started, but Beatrice had already darted off in the crowd. Although taller than the majority of the guests, Alberto quickly lost sight of her.

"Did you lose your Beatrice?" asked a husky voice behind him. Alberto turned around and found himself face to face with Mara Scarpecci. Seeing her up close, he had to admit that her angular face and sarcastic expression made her very attractive.

"Ehm..yes. She wasn't happy with the party, I think she went looking for the party planner." answered Alberto, hesitant.

Mara let out an evil chuckle. "Oh, she wasn't happy, then? Poor Bea, how unfortunate." Alberto had the impression that she knew much more than she let on, but decided not to investigate any further. Mara reminded him too much of Barbara. There was something else he was dying to ask her, but he was terrified of the answer.

"You said you knew my mother when she was young."

"We went to college together."

Alberto hesitated for a second, but decided to ignore his survival instinct.

"Was...was she always...like she is now?"

Mara studied him. Alberto shifted his weight from one foot to the other and rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. That woman made him anxious.

"Barbara wasn't the typical mother, was she?"

Alberto lowered his eyes. He was tired of ignoring the truth.

"No, and nobody believes me when I say that."

Mara laughed. The conversation was truly entertaining her.

"Do you want to know why? Everybody knows her as the fabulous doctor Barbara Oreste, who saves children and takes care of young talented doctors, like your friend Beatrice. They don't know what's behind the mask."

Alberto gave up all diplomacy.

"My mother won't hesitate to mistreat me in front of everyone. Never in her life has she said something nice to me. Never. In private or in public. She is controlling and mean, yet everyone idolizes her. Why?"

"Barbara always had a magic touch. People talked to her and forgot reality, they only saw what Barbara told them. She could say the sky was orange and everyone would say that it had always been like that, even clever people like Beatrice. Did you see how mad she got at me? She would have gutted me if she could have. That's all Barbara's work, honey."

Alberto massaged his temples. That conversation was causing him a headache and the music blasting didn't help.

“And you know what’s worse?” continued Mara “she can mistreat you in front of everyone because she doesn’t need to hide herself behind the mask of the perfect woman anymore. People put it on for her whenever they need to, whenever they need to hide the truth to themselves. Barbara couldn’t destroy that mask even if she wanted to, that’s how much she got people used to it, including herself. She’s not even aware of it, she still thinks she is in control. Poor fool.”

Alberto’s temples were pounding along with the beat of the music.

“You didn’t answer my question, though.”

It was Mara’s turn to hesitate.

“Do you know what happens to the caterpillar when it becomes a butterfly?”

“Yes, but I hope you won’t be giving me some cheap lesson about the cycle of life.”

Mara ignored him. “The caterpillar and the butterfly share the same DNA, even if they are two totally different creatures. The caterpillar’s DNA contains some sleeping genes that activate during the metamorphosis. When the caterpillar seals inside the chrysalis, its body dissolves, but not completely. A bunch of cells remain to give birth to the butterfly.”

She took a sip from the glass of wine she was holding.

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with my mother,” said Alberto, impatient.

“Let me finish. What I’m saying is: your mother underwent a metamorphosis. She started as a caterpillar: a young anxious woman, when I met her, although the genes of what she’s today were always there. They didn’t activate until she sealed herself for nine months in her chrysalis. So to answer: was your mother always like that? Yes and no. But you shouldn’t be caring that much.”

“I care very much instead.”

“Knowing it will only bring you suffering. A metamorphosis is irreversible. The caterpillar dissolves into non-existence. The butterfly can’t go back, nor can Barbara. So knowing how she was before won’t help you tolerate what she is now, because there’s no way to reverse it. You’ll live with the thought of what could have been, but isn’t.”

Alberto bit his thumb. He had one last doubt.

“If what you say is true..”

“...and it is.”

“If it’s true, then what caused the metamorphosis?”

Mara laughed hysterically.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Alberto frowned while she pinched his cheek.

“You.”

---

The noise of the entire room disappeared when Mara said those words.

"What do you mean it's my fault?"

"This wine bored me, I want a cocktail" she complained.

She looked around for a waiter. She blocked one, picked up a glass and smacked his ass.

The waiter quickly moved away looking behind his back, deeply offended.

Mara stared at Alberto for a long minute. Then tried her cocktail and sneered.

"What am I drinking?"

She stopped another waiter, who approached reluctantly. Mara's reputation for groping must have already spread. The doctor put the glass on the tray and the waiter backed away carefully.

Alberto was about to explode. That old hag just dropped a bomb on him and was refusing to elaborate further.

"What the hell does it mean? What are you talking about?"

Mara ravenously stared at another waiter passing by with empty glasses.

"I don't think you need more explanations. Barbara changed because you were born."

"And how is that my fault? I didn't choose to be born."

"Sure not, but Barbara doesn't care. I don't even think that her hatred toward you is completely conscious. In my opinion, it became second nature over time."

"What mother would develop hate for his son as second nature?"

"Barbara was never honest with herself and admitted that being good at taking care of other people's kids doesn't necessarily make you a good mother."

"So I'm a bet for her? She had to prove to herself that she could be a good mother and used me as a test? And when she failed, she blamed it on me?"

"Pretty much. I'm not saying it was intentional. I want to believe that deep down, in her own sick and distorted way, she was thinking about your well-being."

"It would have been better not to be born at all."

"And put somebody else in your place?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would you wish somebody else to be in your place?"

Alberto paused. His head was spinning. The music was so loud it was destroying his ears.

Not far from them, on the dance floor, Amilcare was dancing an improvised tip tap with his wooden leg. How he was able to dance a tip tap with a mahogany leg was a mystery, but the crowd was surely having fun.

"I don't think I would wish anybody else to be in my place." he answered plainly.

"Because you are a good person." she replied with encouragement "Barbara didn't break you, after all."

Silence fell between them until Mara decided to leave, attracted by another waiter.

Alberto collapsed on a chair. His legs didn't support him anymore and his head was spinning again. He had the urge to leave that place, but didn't want to leave Beatrice without saying goodbye. On the other hand, he wasn't even sure he could bear talking to her at that moment.

He felt a complete failure. A miserable and useless human being.. The worst thing was that no one believed him. Everyone was under his mother's thumb, convinced to be in the presence of the most marvelous creature, while he was the only one who took the mask off to reveal the monster unable to love that she really was.

He was alone, now more than ever. Not even Beatrice could understand. But maybe not all was lost: he was well aware of Beatrice's attachment to Barbara, but if she accepted to go to

the party with him, she must have felt something for him. He was tired of being alone. Tired of being unable to talk to anyone he loved about how his mother treated him.

His instinct told him to take the matter in his hands. He had to find Beatrice and talk to her away from the party, but he had to act quickly. He was afraid to slide back into fear at any moment and abandon his plans before even setting them in motion.

He stood up. His legs were hurting but he forced himself to cross the dance floor to find Beatrice.

He found her shouting to the party planner in a corner of the room. The vein on her forehead was throbbing even more than before, to the point of almost bursting.

"Are you telling me that if anyone had called you and asked you to make changes to the party, you would have said yes? Are you kidding me? I explicitly told you to talk to only me or Barbara!"

The party planner was on the verge of tears.

"I-I-I don't know, someone that seemed like Barbara called and told me to make changes and I obeyed, how-how could I know?"

"YOU COULD HAVE ASKED!" screamed Beatrice, so loud that it was heard above the music.

Alberto approached her with his scaredy fawn walk. He had never seen Beatrice so furious. Her head seemed ready to burst into flames at any second.

"Beatrice..." he said shyly.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" she barked, turning quickly. After a second she realized that it was Alberto.

"I'm sorry Alberto. Talking to idiots makes me lose it." she answered huffing.

The party planner bowed his head, embarrassed.

"Beatrice, I don't feel well. Can we leave?" he asked, unsure.

Beatrice moved her eyes from the party planner to Alberto, torn. She stomped one foot in frustration and grabbed Alberto's hand.

"Let's go. I'm not done with you. I'll call you on Monday to discuss your fee."

The party planner nodded, disheartened. Alberto was reminded a bit of himself, while Beatrice's resemblance to Barbara was uncanny. He felt a bit of determination leaving his body to be replaced with fear.

He let Beatrice lead him into the crowd. Barbara was nowhere to be seen.

Once in the car, Beatrice let out an angry scream.

"THAT IDIOT? DID YOU SEE THAT?"

"What happened?"

"They said someone called them pretending to be Barbara and asked for a new theme"

It must have been Mara. She must really hate Barbara.

"I wonder who it could be..."

"I suspect that Scarpecci whore. She's always scheming to make Barbara look ridiculous. But you can't fool Barbara, she can try all she wants. She's not at Barbara's level and will never be."

Alberto swallowed. Hearing her praise his mother caused him a stabbing pain in his side.

"Are you ok?"

He didn't answer.

"Hey? You're worrying me."

"I need to lie down for a while, if you don't mind."

Beatrice slammed the brakes at a traffic light.

"I saw you talking to that bitch. What did she say to you? I bet she talked crap about Barbara. Is this why you're so upset?"

Silence.

"Don't worry, she is full of crap. She has had a beef with Barbara for ages. I don't know their past, Barbara doesn't really speak about it. Mara never loses a chance to throw mud at her and tell everyone that Barbara is a snake, a bitch, and all of that."

"Do you think they are all lies?"

"Of course, don't you? You should know better than anyone, she's your mother!"

Alberto opened his mouth to reply, but the words died in his throat. He asked himself if it could actually be better to surrender to the invisible cage his mother had locked him in.

Beatrice stopped the car in front of house Oreste.

"Do you want me to go inside with you?" asked Beatrice.

Alberto sighed. He fought with himself for the whole drive. It was so weird to think that only a few hours ago, during the same trip, he felt so ecstatic.

"If you want to." answered Alberto, hopeful.

She took him by the hand and led him to his room. Beatrice made tea and they sat together on the bed.

"So this is your room."

"Yup. The room of a true loser who still lives with his mother."

"Don't say that. Now that you work at the hospital, you'll be able to afford your own place. Barbara told me how difficult it is for you to find a job. It's great that she could help you."

Alberto grit his teeth. Now or never.

"Beatrice, I have to talk to you."

She took a sip of tea and stared at him with wide eyes.

"This evening helped me understand many things. Some I already knew, others were completely new. What all these things have in common is that I can't hold them inside any longer."

Behind the cup, Beatrice's eyes became even wider.

"Going to the party with you, holding your hand, seeing you smile for my gift, even seeing you punch a wall..it made me understand that to me, you are so much more than just a crush. I think I've fallen in love with you."

Beatrice smiled.

"Oh..." she whispered.

"But there's one thing, among all these good feelings, that deeply disturbs me. The relationship that you have with my mother..."

Unsure, Alberto dared to raise his eyes to Beatrice. Her face was inches away from his.

Then she did the last thing that Alberto would have expected: she kissed him.

Pure oblivion.

He forgot everything: Barbara, Mara, Amilcare, his pitiful life, his frustrating job...everything taken away by Beatrice's lips.

They made love. Alberto lost track of time. The tea was cold when they finished. It was raining outside.

They hugged. Beatrice never looked more beautiful. He kissed her on the forehead.

"It was even better than my wildest dreams." sighed Alberto.

She took a deep breath and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Yeah..to think that Barbara warned me when I agreed to go out with you."

That wonderful bubble of happiness popped. His mother's shadow crept on him again.

"Can we not mention my mother while I'm lying in bed naked with you?"



Beatrice chuckled.

"Sorry, I was complimenting you...she thought you weren't ready to have a relationship with a woman. After tonight, I can wholeheartedly disagree."

Alberto took the compliment with a grain of salt. Since when his mother was trying to control his love life? Which other aspect of his life was next?

"I'm happy to contradict her, but she had no right to try to convince you."

"Come on, she was just worried for me. She had that concerned mom expression when she told me 'Alberto is not ready for a woman like you'. I thought it was very nice of her, trying to protect both of us."

*Protect us? That's rich.*

"Protect us from what?"

She curled her lip, pondering.

"The way I see it, Barbara worries that her loved ones find people that are up to their level. Clearly she didn't think that we were on each other's level."

"To me, it seems that the only one depicted as 'not on somebody's level' is me. Anyhow, she should mind her own business, since the decision falls on us."

"I don't understand why you're getting upset. Your mother wants us to be happy. It's ungrateful of you to accuse her otherwise..."

Alberto heard enough. He jumped out of bed and started looking for his clothes.

Beatrice started getting dressed too. Alberto read in her eyes an emotion he would rather not see: surprise. His reaction totally caught her off guard. He was sweating out of anger.

"Alberto, I...I don't understand where all this anger is coming from. You know how much I admire Barbara, I owe her my entire career and she's like a mother to me."

"That's *exactly* the problem. She is a motherly figure for everyone, except his son! For me, there is nothing else but insults, mockery and hate. Why none of the idiots who gravitate around her realize all the hate that she has thrown my way since I was born?"

"Your mother is hard on you only because she cares. She doesn't want to see you fail, she wants you to be strong and determined."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Yes, and I believe her. I trust Barbara and I know she's a wonderful person who would never hurt you on purpose."

"You don't trust my word, though."

"I didn't say that..."

"But you don't believe me when I tell you that my mother isn't a good person."

"It's not that I don't believe you...I just think you have a distorted image of Barbara. Maybe led by frustration because you weren't able to be at her level or, I don't know..."

Alberto felt the anger squirming in his chest like a slipping eel. The only part of him trying to control it was the one who remembered the happiness he felt with Beatrice that night. But he feared it wasn't enough anymore.

"That woman-" he stepped in her direction and she instinctively flinched. He must have had an expression of pure danger on his face, but he was so out of his mind that not even Beatrice's scared look stopped him.

"That woman...humiliated, insulted and hurt me since I have memory. No one ever helped me, because everyone knows her as the fabulous doctor Oreste, world renowned pediatric doctor, philanthropist and patron for young promising doctors. She was so good at playing the part that you don't even realize that she has you wrapped around her finger."

Beatrice's confused and hurt expression made the eel squirm even more. How was it possible that she never realized the abuse Alberto was going through? That she blamed it on his lack of personality?

"Knowing Mara tonight made me realize I'm not crazy. I didn't build an image of my mother that doesn't exist. I'm the only one that sees Barbara Oreste in her true form: a despicable human being."

His chest was moving at an insane rhythm. His head was spinning like a rollercoaster, while the eel was still squirming in his chest like crazy.

Beatrice seemed to shrink with every word. She was now curled up on the bed, hugging her knees and staring at him as if he were threatening her with an axe.

He didn't know how long they stared at each other. Minutes, hours, seconds maybe. When Alberto regained some lucidity, he realized how much he scared her. He scared himself too, even if he felt a sliver of pride for finally getting that weight off his chest. He had to comfort her now. He sat on the bed near her and tried to put a hand on her shoulder.

"Beatrice, I'm sorry, I-"

She dodged him and left the bed from the opposite side.

"Don't touch me."

Alberto pulled his hand back, muttering an apology.

She crossed her arms and looked at the ceiling.

"I can't believe I let my feelings for you fool me. Barbara warned me. She told me you weren't able to make me happy. And now you want to blame it all on her. Alberto, grow up. If you're weak and insecure, it's your fault."

There. Exactly what he feared: Beatrice didn't believe him. She didn't even want to look him in the eyes.

Alberto remained silent. He tried and failed. The eel in his chest dissolved in a pool of acid. He didn't need it anymore. Telling the truth meant losing Beatrice.

"Don't call me," she murmured.

While walking away, she stopped on the doorway. Alberto lifted his head hoping she changed her mind. But all she did was take the necklace off and place it on the library, near the door.

"I hope you will give it to someone at your level."

She left.

The only hope of happiness, destroyed by the ever-present ghost of his mother.

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When Barbara came home, a few hours later, Alberto was sitting on the couch in the living room, in the dark. Turning the lights on made her wince.

"God, Alberto, what are you doing here? I thought you were somewhere with Beatrice."

He was so tired that he didn't even have the energy to hate her. He just wanted answers.

"Mom, do you hate me?" he asked, straight to the point.

"What's this nonsense? You are my son, how could I hate you?"

"Be sincere. It's just you and me."

She scanned his face for an answer.

"Are you drunk?"

"No."

"On drugs?"

"No."

Barbara frowned.

"Then I don't understand how you could ask me such a thing."

"None of your business. Give me an answer."

"No, I don't hate you, Alberto. Happy now? May I go to sleep?"

"If you truly don't, why do you treat me like dirt?"

"Because I think you are." she answered without hesitation.

Only a few hours before, that answer would have made him crazy.

"Have you ever wanted to be my mother?"

"Until I realized what a failure you were, yes."

"You're lying again."

Barbara snorted, annoyed.

"Alberto, I don't owe you any explanation."

"I think you owe me a lot of explanations."

"Since when do you reply to your mother like that?"

"Since I stopped considering you my mother."

Those words seemed to strike a chord with Barbara, but she quickly regained her composure. Her usual disdainful expression resurfaced almost immediately.

Alberto continued.

"Do you hate being *my* mother or being *a* mother?"

"All right, let's get through with this bullshit. The first one. I wanted a different son. Someone who could carry the family name with strength and dignity."

"So *I* am the problem then. If I were different, would you have treated me with respect?"

"Maybe..."

"Different how?"

"Let me think...you're weak, insecure, too sensitive, utterly obtuse, and completely unreliable. Should I continue?"

Barbara rattled off her answer. There was no trace of remorse in her voice, only impatience.

"Have you ever thought, even for a moment, that this might be your fault?" asked Alberto.

The rabid eel in Alberto's chest snapped awake. He didn't want to give in to it. It would only make his mother even more abrasive.

"I did nothing but try to make up for your shortcomings. Don't blame me for your failure, Alberto."

"Unbelievable. Do you know who just told me these same words? Beatrice. You brainwashed her good, didn't you? She bought all that crap about being my fault if I'm not able to live a normal life."

Barbara smiled, satisfied.

"I did a great job with Beatrice. She was like you, when I met her: insecure, anxious, paranoid. Look at her now! She blossomed into a wonderful steel flower. Her only mistake was falling in love with you. But if I've planted my seeds in the right places, soon it won't be a problem anymore."

Alberto bolted up from the couch. He was filled with so much urge to put as much distance as possible from that woman that it made him nauseous. The eel in his chest stopped roughly around his throat, ready to rear its ugly head at the first misstep of his self-control, now on its last legs. His palms were itching, so he rubbed them on his legs. He couldn't understand why.

"Are we done with this ridiculous conversation?" asked Barbara, huffing "I would like to go to bed, if you don't mind."

Barbara couldn't tell by looking at Alberto, but something in his son's chest had ripped. Something that was pulled, yanked, scratched to the point of being unmendable: his dignity. Through the rips, glimpses of something darker and scarier wormed their way through to pollute Alberto's mind.

He turned to his mother, fists clenched, breathing heavily, palms still itchy. He gazed at Barbara with fire in his eyes. The desire to hit her, hurt her, watch her suffer and beg was filling the distance between the two like an eerie guest.

Even after figuring out what was going through his son's mind, Barbara didn't seem scared in the slightest.

"Quit it, Alberto. We both know you won't hurt me. Let me tell you how it'll go: I'll have a good night's sleep, and tomorrow everything will be back to normal. You'll wake up the useless worm you've always been, I'll still wake up as your mother. None of these things you have the power to change."

Barbara's words flew through the room like knives and sank into Alberto's chest. He collapsed to the ground. Sighs as huge as rocks filled his mouth.

"There, behaving exactly as I predicted. You're pathetic." spouted Barbara before turning the light off and marching upstairs.

Alone and desperate, Alberto cried, in the darkness of the living room, still on his knees. In the end, she won. With cruel irony, she did it by handing him exactly what he asked for: the truth. He was now sure to be the cause of his own suffering. The universe had arranged its pawns to send him to that house, with that woman, to be punished for being born.

---

He dragged himself upstairs. He needed a handful of sleeping tablets and a horizontal surface to lay the meatsack he had become on. He went to his room and looked at his unmade bed. He moved in its direction, tripping over the cups, spilling water everywhere. On the pillow, he smelled strawberries. He buried his face in it, crying again.

When he emerged from his desperation, he realized something was out of place: the stamp collection was on the bedstand, even though it was supposed to be in its hiding place. He was so focused on Beatrice that he didn't notice, but it was weird. Without thinking too much of it, he picked it up. Maybe browsing it would have made him feel better.

He opened it and looked at the first page.

Then the second. The third. The fourth.

His cataloguing system. His methodical organisation. Gone.

Everything was *different*, everything was *worse*.

Blood pumped like war drums in his ears.

*That's it.*

Gripping the album in his hand, Alberto went to his mother's room. She was already fast asleep. That sight made him sick to the stomach.

He stopped near the bed, trusting her light sleep would wake her up. As expected, after a minute she did, startled.

"Alberto, what do you want? Can you leave me alone?" she mumbled with a sleepy voice.

Alberto lifted the album.

"Why did you change my stamp collection?" he grumbled.

"I don't know what you're talking about, let me sleep."

"Why did you change my stamp collection?" he repeated, raising his voice.

"Don't yell at me, I don't know which stupid collection you're talking about, you idiot."

Alberto smacked the album on Barbara's face. She screamed in pain.

"Alberto, are you out of your damned mind? What is wrong with you?"

He hit her again. Barbara tried to leave the bed, but Alberto pinned her down by sitting on her chest. He started smashing her head harder and harder with the edge of the stamp collection. Blood spilled with each blow, while Barbara screamed and screamed, praying for her son to stop.

"WHY DID YOU CHANGE IT? WHY? IT WAS THE ONLY THING I COULD CONTROL, WHY DID YOU TOUCH IT?"

Alberto kept hitting and screaming until Barbara stopped moving. A pool of blood spread around her head. The red of her hair blended with the red of her blood.

The war drums inside Alberto's ears were playing louder than ever.

He got off the bed, the dripping album still in his hands and turned around. Lupita was on the doorstep, a mask of horror on her face. None of the two wanted to talk first.

After a long instant, Lupita spoke, choking on the words.

"Sir, please don't kill me. I rearranged the album, it was an accident. I dropped it while cleaning. I tried to fix it, I didn't think you...I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Lupita started sobbing like a child.

"You were always s-so kind to me, n-ow because of me..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

Alberto patiently waited for her to regain control. He didn't want to hurt her. No one else deserved to be hurt in that house anymore. Slowly, she stopped crying. Her expression hardened.

“Sir, you have to leave. I’ll clean the room. Bring the album with you and burn it. There must be no trace left, take the ashes and spread them somewhere. I’ll take care of your mother. Wait a couple of hours, then call the police and report her missing.”

Just like that, a red string tied their lives together. Alberto nodded and picked up some new clothes to get rid of the blood-stained ones.

He was almost out of the front door, when Lupita called him from the top of the stairs. She pulled an apricot orange flower from her pocket.

“Gracias. Everything will be ok.”

Alberto smiled and left. It was still dark out. He took a deep breath and walked with confidence toward the gate. The scaredy fawn walk had left his body.

He was free.