

HOW MANY

Goodbyes

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BY

CATARINA WENGOROVIVS

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by Catarina Wengorovius

Second Edition

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For more about the author, visit:

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For Du, because I'm so lucky we found each other after our first goodbye.

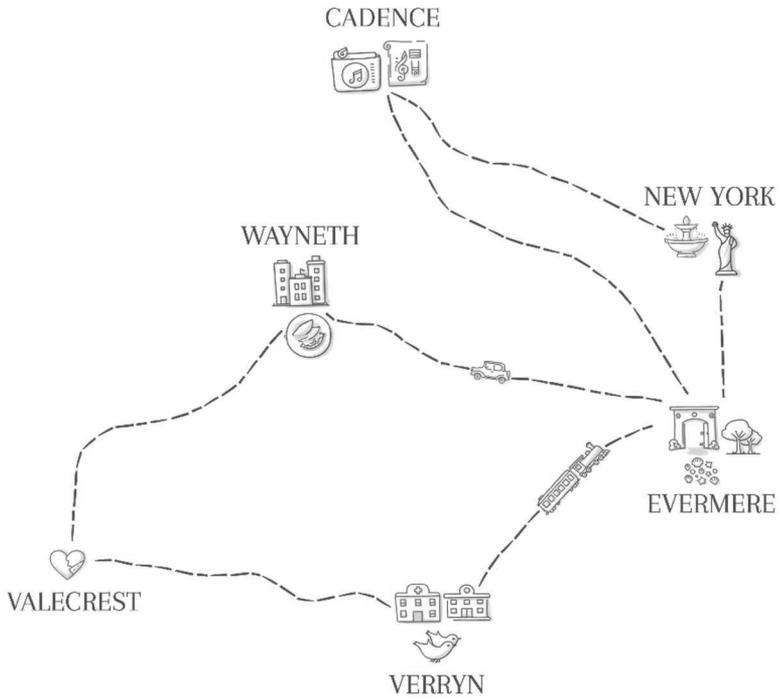
Dear reader,

I hope this book comforts you.

I hope something makes you smile.

I hope it keeps you company.

Welcome to my very first book, thank you for being here.



PROLOGUE

Ella

February 8th, 2008

Friday

I sit on the bench at the train station.

I used to take trains here every time I came back to my hometown when I was studying at college.

Back then, I knew by heart the directions where the trains on each of those four lines went at the specific lunchtime. Countless times I sat eating a sandwich on this bench while the trains passed by and that automatic robotic voice from the station repeated the same words, changing the line number and the train's destination. Many other times I sat down just to catch my breath, after running all the way from the parking lot to here, and watched the train leave the platform in front of my eyes without being able to catch it for barely seconds.

To stop being late was a goal that made it onto my list of personal improvements every January 1st. I justify it by saying I realized it's actually very hard to put an end to "the distractions of life" (what I call the things that make my mind wander).

Here I am, after a three-hour journey, sitting on that same bench, a decade later, and it feels as if nothing has changed. Though I know everything did.

But not here. Here, it's a train station, totally frozen in time: the same four train lines, the same robotic voice, the same cold, slippery metal benches.

I've just arrived from a Neuroscience conference. A fascinating one. I spent the three-hour train ride gazing at the familiar landscapes, my thoughts drifting beyond the glass of the window beside me, and jotting down in my notebook everything that felt too interesting to forget: The role of laughter in attenuating stress. fMRI imaging: the researchers scanned participants' brains while they watched comedic and neutral video clips. Increased activity was observed in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, both linked to emotional regulation, decision-making, and reward. Laughter, particularly spontaneous socially shared laughter, activates brain regions associated with emotional regulation and stress relief. Participants who laughed more showed reduced cortisol levels post-experiment.

As part of my work in neuropsychology, I get to travel to these international conferences from time to time, where we present findings to fellow scientists and network with researchers from all over the world. Each city brings new topics and new discussions.

It had been a good idea to return home by train. It had always been my preferred mode of transportation. Train journeys lend themselves to self-reflection. The lull of the train's speed and the passing scenery seem to soothe every nerve in my nervous system.

I could have gone to Verryn, but Bill wasn't there. He was away at a business conference too. So, instead of returning to the city to an empty apartment, I made a sudden and not-so-

frequent-these-days choice to visit the countryside, my small town, and my *second home*.

Bill and I live in Verryn, in a modern, silent, glassy apartment, with high-end marble decor throughout. A place that was actually bought by him, for him. It was a few years ago, right after he got promoted to his very important, very competitive corporate job, that he decided it was time to take that first big step into adulthood. Before we took *our* big step.

I bought my beautiful country house in my hometown, Evermere, two years ago when a great deal came along, one my mother simply couldn't let her eldest daughter pass up. It was so exciting to do it with her: going to see the house together, negotiating for a better (even better) price, discussing the expense calculations, meeting with the bank, signing the mortgage papers — me as the owner, my mom as the co-signer. And just like that, I had the key to a house. A space. My space. I had claimed a little piece of the world for myself. Love you, Mom.

That space was now my “*second home*”, or, as Bill would say, our “*vacation house*”. Because Bill's apartment in the city was now “*our home*”.

And as much as I like that idea, I still find myself happy to escape here. To Evermere, my small town.

Another train pulls into the station. Line number 3.

The sky is already dark, full of stars overshadowed by the streetlamps.

While waiting for my cab, I find myself tracking with my eyes each person who steps out of that train's carriages onto the platform, and each person who is waiting on the other side

for someone to arrive. Some would be parents, grandparents; others companions, friends, siblings. How long has it been since they last saw each other?

I smile as I contemplate these moments, these people.

I'd forgotten how much I liked train stations on Friday nights.

I liked being a spectator of all the happiness contained in the moment people reunited.

I liked when they called out for their loved one's name in the crowd. I liked the smiles. The tight hug that lasted a little longer this time.

I liked the rushing around, the impatience, the tears of joy.

I liked the touch, the coming together, the closeness.

The end of missing someone.

PROLOGUE

Miles

February 8th, 2008

Friday

I put down my guitar. The studio is still empty. I've spent a brief 30 minutes strumming chords randomly across the strings of my now very old guitar. An empty studio is a peaceful sanctuary for me. I end up coming here alone and making use of it much more than the guys. And yet, they insist we split the rent equally.

They're supposed to arrive at any moment. We're about to start composing the instrumental part of a new song for the next album.

I get up and start walking around the studio. We've been renting this place for a few years now, and in this big city, the space between these four walls feels very much like ours. Finn, the drummer, bought the couch under the pretext that we needed something *extremely comfortable*, since we would *eventually* be spending whole afternoons here. As time goes by, there are cushions of various shapes, blankets, and, from time to time, some slippers that appear and disappear.

On the shelves on the wall perpendicular to the *extremely comfortable* couch, there's a plate with guitar picks, a cup filled with pencils and pens, and several used notebooks with musical notes and phrases that go from mind to paper when someone feels inspired. I still have an old, thin, and frayed black notebook tucked somewhere among the others, one that

could go unnoticed by anyone else, but that never lets my eyes pass it by, because my mind never forgot what's written there on its pages, about a dancing blonde hair and a beaming smile.

For a second, I consider reaching for it, leafing through those words and emotions once attached to them. But I keep walking.

There are quite a lot of photographs scattered around. We officially decided to form a band five years ago, but we already have so many stories to tell that the memories seem to come alive in the pictures I look at. I smile. The three are like family to me.

"You're here!" Finn enters the room with his two drumsticks in the air.

"Let's go, guys." Elliot comes in and sits down at the piano. He's always the most pragmatic, quickest, and most punctual member of the band. Without him, there's a good chance that a song that took us three months to write might have taken six.

All of us have our own jobs, and being in the band is our passion project on the side — our second job, our free time, and our extra money. It's not always easy to align all the schedules, but we almost always accept the gigs we're hired for.

Asher enters the studio, greets everyone with a high five, and glances at my guitar, holding up his. "I brought my old lady too! So yours wouldn't feel outdated," he says, sitting down on the couch with the guitar on his lap, and a mocking look on his face.

Asher is the one I'd known the longest. We met eight years ago in college and have been inseparable ever since.

There is no way life could feel boring, empty or lonely with these three in it. They're the guy friends I never had growing up. The ones you'd call to debate how to ask a girl out when you're learning to read women's signals. And the ones you'd meet after to sigh, because of her or for her. The ones who'd listen to you and not leave your side until your mind is clear. The ones who'd call you out when you're wrong, not to mess with you, but because they're looking out for you. And I wish I had been wrong around them in my teenage years.

Elliot plays a chord and we decide to erase the last two. Rewriting the end of a song me and Asher wrote a few months ago.

The afternoon passed between chords and bars, laughter, disagreements, couch compliments, bags of nuts...

And new beginnings.

Ten Years Ago

Chapter 1

Ella

August 31st, 1998

Tuesday

“That’s the men’s bathroom,” a man’s voice said behind me as I opened a door.

“Oh,” my brain caught up three seconds later, my eyes flicking between the guy’s face and the little figure drawn on the bathroom door. “Of course, thank you,” I said, awkwardly gesturing with my arms.

The next moment didn’t go any smoother. Since I’d ordered the messiest option in the coffee shop’s display — a warm, gooey chocolate muffin with chocolate chips — my hands needed some napkins. I accidentally pulled out too many from the dispenser and tried to shove them back in, but only made it worse, jamming the spring that was supposed to push the napkins forward.

“Well, not your best move,” I told myself in the middle of that operation.

After apologizing for my slightly chaotic over-pull of napkins and then clumsy attempt to shove them back in, I left that coffee shop, earbuds tucked under my hair and the Discman inside my tote bag.

I walked alongside the river.

It was a chilly end of the day, and end of the summer. Sailing boats slid down the river, slowly, barely moving. On the sidewalk by the water, some people were running, others walked, as slowly as the boats, alone or in company, soaking in the last rays of sunshine.

I sat on the steps at the entrance of the Verryn Museum of Art, a notebook on my lap, which I called my journal, observing strangers in their own parallel city lives.

I didn't leave Evermere much during the school months. My mom used to plan one big family summer vacation every July. And sometimes, throughout the year, we'd meet other family members in their own towns, since we all lived far apart. Today, the meeting was here, in Verryn, for a museum night, and they were due to arrive at any minute.

My mom had come with my siblings this morning, but I was busy in Evermere so I couldn't catch a ride with them when they left. I had just arrived in the city by train, and they were meeting me so we could all go to be part of my aunt's art exhibition opening.

I didn't mind at all that they came without me. I enjoyed my trip, my solo wandering through the city. Dates with myself were fun.

I liked my time alone. I was constantly trying to make space in my agenda to plan more of it.

Sometimes the feeling of lacking my own space surfaced, despite actually having my own bedroom. Later, I realized the *problem* was never at home.

We were not a family of "everyone in their place doing their own thing". The doors to the rooms were rarely closed;

we talked from one floor to the other all the time, and we went into each other's bedrooms just to chat, simply because the other person was there — sometimes that included the bathroom too. And I still loved it.

Our favorite thing to do was to all go to the living room at night and play a board game or watch a movie in front of the fireplace, some on the couch, others on the floor, with fluffy blankets and something pretending to be popcorn. No one needed to say it, but we all knew it turned out to be the best part of many days.

The older I got, the more grateful I felt for this closeness.

I ended up finding some *spots* in nature, close to home, where I could be all by myself, living in my thoughts, writing, reading, listening to music, or reflecting on the sunset.

And I always loved coming back to my crowded, noisy home.

I waited on the cold steps of the museum entrance for my family to arrive, and smiled to myself at the sight of a woman walking by, holding hands with a little child who still walked unsteadily, as if it was difficult to hit the ground with the whole soles of those miniature shoes.

Suddenly, in my peripheral vision, I noticed them. Some of those who shared surnames with me. My sister Mira was walking backwards, and I saw her nearly collide with a gentleman on a bicycle, making me nervously shift my focus.

To all the older sisters out there: Are we all like this?

I was aware of my constant worrying. That I cared too much.

The other day, I was sitting on the floor of a balcony, leaning against the railing, my legs stretched out in front of me, relaxing. And I noticed that when my sister came and sat down next to me, leaning her back against it too, I almost immediately straightened up so that I could keep an eye on her. And the thought crossed my mind: if anything happened, I'd be sitting up straight, ready to grab her.

Also, I never closed my eyes during a car ride. No matter who was driving. Mom, dad, or anyone else. There was something in me that felt responsible for staying alert, for being aware of everything and anything that might happen.

So I could never, ever, ever, close my eyes during a car ride.

People called me sunshine, but they didn't know I always felt like I was climbing the mast to the crow's nest of the ship, looking out for any storms approaching the people I loved.

"Where's Theodore?" I asked myself.

"Have you been here long waiting for us?" asked a voice behind my back. It was Theodore, my little brother.

"Oh," I turned to smile at him. "No, come, sit here with me!"

I looked at my mom and my three other siblings. In the background were my grandmother and my two aunts, talking quickly and walking slowly.

A large family equals a large amount of time to get to places.

My mother usually went crazy on the first day of vacation. There was always someone who forgot the bag, the hat, the toy, the toothbrush, or whatever it was that only came to mind when it was almost too late. *Almost*. Because — as it was never too late — we all ended up going in and out of the house a thousand times before the final departure.

Oh, the fun start of summer family vacations.



The rest of the evening went perfectly. The remaining members of the family arrived throughout the night, so the noise of surprising voices and hugs constantly disrupted the museum's silence. But that was the fun part of my family — you never really knew who was showing up to my mom's town hall speech, or to my uncle's book release party, or to my aunt's exhibition opening at the Verryn Museum of Art. We ended up being there for each other's important milestones, even though we lived far apart.

And after my aunt gave a thank-you speech to end the art opening, my cousins and I started debating which nearby restaurant might be open and have enough free tables.

Because every reason was a good reason for an unplanned family dinner.

It was a great night, even if, right after dessert, I felt a wave of sadness. The moment of goodbyes. My mom, my siblings, and I headed back to the other side of the river, to the countryside. About two hours away.

We all hugged goodbye and hoped for a real “see you soon.”

As my mom drove and we got further from the city, the light pollution faded, and the number of cars decreased.

I started to see the view of the mountain in the darkness of the night, the stars shining brightly above us as we entered Evermere, where the great, familiar trees danced in the soft wind.

I couldn't lie. I loved my small town and every part of the nature that surrounded and belonged to it.

Chapter 2

Miles

September 7th, 1998

Monday

I sat on the grass, not knowing what to do with myself on that Monday afternoon, watching a man — who was now my new neighbor — pacing back and forth with plants and bags of dirt.

We lived in the city until four days ago. Living in the city meant living in constant movement. Discovering a new tapas restaurant every month. Going for a drink somewhere when you don't want to stay at home and ending up at a concert. Taking part in a workshop at the last minute. Hopping between exhibitions on free museum nights. Not that I would do all that, but it was nice to have the option to.

I liked strolling through the illuminated streets and seeing every corner full of life. There was always a lot going on in the city. It kept my mind busy.

I liked that.

I understood that my mother wanted to move away from what life had been like in the last couple of years, after separating from my stepfather. She worked at the same company as him. Until a few days ago she was actually his secretary. But I expected her to move to a different department, not kilometers away from him. And I didn't understand why that distance had to mean living “in the middle of nowhere,” words I muttered when we arrived at the front

gate of my grandparents' former house, the place my mother had declared as "*our new home*" in a sea of emotions, tearful eyes, and without any prior family deliberation.

I never got to meet any of my grandparents. Unfortunately, none of them lived very long. Sometimes I'd ask my mom questions about them, we're a small family of two, I'd like to know more about the people who were part of it. But my mom always left the conversation undeveloped. I picked up on a few sentences here and there that her father fell ill very young, and that she admired her mother a lot.

I was sifting through this memory when I noticed the ramp next to the stairs at the kitchen exit. A ramp suitable for a wheelchair.

I had never been to this house before. It had no special meaning or memories for me. I was four hours away from the place where my memories were.

I had already reflected within my thoughts on various options for my life. I had just turned seventeen years old, and being seventeen meant being old enough to drive, grown up and independent to make decisions. But not yet having a source of income meant remaining dependent and actually ending up with not many other options.

My mother repeated that I should skip the "tempest in a teapot", because the new house was "*just over four hours' drive*" from the city where we used to live. But for me that didn't change the routine I'd landed in a few days ago, of waking up to the new view from my bedroom window: the neighbor's chicken coop. Of sitting here on the grass not knowing what to do with myself, and of my friends not being able to just call me to meet up in 15 minutes for the "evening plan".

I got up and entered the house through the kitchen door, where my mother was tidying clothes, surrounded by cardboard boxes and stuff that almost made it impossible to see the wooden floor.

“Mom, can I steal your car?”

“Well, hello to you too!” she answered, while opening and closing drawers. She had gone to the supermarket and spent the morning running errands, and considering I didn’t get out of bed until 1 p.m. I still hadn’t seen her that day.

“Hey,” I said, with a low tone.

“You’re very grumpy,” she said, without taking her attention away from the pans she was now lining up in a cupboard above the sink, which instead of dirty dishes had dirty, dusty boxes stacked up. “You should go unpack the boxes I left in the living room.”

We hadn’t brought much from Wayneth. Just a few boxes we carried with us in the car.

“Mom...” Staying home to unpack was the last thing I wanted to do at that moment, “I just want to go for a drive. I’ll do all that when I come back home,” I said, grabbing her car keys right there on the counter. “There’s not much to see here in the neighborhood so I’ll be back soon anyway.” I knew my tone wasn’t exactly *nice*, and I had never spoken disrespectfully to my mother before, but I just felt so upset about these last days.

“Miles,” my mom closed the last drawer and looked at me. “I think that you’re a little lost, son. I understand that you don’t like the change, but I think you’ll soon realize how much good it will do you. A different place could be just what you need to

discover yourself and your future.” I looked away from my mother, I couldn’t agree, but I didn’t feel like arguing either. “And I apologize for how quickly everything happened, but I don’t apologize for my decision.”

“We could at least have decided some things together,” I replied, already letting irritation get the better of me.

My mother took a deep breath in and out, and I knew she wouldn’t be in the mood to argue. She never was.

“This is going to be good for you, son. It’ll be good for you.”

“Stop saying that! Are you trying to convince me of that? Or trying to convince yourself so you feel better?” I didn’t let my brain reflect on the words before they came out of my mouth in rocket-fire mode. I couldn’t contain it. But I knew that tone would no longer be acceptable.

Maybe that was what I was looking for. For something that would not be acceptable.

“Miles.” My mother’s eyes went from calm to serious, very serious. There were a lot of words hanging in the air that neither of us said. I sensed that she was sensitive to the idea that I wanted to call her selfish without actually saying the word.

Did she feel it? Selfish?

“Take my car,” she said. “I want you back in two hours, maximum, and straight to the living room to help me with those boxes.” My mother’s words were still gentle, but her voice was now stiff, it seemed to cut like glass.

I turned toward the kitchen door. I could feel the atmosphere turning reactive. Anything else said on impulse would be a bad idea. “Thank you. I’ll see you in an hour and a half.”

You couldn’t say my mother and I had the best relationship, but I had just turned my back on her. I didn’t do that.

A weight settled on my chest as soon as the slam of the door echoed behind me. I was feeling her fragility.

No one had told me the full story. My mother said that my stepfather had ended their relationship.

She’d never been lucky in love. My father abandoned her when I was almost one year old. I didn’t mind knowing that I was an accident that happened between two young adults, but I did mind thinking about my mother alone and the image of a self-absorbed father who never came back.

Many years later, after fleeting boyfriends whose faces I no longer remembered at all, Ben showed up in our lives. I had a father figure for five years, and my mother finally had a kind, serious boyfriend.

But that was no longer the case.

I got into the car, not knowing where I was going.

I left the neighborhood, passed a children’s playground, and looked at the houses. No tall buildings in sight. Everything was very white, very rural. Nothing glassy or even remotely modern. It was, in fact, a different landscape.

Chapter 3

Ella

September 7th, 1998

Monday

It was a bright, sunny Monday morning.

One day after my 17th birthday.

And I woke up to something that could be a small civil war happening downstairs. With my three brothers, I never knew if the loudness was them being super excited and hyped about the simplest thing or them screaming and fighting over nothing they could remember or care about after an hour.

This time, they were simply too excited about silkworms in a shoe box.

My mom hugged me good morning and opened the fridge to reveal a lonely leftover piece of cake. She had bought an enormous, beautifully decorated birthday cake. The whole family came to our house yesterday, including my dad. By the end of the night, he was the one who cut an extra slice and told my brother Alvin to store it away so I could have birthday cake for breakfast today. I loved it and all the blue balloons my mom had bought and blown up to surprise me when I woke up on my birthday morning. My brothers and sister cooked a feast, a full “hotel breakfast”, as we liked to call it. The family drove and flew from different places to be here. One more lap around the sun to sing for. Birthday celebrations were taken seriously in the family.

“Hey, sis,” my sister Mira said as she walked past me in the hallway the second I closed the bathroom door behind me. “Have fun with your event planning today! See you later!” she added, hurrying outside to catch the bus.

I chuckled, “Thank you, and be back in time for dinner!”

“Oh, always!”

“Summer makes her the happiest,” I told myself.

My mom left the house a few minutes later to drive my brothers to the Community Integration Center and head for her office.

I had the house to myself. Part of me felt that I should just stay in and enjoy it (it was as rare as Donald the Duck wearing pants). But my calendar had commitments, and I’d never been able to cancel those.

My sister taught me the motto: “*dolce far niente*”. She said the first step was to say “*no*” to people. But that was not so easy. Was it?

My three younger brothers had summer activities planned by the Community Integration Center for kids aged five to eight. I was once part of those programs too. I also used to take the bus to the beach, play sports and dance at the pavilion, or do arts and crafts programs that included walks through the village public gardens to gather leaves, flowers, and inspiration. I still cherish those memories of summers filled with discovery and wonder.

Because of that, my brothers spent their weeks pretty busy, which was great, because my mom spent her summers pretty busy too: with work. She was the mayor. And *with great power*

comes great responsibility, as Voltaire wrote — or I might have heard it somewhere else too. She definitely carried that great responsibility on her shoulders, and I knew I often found myself trying to take some of that weight off her.

So, for the past two weeks, on some evenings around 6 p.m., I'd been driving out to wherever my siblings were to bring them home.

My sister, Mira, who was 14 years old, about three years younger than me, was in that phase where summer meant busy days too, but busy hanging out with friends during the daylight, and at the arcade chatting with boys during the evenings, something I also kept an eye on.

My favorite summer days were spent at the beach, my favorite place to be. Evermere had a beautiful coastline painted in shades of blue. I would go with some friends from school or by myself, accompanied by my journal and one or two books (I usually packed two, because my mood affected what kind of book I felt like reading).

Some summer days included going for walks in the hills, where my horse friends were. Others were spent at Miss Amara's house, having piano lessons with her.

Most afternoons, I'd fit in a visit to the Community Integration Center, which we called the CIC, where I was volunteering.

And on some nights, I went to the village movie theater with school friends, danced on the underage nights at OndaMix, or at the occasional Evermere summer fairs.

Today, I was heading to the CIC a bit earlier to spend some time helping plan the end-of-summer village festivities, which

would be a three-night fair with food trucks from local restaurants, stalls selling regional specialties, live music from our local band, and lots of sharing, laughter, and a deep feeling of togetherness.

There was something really special about living in Evermere.

It was so easy to ask for help, knowing someone next door would offer it to you. With no doubt in their mind that you would do the same for them.

Feeling safe about forgetting the car keys in the ignition at night. Losing a backpack in the middle of the street in broad daylight and getting it back hours later — both of which had happened to me before.

I wondered how much the notion of *community* mattered to a person's happiness. The sense of belonging. Maybe that's something that's always missing from true fulfillment. Or maybe, if someone wasn't born into it, they wouldn't feel the lack of it at all. Would they?

Like the rest of my family, who lived in big cities and didn't really know the names of the neighbors in their tall buildings, or didn't really say hello to all the strangers on the walk home.

But maybe, because having a big family practically counted as being part of a community, I couldn't really consider them for this dilemma.

I parked the car in the parking lot of the CIC.

The CIC was an enormous building with only two floors, shaped like a square with a vast garden in the middle. Ancient

trees shaded the windows of the Center's rooms, and the stone tables scattered across the lawn.

I was walking toward the large iron gate at the entrance when I noticed the beautiful pink flowers covering the wall, as if trying to leap from inside the Center onto the street pavement, more and more of them blooming every day. I wanted to capture their growth. I wished I had a camera.

“Good morning, Ella!” Ross, an adorable man, greeted me as soon as I walked through the CIC's door.

Ross was recovering from back surgery due to a herniated disc. It had temporarily affected his ability to work, and he came to the CIC regularly for physical therapy. But I, a hopeless romantic, suspected that not only his back was leading him here but also his heart... because of Raquel, one of the nurses.

“Good morning, Ross! How are you feeling today?” I asked him. “And is Miss Amara around?”

“I feel magnificent!” he smiled. “I heard Miss Amara saying she was heading to the village to bring materials for some final touch for the party.”

“She never stops! If you see her, would you please tell her I'm here? I'll start organizing things at the saloon.”

“Of course, if I see her, I'll let her know!” he said and waved me goodbye to continue his slow walk toward the cafeteria.

I took a detour around the CIC.

Miss Amara was retired. But she loved the Community Integration Center, she did all kinds of things around here.

She was the CIC's coordinator. She organized activities, fundraisers, donations, and harmonized the volunteers' schedules. She basically made sure everyone had what they needed, when they needed it, while also showing up for duty for anything else she might be needed for.

Miss Amara had a lot of energy. She was one of those people you would call "a force of nature". We spent a lot of time together at the CIC, contacting local businesses, supermarkets, and restaurants to collect food donations, and organizing it all; supporting elderly residents, reading to them or simply spending time listening to their stories while accompanying them on walks around the Center; reading books to the kindergarteners, playing with the kids, and helping them with small tasks or homework while they waited for their parents to pick them up.

The CIC was a place of connection for the entire town.

From Miss Amara and the CIC, I learned that happiness is like a flame: one candle can light a thousand more.

Chapter 4

Miles

September 7th, 1998

Monday

I should have taken my guitar with me, but in the middle of everything that the conversation stirred up, I didn't grab it.

I'd been driving for about 20 minutes, possibly going around in circles, not really paying attention to my surroundings. I was wrapped up in my thoughts.

I felt like being loud, but not with words.

Playing the guitar was how I let everything out without speaking.

I never really vented to anyone, and honestly, I didn't know who I'd call if I wanted to. My friend group back in the city wasn't the kind that talked deeply about anything. When something upset me, I'd just meet up with them, and we'd go do something — have an illegal drink, shoot some hoops, or wander around the mall letting our eyes get distracted by girls. Anything except actually talking about it.

I looked out the car window and recognized a pastry shop, it had been the first stop my mom and I made in this town on the day we arrived. I hadn't paid much attention to anything that day either. My frustration with the news of the move had caused a cloud to grow around me that I hadn't even tried to lift.

But I remembered the chicken pie.

So, I parked the car and walked to the wooden sign that read “Village Oven”, hanging right above the door of the little pastry shop.

It was a place that extended further than it seemed from the outside. All the tables and chairs were made of wood. Vases with flowers distinguished one table from another. Many customers stood attentively, contemplating the display of sweets and savory snacks, and even so, the terrace outside was full.

While I was sitting at one of the small wooden tables, lost in thought over my chicken pie, I got the feeling I was being watched. My gaze lifted to a woman standing by the counter near the door. She looked to be in her 70s, wearing a long white dress, carrying a purse on her shoulder, two bags in one hand, and a box of something from the bakery in the other.

She looked at me serenely. Maybe judging my chicken pie choice. Maybe trying to place me.

A few seconds passed. I looked behind me, but my eyes met only the wall. I watched her as she slowly turned toward the door and disappeared.

Moments later, I stepped outside too. The sun was low, hiding behind the tall trees that lined the sidewalk of the village’s main street.

People were coming in and out of the café, smiling and greeting those sitting on the terrace.

I decided I would keep driving around.

When I turned left onto a narrow pedestrian road to get to my car, I ran into the lady from before, the one who had

studied my face with the look of someone trying to crack a puzzle.

She was walking at a brisk pace, seeming either super busy or super late.

I walked behind her. Her hair was light gray, short, and arranged in perfect curls.

A roll of duct tape fell out of one of her bags and rolled toward my feet. I bent down to pick it up.

“Miss, I’m sorry, you dropped this,” I called out, hurrying to catch up with her.

She turned, glanced at my hands to see what I was holding, and a smile found her lips.

“Oh, honey, thank you so much! You wouldn’t believe how indispensable this is!” she said joyfully. There was so much energy in her voice.

Then she asked if I was heading in the same direction as her. And I was, indeed.

“Wonderful! Could you please do me the biggest favor and help me carry some of these to the bus stop right there?” She tilted her head toward the end of the street. “If you’re not in a hurry!” she added. “You know, the elders never realize when they’re disturbing the younger ones’ plans,” she said in a playful tone.

“Well...” Some agony still took over me, born from the thought that I had absolutely no plans she would be disturbing me from. “Of course! Let me help you.”